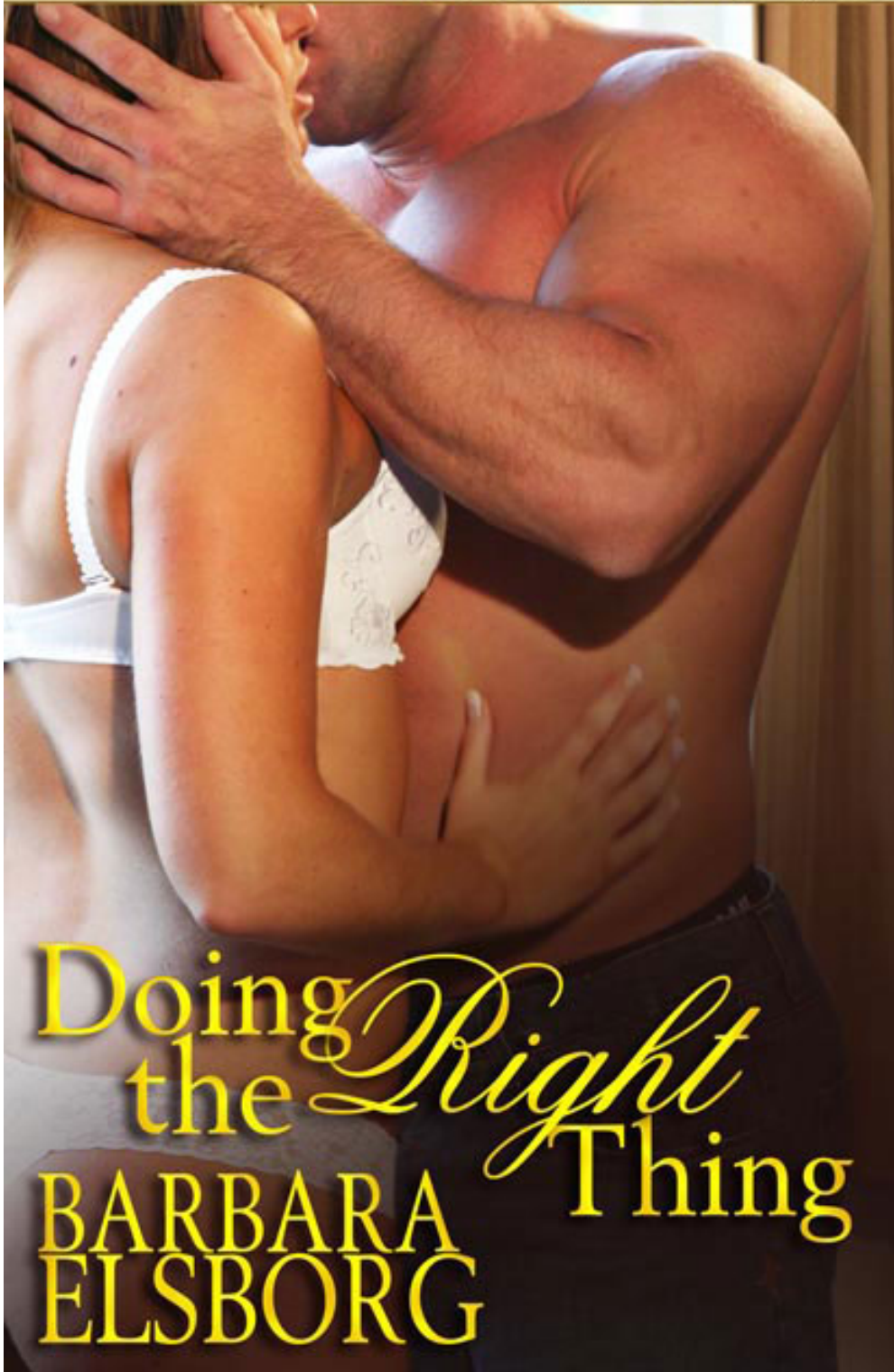


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Doing
the *Right*
Thing

BARBARA
ELSBORG

Doing the Right Thing

Barbara Elsborg

Addie Winter is single—just one more reason for disappointment in her permanently disapproving mother’s eyes. There’s nothing she wants more than to be loved but when her own mother can’t bring herself to love her, she wonders if anyone can. What she needs is a man—real would be ideal, but she’ll settle for pretend. Anything to shut her mother up.

Will Mansell chokes on his drink when Addie offers to pay him to spend the night in her room. Tall, dark-haired and the epitome of Addie’s “hero”, he can’t believe his luck because women usually go for his blond-haired brother. Ed Mansell is a serial playboy with an electric smile who waltzes through life and through women. Lucky for Will and Ed, they don’t have the same taste in women. But that was before they met Addie.

Far from pretending, Will and Ed set out to prove Addie is worthy of love—but Addie finds too much love can be just as painful as none at all.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorasave.com

Doing the Right Thing

ISBN 9781419924729

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Doing the Right Thing Copyright © 2010 Barbara Elsborg

Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower

Photography by JazzieB and cover design by Syneca

Electronic book publication January 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

DOING THE RIGHT THING

Barbara Elsborg

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Armani: GA Modefine S.A. Corporation

Barbie: Mattel, Inc.

BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke; Aktiengesellschaft

Boxster: Dy. Ing. h. c. F. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Calvin Klein: Calvin Klein Trademark Trust

Corona: Cerveceria Modelo, S.A. de C.V. Corporation

Dos Equis: Cerveceria Moctezuma S.A. Corporation

Dyson: Notetry Limited

eBay: eBay Inc

Eternity: Calvin Klein Cosmetics

Ex-Lax: Novartis AG Corporation

Google: Google Inc.

Greenpeace: Stichting Greenpeace Council Foundation

Hallmark: Hallmark Licensing, Inc.

Harrods: Harrods Limited, London

Harry Potter: Time Warner Entertainment Company, Books JK Rowling

Ikea: Inter-IKEA Systems B.V. Corporation

La Perla: La Perla s.r.l. Limited Liability Company

Lego: Lego Juris A/S Corporation Denmark

Lexus: Toyota Jidosha Kabushiki Kaisha TA Toyota Motor Corporation

M&M's: Mars Incorporated

Manolo Blahnik: Blahnik, Manolo individual

Marriott: Marriott International, Inc.

Mars: Mars, Incorporated

Megatron Transformer: Hasbro Inc.

Porsche: Dr. Ing. h. c. f. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Primus: Primus-Sievert Aktiebolag

Selfridges: Selfridges Retail Limited

Sky TV: BSkyB Ltd

Spiderman: Marvel Characters Inc.

Star Wars: Lucasfilm Entertainment Company Ltd.

Superglue: Chemence, Inc.

Superman: DC Comics

Versace: Gianni Versace S.p.A

Yo! Sushi: Yo! Sushi Limited Liability Company

You Tube: Google Inc.

Chapter One

The gym at the Delmonte Hotel was Addie Winter's last resort. If she couldn't find Noah there, she'd have to come up with a spectacular excuse to satisfy her mother.

"Sign the register, please." A Lycra-clad trainer with sleek golden hair and a body to match handed Addie a pen. "Do you know how to use the equipment?"

"Yes, I'm fine, thanks."

The last thing Addie needed was a beautiful woman making her look a complete idiot. Or a beautiful man. Well, she needed a beautiful man, but not one who thought she was an idiot.

When she pushed open the door of the gym and saw the only occupants were ranks of metal sculptures, none of which looked beautiful, disappointment swamped her excitement. Addie chose the machine that looked the least intimidating, hoping for a stampede of testosterone-charged men before she broke into a sweat.

The moment she started to walk, lights flashed in front of her.

Clean the nozzle

Yuk. She'd rather not.

Make a selection

Addie dithered. What did she want? She tried to focus on the changing screen. *Aerobic, cardio, decaf, regular?* She pressed buttons at random. The questions began again and the treadmill ran faster. *How much did she weigh?* In bloody kilograms? While she frantically tried to work it out—mental arithmetic under stress not being one of her strong points—the question changed and the speed increased. *How long did she want to be tortured?* Addie was already panting. If Noah didn't appear within the next ten minutes, she'd be incapable of breathing, let alone talking. *What level did she want?* How hard could running be? Still, better start low. Level two. Oops, had she pressed twice?

Start, the machine commanded. Addie thought she already had.

As the belt continued to pick up speed, the whirring motor overpowered the sound of the radio. A gentle jog rocketed into an escape from the hounds of hell. Her fingers groped for and missed the red panic button, and she took off in an inelegant reverse flight, arms flailing to land in a crumpled heap on the floor. All the air whooshed out of her lungs. Thank God she was alone.

"Are you okay?"

Addie looked up to find a fair-haired guy staring down at her. *Damn*. He was trying not to smile, but his tight lips and twinkling eyes gave him away.

"Doing a few sit-ups." She sat up, her head swam and she lay down again.

He hesitated and then moved away to step onto a machine that moved arms and legs in opposite directions. The label said cross-trainer. As opposed to happy-trainer? Smiley-guy had a great face. Dark blue eyes. Square chin. Lovely body and he was tall. But he had floppy blond hair, which was no use at all. She could hardly expect him to dye it. Addie staggered to the mats and slumped onto a large pink gym ball. She'd lie on that for a while and pretend to be exercising something invisible while her organs rearranged themselves.

Addie stared at the ceiling trying to figure out what the hell she was doing. She'd never fool her mother and she wouldn't fool herself, either. Prince Charming never turned up in real life and if he did, it wouldn't be in *her* life. She ought to give up this crazy plan and leave before— The door swung open. Addie glanced across to see two dark-haired guys walk in. Her heart, still in recovery after the unexpected sprint, now attempted the high jump. Both men were tall—with dark hair. They had good bodies—and dark hair. What was wrong with them? Addie stared at their backs. No forked tails.

Overwhelmed by the prospect of having a choice, Addie hadn't noticed the ball deflating beneath her until, once again, she lay flat on her back, looking like a upturned Barbie turtle. She picked up the lump of pink plastic, folded it into an untidy mess and tucked it behind a rowing machine. When she turned, the blond one grinned at her. Addie slunk to the opposite side of the room and stepped onto an angular machine that reminded her of Megatron, one of her brother David's "Robots In Disguise" Transformers. He was twenty-seven and they still lined his windowsill.

Lesson learned, Addie selected level one. She pressed down her foot as hard as she could, but the platform didn't move, not even after she used both feet and bounced. The fair-haired guy stepped onto Megatron's twin, shot her a little smile and flicked a switch on her display. Addie almost kneed herself in the mouth.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

She registered his shining eyes and happy face. Addie could have asked him to be Noah, she wanted to ask him, but he was no use, unless the death of his mother had sent him prematurely blond. She considered that as she slogged up Everest, and then dismissed it. Gray might work, blond didn't.

The other two were doing alternate biceps curls with dumbbells. Addie gave up on the mountaineering, unable to conquer the foothills, and joined them. She picked up an EZ curl bar and the weight dropped straight off one end, just missing the nearest guy's toes and making a huge dent in the floor. Addie stared at it in horror, wishing it was deep enough for her to drop into and disappear.

"Sorry," she gasped.

The two men ignored her. It was the blond guy who came to help.

"Not your fault," he said. "Someone left off the collar."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Addie began to melt at his grin and then snapped upright. No matter how much she might wish otherwise, Mr. Very-Nice-With-Gorgeous-Blue-Eyes didn't fit the profile. She forced her attention back to the other two. The glimmer of a wedding ring turned choice into no choice. No ring on the one whose foot she'd almost crushed, though that didn't mean he wasn't married. Addie positioned herself so she could look at his face and froze. Beneath his annoyed frown, she saw every paperback hero she'd ever loved. His dark hair was straight and well cut. He was tall and tanned. He had dark gray eyes and the shadow of stubble on his chin. Forget the too tight T-shirt that bore the words, *Idaho No Udaho*. It had taken Addie a moment or two before she got it, particularly having to read it in reverse, but she didn't care what it said. She'd found Noah.

While she struggled to get the words right in her head, she pranced from machine to machine. When the words were right, her feet took her in another direction. *Coward*, Addie scolded herself. How difficult could this be, compared to what she'd been doing all those weekends she was supposed to be in Manchester with Noah? While her friends and family thought she was having fun with her boyfriend, she'd paid a fortune to throw herself off cliffs, flip into freezing, wild water from a canoe and crawl down ever-narrowing underground tubes.

Despite the fortune she'd forked out for those adventure courses, Noah had never rescued her. Now she had to rescue herself, but the prospect of asking a simple question made her heart pound in her chest with the violence of surf crashing on a north Hawaiian shore. If she didn't do something soon she'd drown in a pool of sweat—not attractive—or have a heart attack. Actually, that wasn't a bad idea, so long as Noah knew CPR. Somehow Addie guessed the blond one would save her.

As Noah sat at another machine, she took a deep breath, stepped toward him and smiled. He ignored her. Addie's smile withered, died and fell off her face. In her rush to escape, she kicked his water bottle, sending it spinning over the wooden floor like a puck on an ice rink. Addie ran to pick it up, knocked it again with her foot and after it stopped against the wall, she returned it with a burning face.

"Sorry." Now she'd managed to apologize, she kept going. "Er...I...er...need to ask a favor. When you've finished exercising, could I buy you a drink in the bar?" Addie stared at the dent she'd made in the floor.

"Okay," he said.

Shocked she'd managed to speak and even more shocked he'd responded positively, Addie stared straight into his face. He was gorgeous and he'd said yes. He'd said yes! The awareness came far too slowly that she stood there looking her least attractive, her hair disheveled with her mouth hanging open like a basking shark. She clamped her jaw shut.

"Twenty minutes?" he said.

Addie nodded with the energy of one of those dogs with wobbly heads that sit in the backs of cars and then fled, feeling horrified, amazed, thrilled and frightened. She

burst into the changing room, caught a glance of herself in the mirror and winced. She needed a quick-fix beauty salon and on the way to the shower noticed all the hairdryers sported “out of order” notices.

That was odd, Will Mansell thought, and wondered what she wanted. He’d watched the gangly brunette struggle with everything she’d attempted. She’d flitted between the equipment like an errant pinball, changing the weights and doing a couple of repetitions before moving on. He’d noticed his brother watching her too. Ed leapt in when the weight fell off her bar and Will had seen him give her one of his looks, the “Hello sexy. How about it?” one and she hadn’t reacted. Intriguing. Ed hadn’t given up – did he ever? But in the end it wasn’t Ed she’d asked to go for a drink. Will smiled and pulled down on the handles.

She had legs like a baby giraffe, and appeared just as awkward. After she’d played football with his water bottle, Will had been about to come out with a sarcastic quip until he’d caught a glimpse of her eyes. They were huge and a wild tawny color, like the coat of an Alsatian dog, only she’d sounded about as brave as a King Charles spaniel. However, Will never looked a gift King Charles spaniel in the mouth, both pleased and surprised she’d picked him and not his brother. Ed would be really pissed off. Will grinned harder and got up.

“Jack? Ed? I’m stopping now. I’ll see you in the bar,” Will said.

“Slacker,” Ed grunted, his face contorted with the effort of doing bench presses.

“Wanker,” Will muttered under his breath as he passed.

When Will had heard his brother and their client, Jack Magelan, agreeing to spend a couple of hours in the hotel gym before they ate, Will thought Ed must have left his brain behind in London. It wasn’t that Will had anything against gyms, but not after seven hours on the motorway, most of it cursing stationary traffic.

Will had made a deliberate show of reducing the weight load the moment he sat at a machine just used by Jack. Idiot Ed did the opposite. When Jack selected his dumbbells, Will went for the smaller size even though he could have taken the next weight up, because he knew if Jack didn’t think he was stronger and fitter than them, they’d be in there all night engaged in some stupid, macho, pissing contest. Will was grateful there were no other men for Jack to outperform because he’d keep going until he gave himself a heart attack.

The request to go for a drink had provided Will with the excuse he’d been looking for, because he’d decided that if Jack asked him to spot for him, he might have accidentally-on-purpose let the weight drop and crush him. Will wanted to kill Ed too, so the pair had a lucky escape. He grinned as he stepped into the shower.

Will soaped his body, wondering what her “big favor” would turn out to be. Hopefully something simple like sponsoring her in a “cycle across the Atlantic” challenge. Will smiled at the thought of the woman with the interesting eyes pumping

those long legs on a bike. Then he scowled. With his luck, she'd turn out to be some friend of Jesus trying to point out the error of his T-shirt.

Addie lurked by the entrance to the bar, convinced Noah wasn't coming. Why should he? She was an idiot. *Fou. Baka. Trottel. Idiota.* No matter what country she was in, she'd be an idiot. This had always been a last-ditch idea, but she'd thought hotel gyms would be full of men and she only needed one, a respectable guy who wouldn't rob her or rape her and, almost as important, he'd be passing through Leeds, so she'd never see him again. Even if he turned out to be local, Addie wouldn't be going back to the gym, so there'd be no embarrassing meetings afterwards. No, this would be a straightforward, single night's work for a stranger. Only he wasn't going to come.

Her shoulders slumped, she turned to leave and found her face inches from his.

"Giving up already?"

Addie tried another smile, but he still didn't smile back.

"I'm Will."

"Addie." She took a deep breath. "What would you like to drink?"

"Surprise me."

As he made for a table, Addie walked up to the bar. "Lemonade please and..." What could she order? What did her brothers drink? But maybe he didn't drink. No, he'd have said. Beer. But what sort? Maybe lager?

"And?"

Addie looked at the barman. He raised his eyebrows. Dark hair. Not bad-looking. But shorter than her. What was she doing? She'd become obsessed.

"A gin and tonic," she blurted.

Addie carried the drinks to the table and sat down. Will looked annoyed and she hadn't said anything yet. Trust her to pick someone miserable. She gulped her drink and grimaced, realizing she'd not only picked up the gin and tonic, which she hated, but had also managed to snag a large chunk of ice in her mouth, along with the slice of lemon. Addie debated whether to spit them back into the glass, decided not, so chewed and swallowed, including the rind. When she'd finished chomping, she glanced up and saw him smile. Oh God, she'd lost this before she started.

He took a sip of the lemonade that should have been hers, and sighed. Addie felt something crumple inside her. It was a mistake to choose a man she fancied. He was too good-looking.

"Are you married?" *Oh God, did I say that out loud?* She waited, half-hoping for a yes, so she could walk away.

"No."

Question two. "Are you staying at the hotel?"

"Yes."

And three. "Are you busy tomorrow night?"

"No."

The big one. "How do you feel about lying?"

She noted the furrowed brow. He hadn't expected that.

"Sometimes being truthful hurts more," he said.

A flicker of hope. "So in certain circumstances lying is acceptable?"

"Yes."

She wanted to kiss him. It would have been easier than asking the next question. She looked at the table, unable to meet his gaze. "If I give you a hundred pounds will you spend tomorrow night with me?"

He spat his drink back into the glass as he choked and coughed. She raced on, wondering whether to pat him on the back, and annoyed she'd said a hundred when she'd been thinking fifty.

"It's not what you think. You don't have to do anything. Well, you have to do something but..." She stopped, exhaled and kept her eyes on his blue-shirted chest. "I'd like you to spend the night in my room pretending to be my boyfriend. You can sleep in my bed. I'll kip on the floor. I'll make you breakfast on Sunday and pay you a hundred pounds."

She delivered this at breakneck speed, then waited. He didn't speak. Addie dragged her eyes up to his. He was staring at her in what could have been astonishment, but might have been horror. She clenched her fists under the table.

"Why?" he asked.

"D-does it matter?"

"It does if there's some deranged ex-boyfriend you're trying to get rid of, some massive bruiser who might launch an attack on bits of my body I'd prefer to keep intact." He picked up his drink and put it down again before it reached his lips.

"There isn't."

He tipped his head on one side. "Why then?"

"I invented a boyfriend, only no one thinks he exists."

"If you invented him, then he doesn't."

Good-looking, but a smart Alec. She might have known.

"I need...certain people to believe he's real."

"Like who?"

"My mother." The only one who mattered. "You don't have to meet her. You only have to talk to my housemate and her boyfriend, who happens to be my youngest brother. Then he can tell my mum you're real."

"Are you gay?"

She gawped at him. "No." *Did she look gay?* "Are you? Actually, that doesn't matter. Being gay is fine. You can still stay the night. In fact, it might be better —"

"I'm not gay." He glared at her.

"Oh."

"Don't sound disappointed."

"I'm not."

"How long have you and your imaginary friend been going out?" Will tapped his fingers on the table, flipping the coaster.

"Er...six months." This was humiliating.

"Six months?" He slapped the coaster flat. "Wouldn't it have been easier to find a boyfriend? Better than lying to your family."

Addie bristled. "Look, I presume you're a businessman and this is a simple business deal. Stay over and leave with..." She paused. Could she drop to fifty? No, he'd notice. "A hundred pounds," she concluded in reluctance. "And as you're staying at the hotel, you'll no longer need a room, so you'll save even more."

He started flipping the coaster again. Addie took another gulp of her drink, and shuddered.

"Why've you left this so late?" he asked.

She sighed. She hadn't anticipated being grilled like a sausage. "Things came to a head last Sunday. I've spent the whole week looking." *Her whole life looking.* "I wanted someone perfect to fit the guy I'd described, but I've run out of time."

"You should have stopped after 'perfect'."

Addie glanced up and saw no smile. "Sorry."

"So where do you live?"

"Why do you want to know where I live?" She was immediately defensive.

Will chuckled. It took a moment or two to sink into Addie's brain.

"You mean you'll do it?"

He nodded. Her heart stopped. He'd said yes. The man from Delmonte had said yes. She took a huge gasp of air as though she'd surfaced after a deep dive.

"Thank you." Two words that were nowhere near enough to show her gratitude, but kissing his feet seemed over the top. She'd already written down her address, drawn a map. Her fingers shook as she handed it over.

"Thank you so much. You won't have to talk much, just say hello, shave in the bathroom, sprinkle hair in the sink, leave the toilet seat up, that sort of thing."

He raised his eyebrows. "I never leave the seat up."

"Sorry." Addie jumped to her feet, desperate to leave before he changed his mind.

"Hold on, what's my imaginary name?" he asked.

"Sorry. Noah Davies."

She backed away.

“What do I do for a living? Where do I live? How did we meet? Don’t you think you should give me your mobile number?”

“You’re an investment consultant. You live and work in Manchester. We only see one another at weekends. I always go to your place. I can’t give you a mobile number because my brother has my phone. I put his in the washing machine.” Why had she told him that? She looked at his face. She shouldn’t have told him that.

“So what’s different this weekend?”

“I’m afraid your mother died.” Addie bit her lip.

“What of?”

Her mind went blank, but not blank enough. “A flesh-eating virus.”

He smirked and Addie went into a fast reverse, gripped by such a disturbing surge of lust, she feared she’d leap on him.

“I like a full-cooked breakfast on Sundays,” he called in a loud voice, “with scrambled eggs, fried bread and mushrooms.”

He grinned and as her eyes registered that everyone else in the bar was grinning too, Addie turned and fled.

Chapter Two

The following morning, Will expected Ed to join him for breakfast, but his brother's mobile was turned off and there was no answer from his room. The night before, after their session in the gym, Jack had spent two hours spoiling a decent curry talking about his plans for the business he'd bought in West Yorkshire. Will and Ed were management consultants, experts in business development. They already knew what Jack wanted so why he needed to go over it every time he gave them another contract, Will had no idea, except Jack Magelan liked the sound of his own voice. Fortunately, Jack's relatives lived in Harrogate, so he was spending the rest of weekend there and not with Will and Ed.

Last night, Ed had eaten all the poppadoms, pleaded tiredness and disappeared, leaving Will to entertain Jack. Only it hadn't been very entertaining. When he'd finished spouting about his business, Jack had turned his attention to Will's private life. Will had landed the first Magelan contract after he'd married Vee, Jack's god-daughter. Jack was a devout Catholic who considered Will's divorce a sin let alone a huge mistake. It was neither, but Will guessed if it hadn't been for the fact that the Mansell brothers were good at what they did, Jack would have terminated their arrangement in the way Will had terminated his marriage.

Will had almost finished breakfast by the time his brother turned up wearing the same clothes as the night before. Ed helped himself to black coffee and a large bowl of cereal from the elaborate buffet before slumping next to Will.

"What happened to you?" Will asked.

Ed winced. "Don't shout."

Will sighed.

"I crossed the road to Majestik's," Ed mumbled.

"And didn't come back?"

"Sophie was very persuasive." Ed screwed up his eyes. "I think her name was Sophie."

"You can't remember?"

"There were two. I can't remember which one I ended up with."

"Not both of them? You're losing your touch." Will ate his last mouthful of scrambled egg.

"Yep, it's worrying. Didn't you have a date with the legs from the gym?"

Will had let Ed and Jack think so. "Unlike you, I don't sleep with every woman I talk to." Will got to his feet. "Be down in the car park in thirty minutes."

Because Will had another contract in Leeds to run parallel with the Magelan job, he'd signed up for a short-term rental property, a much better deal than paying for hotel rooms and restaurants. He thought it unlikely he and Ed would see much of their London homes before the New Year. On the plus side, Will wouldn't see his ex-wife either. He and Ed had driven up with a selection of their possessions, though Will ended up with most of his brother's clothes on the backseat of his Lexus. Storage space in Ed's Boxster being devoted to his precious music system and a few million DVDs.

* * * * *

Will had booked the rental house in Alwoodley over the internet, so when the pair of them pulled up in their cars, it was a relief to find it in a good neighborhood, a leafy suburb about seven miles from Leeds city center. Ed raced round the house like an excited puppy, whooping over the 42-inch plasma HDTV and Sky, the presence of which had swung his agreement about the house. Will went through each room, logging what was there and what else they needed to get, like bed linen, pillows, towels, a couple of work lamps and the right-sized coffee table for pain-in-the-neck Ed to rest his feet on, since the delicate glass thing that came with the house would have to be moved.

Will drove them to a retail park in Birstall where they crawled through a heaving Ikea along with every family in West Yorkshire that had three small, badly behaved children, an enormous buggy and a super-slow grandma. Will's only pleasure came from spotting the item with the most ridiculous name. Ed found everything fascinating, particularly a pretty sales assistant with long blonde hair and big breasts. If it hadn't been for the fact that she lived in Huddersfield and Ed was tired, Will guessed his brother would have had a date for the night – again.

As it was, by the time they'd driven back to Leeds, called at the grocery store, picked up pizzas, then constructed the suitably named Nasti coffee table – all without arguing because they worked well together – neither of them wanted to move. Ed emerged from the kitchen with a twin pack of Predator movies and six bottles of Corona. He planted himself on the couch, put his feet up and gave a contented sigh.

Will accepted a beer and glanced at Ed. It took so little to make his younger brother happy. Easygoing Ed waltzed through life looking bemused and women loved him. Really loved him. Ed used some terrible pick-up lines. If Will had whispered "I'm great in bed," in a woman's ear, he'd have had his face slapped. When Ed said it, they wanted him to prove it. Will had no idea what women found so desirable about him, but if it could have been bottled, they'd have made a fortune.

It was lucky they didn't go for the same type. Will liked chic and sophisticated, while Ed preferred flashy tarts in tight dresses. Will wanted his women to have a brain but Ed was only interested in getting them naked. Will wasn't sure if Addie had a brain, but he wouldn't mind seeing her naked even if she wasn't his type. For once, Will had managed to pull without even trying.

* * * * *

Addie could hardly wait for her housemate Lisa to go shopping with her boyfriend David, Addie's brother. The moment the door closed, Addie transformed into Domestic Terminator and went berserk with a duster and a spray gun. Lisa was the untidiest person Addie had ever known. They met when they found themselves sharing a room in a hall of residence in their first year at Bristol University. Addie arrived with one suitcase and a rucksack to find Lisa surrounded by a mountain of clothes and shoes, a TV, DVD player, mini fridge, laptop computer, several strings of fairy lights, a million cushions, a pair of loving parents and a partridge in a pear tree. Well, a large potted plant.

Because Addie was on her own, Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson-Smith took her and Lisa for a farewell meal. Their tears when they kissed their daughter goodbye made Addie feel like crying too. That morning, her mother had gone to have her hair done as usual without saying a word. Her father had dropped Addie off at Leeds station and kept the engine running while she took her case from the trunk. Addie's three brothers had all gone to Leeds University and though they hadn't lived at home after the first year, they'd stayed near enough to keep their mother happy. Addie knew the further she was from her mother, the happier they'd both be. Since there was no university at Lands End or in the Outer Hebrides, Addie settled for Bristol.

Considering how little Addie and Lisa had in common, it surprised them both they'd ended up sharing a house. After they parted company in Bristol, Addie embarked on a series of not-very-impressive jobs until she'd been persuaded to return to Yorkshire to help look after her sick father and take up the offer of a part-time sales and admin job with Booth's Travel. Booths did work for Easyspeak Language School in Leeds, where Lisa worked. Recommended by Lisa, Addie had been offered work two days a week teaching English conversation. When Lisa asked Addie if she'd like to share her house, Addie couldn't leave her mother's fast enough.

The price she paid was life with the messiest person in the world. Addie cleaned without stopping for lunch, which was her excuse for eating the three rock-hard chocolate mints she found down the side of the couch. An action she regretted when the next item the couch regurgitated was an empty condom wrapper, though she kept it to toss in the bathroom bin, for a touch of authenticity.

By the time Lisa and David returned, Addie had only freaked out twice about spiders and the house was well-aired, sparkling and tidy. Lisa's possessions, including a pile of origami sculptures of animals and insects that bore no resemblance to any insect or animal Addie had ever seen, together with thirty-seven bottles of nail polish and ten pairs of shoes, were piled up outside Lisa's bedroom.

"Wow," Lisa muttered as she walked round the lounge. "The cleaning fairy's paid us a visit."

"Bloody hell," said David. "Are we in the right house?"

Lisa tossed her handbag on the couch along with a pile of plastic carrier bags. Her coat flew onto a chair and her shoes in front of the fire. Addie winced.

"Is Noah anally retentive or something? Is that why he hasn't come to stay? I could have tidied," Lisa said.

Since she never had, Addie thought that unlikely.

"I told you he needed to be near his mum while she was ill. By the way, don't mention her. He'll get upset." *Or forget she's dead.* "What did you buy?" Addie knew the way to deflect Lisa.

Lisa pulled out her purchases for inspection. Five more bottles of nail polish, two pairs of trousers and three jumpers. Addie oohed and aahed in the right places. Lisa was always protesting about bills and moaning about the mortgage, but it was clear the Jefferson-Smiths subsidized their daughter.

Out of the corner of her eye, Addie saw David heading for the kitchen.

"David, if you even look at those I'll kill you," she shouted.

She'd left a selection of cheese pastry snacks cooling on a wire tray. The chances of David leaving them untouched were about as high as expecting an alligator to ignore a chicken dangled over its nose.

"So where are you going tonight?" Addie asked.

"Thought we'd stay in," Lisa said.

There was a distinct smell of burning rubber as Addie's heart screeched to a halt. "I thought Noah and I could have the place to ourselves."

Lisa shrieked with laughter. "It's Saturday, course we're going out, but we'll wait and have a drink with Noah."

"Great." Addie pushed a smile on to her face.

David came in chewing. "Here." He handed Addie her pay-as-you-go mobile. "I picked up another today. Yours doesn't seem to be working."

"David!"

"Don't moan after what you did to mine."

"You shouldn't have left it in your trousers and put them in our laundry basket."

"You should have checked the pockets."

"You should have washed them yourself."

He glared at her. She glared at him.

"Stop fighting," Lisa mumbled as she came out of the kitchen, her mouth full and a cheese straw in her fingers.

Addie hoped there were some left.

* * * * *

"Is Noah going to be here soon?" Lisa asked for the third time.

“Yes.”

“Has he rung?”

“No.” No use lying about that.

She knew Lisa wouldn't wait much longer. David, on the other hand, lay on the couch, drinking beer and watching football, quite happy to stay in. There was no way Lisa would let him.

David had appeared one night, not long after Addie had moved in, carrying a box of her belongings. When Addie had gone through them, she realized her mother had eradicated all traces of her ever having lived at home. The box held swimming certificates, Brownie badges and the contents of Christmas crackers she'd saved over the years, plus fluff from her drawers. David had taken one look at Lisa and fallen hard.

They'd been dating for five months. Lisa, who was thin as a whippet with blonde hair straight out of a bottle, had been seduced by policeman David's uniform and later by his handcuffs. Lisa had once told Addie, if she didn't think a guy was husband material, she didn't go out with him for more than five months. Addie couldn't believe anyone in their right mind would want to marry David, so she was almost certain his number was up.

Lisa looked at the prone figure of her boyfriend, a large packet of salt and vinegar crisps balanced on his chest, and frowned.

“I'm hoping when David meets Noah, a bit of his charm will sense the vacuum in David's heart and be sucked across.” She glanced at Addie. “The trouble is I've gone on so much about the fabulous Noah, David hates him.”

“Guys who send flowers, champagne and big boxes of chocolates ruin women,” David said.

“You think you've been generous if you bring me a six pack and a Mars bar, and you eat the bloody Mars bar,” Lisa said.

David offered Lisa a crisp. “My last one. Don't say I don't treat you well.”

Addie laughed. “He must have some good points. You're still going out with him.”

“One very good point.” Lisa grinned. “At least when I can tear him away from the football. To be honest that's all that occupies David's limited mind—football and sex. He's insatiable. For both.”

“I'm here, you know, listening to this,” David said.

“They're moans of displeasure I hear coming from your room?” Addie asked.

Lisa laughed. “Yeah, when he doesn't get it right.”

Addie put her hands over her ears. “God, this is my brother you're talking about.”

“Maybe he could ask Noah for a few pointers.” Lisa raised her eyebrows.

“Don't you dare,” Addie said and a thousand butterflies began to flap in her stomach.

“I hope you're joking.” David sat up and belched.

Noah had seemed like a logical extension of Addie's imaginary childhood friend Leo, only now she engaged in imaginary sex as well. When Lisa had pressed for details of Addie's exhausting weekends in Manchester, Addie made it up. She had a thousand ways to describe seduction, gleaned from erotic paperbacks and Lisa's magazines.

"Maybe we could all go out together," Lisa said. "I want to see him dance."

Addie had forgotten she'd made Noah a fantastic dancer. She hadn't liked lying to Lisa and wouldn't have, had she not been going out with David. Addie had reasoned that if she could convince her housemate that Noah existed, David would be convinced as well, and then so would the rest of her family. And it had worked. Until last Sunday. Now pride stopped Addie from telling her friend everything, because Lisa could have any guy she smiled at, including the one Addie had wanted at university. If Noah had existed, Addie was fairly sure Lisa would have had him too.

Chapter Three

Addie kicked off her shoes and curled her feet beneath her on the couch. Once Lisa and David had gone, she'd kept the TV off in case she didn't hear the bell, but she couldn't concentrate on her book. As the evening progressed, hope drained out of her, rather like blood from the wrists she intended to slit. Noah said he'd come, and he hadn't. Why would he? He didn't need the money. What if he'd been a policeman? Addie shuddered. What if he was a male escort? She shivered. It was a criminal offense to procure a prostitute. She imagined herself in front of an incredulous judge. *You offered him money to spend the night with you? In your room? And you didn't expect anything to happen? What were you paying him for then? To read you a bedtime story?*

A lucky escape, only she didn't feel lucky. It had been risky anyway, inviting a stranger to sleep in her room. He could have been a murderer. What if he arrived now with an axe in his bag or a set of knives or a long silk scarf? Addie tried to think what other instruments of torture might fit in an overnight bag. Thumb screws? Electric probes? Hamsters? She didn't like hamsters. Their teeth were too sharp.

She'd even made an effort to look nice for her killer, somewhat along the same lines as her mother telling her to put on clean underwear in case she got knocked down by a bus. She'd applied a dash of lipstick, tamed her hair, and put on her green top and best trousers. Now, with the idea running through her head that Will might be a psychotic killer, Addie armed herself with a kitchen knife, wondering if she should have made herself as unattractive as possible.

Only she couldn't. Even though she'd said this was a business arrangement, she didn't want Will to find her repulsive because a tiny, pathetic part of her hoped he might want to see her again. Entertained by her sparkling wit and intelligence, he'd see past all the things her mother didn't like and ask her on a proper date. Only for that to happen, he needed to turn up.

Maybe it was for the better. This way she wouldn't be disappointed when he fell asleep, ate her breakfast and walked out with her money. It was easier not to hope.

The later it grew, the more Addie realized it was relief that crept through her. She wasn't trying to fool her family, but herself.

Consequently, when the bell rang, she turned to stone. The third prolonged ring unfroze her. She grabbed the knife, raced to the door and flung it open. She'd have been less shocked by an alien.

"Don't look so surprised," Will said. "You asked me to come, remember?"

"Sorry. Come in." Addie moved out of the way, keeping the hand holding the knife behind her back. He was dressed in black jeans, black sweater, and carried a black bag. He looked like the Grim Reaper, only less cheerful.

"On your own?" he asked.

"Yes, my housemate's out." *Oh God. Mistake.* Addie tightened her grip on the knife and closed the door. *Please don't let him be a murderer.*

"I'm taking a risk here," he said. "I hope you aren't planning to murder me."

"Only if you snore."

Will chuckled. Addie's heart flipped. She'd made him smile.

"Would you like a drink or would you rather go straight to bed?" she asked. *God, stitch my mouth up now.*

He laughed. "I'd like a drink, but not lemonade."

Addie tucked the knife in the back of her trousers, covered it with her top and led him through to the lounge. The moment she hoped the knife didn't slip, the blade started a journey south.

"Wine, beer? Would you like anything to eat?"

"Beer's fine. I'm not hungry."

She'd intended to retrieve the blade in the kitchen, but he followed her. Now she had two pressing problems – a heart going so berserk in her chest she thought it might break her ribs and a knife sliding down her bottom, sharp end first which could shortly result in her standing in a pool of blood.

"Is Corona okay?" Addie asked, taking two bottles from the top of the fridge. She hoped to God it was, otherwise she'd have to bend down to David's supply of Dos Equis in the drawer at the bottom and the way the knife was progressing that could be life-threatening.

"Yep."

"Lime?"

"Great."

Addie looked for a knife and realized they were all being scalded in the dishwasher. She hesitated, then shook her leg and let the one by her knee slip onto the floor. She could feel him watching as she picked it up, washed it and cut two slivers of lime. Addie kept her eyes away from his as she forced the pieces into the necks of the bottles.

"So what's your housemate's name again?" he asked and Addie breathed out.

Will perched on the edge of the kitchen table and picked up a cheese biscuit.

"Lisa. I'm her lodger. She goes out with David, my brother. He's a policeman. So are my other brothers. Hugh's a sergeant and Finn's a detective inspector."

If that didn't warn him to be careful, nothing would.

"What do you do?" Will asked, eating another cheese spiral.

He likes my cooking! "Sales and admin, a bit of teaching. What about you?"

"Investment consultant." He took a long slug of beer.

"Hey, that's a stroke of luck," she said.

He grinned. "I thought that's what you said I did?"

Addie bit her lip. "Are you from London?"

"Manchester. Trying to catch me out?" He raised his eyebrows.

She smiled.

"I'll stay in character. It will be easier," he said. "I'd hate to forget who I was supposed to be. I'll do everything you'd expect Noah to do."

Is he flirting? Addie thought of the fabulous imaginary sex she'd had with Noah and a fountain of heat gushed through her. *Oh God, now my pants are wet.*

"What does Lisa do?"

"Teaches at the same place as me."

He stifled a yawn and Addie wanted to bite off her arm. They'd only been talking a few minutes and she'd bored him.

"I've had a busy couple of days. A lot to sort out over my poor mother's death. I'm thinking of suing the hospital."

She wasn't sure whether to laugh. He looked disappointed she didn't.

"Maybe you'd better show me where I'm sleeping."

Addie led him out of the kitchen into the hall and in her haste to get upstairs, tripped on the second step and fell. Embarrassed, she bounded the rest of the way, two steps at a time. Will was still at the bottom watching when she reached the top. He took his time walking up.

"The bathroom, Lisa's room and this is mine," Addie said, reaching around to switch on the light. She gestured for him to go in.

Addie liked her bedroom with its stripped and stained wooden floor. A shaggy flokati rug lay by the bed, cream linen curtains hung at the windows and pooled on the floor. There wasn't much furniture, just a bed with a twisted metal headboard, a white-washed single wardrobe, a couple of matching bedside cabinets and a bookcase. The wall facing the bed was covered with dozens of her black and white photographs, all held in clip frames. Addie rarely took shots of people. These were parts of things—the back of a seat, a tree trunk, railings.

Will stepped over to look. "This reminds me of that game where you have to identify an object from a picture taken at an unusual angle," he said. "Your work?"

"Yes."

"They're good. None of me?"

"You don't like having your picture taken."

"Strangely enough that's true."

Her heart fluttered at the coincidence. Addie watched as he walked across to her books and fingered the spines. There were several foreign language dictionaries, along with piles of double-stacked paperbacks, no titles visible.

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*" Will asked.

"*Un peu.*"

He laughed. "And Japanese?"

Addie nodded. Her desperation to leave home had led her to study languages, knowing she'd spend a year abroad. She couldn't get much further away than Japan, though she hadn't remembered she'd be taller than ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the population.

"Really? What else?" Will asked.

"I'm fluent in German, French and Japanese. I can get by in Russian, Spanish and Italian. I know how to swear in Portuguese, Turkish and Australian."

He chuckled. "Impressive. Particularly the Australian swearing. Which language do you teach?"

"English."

He smiled and looked through the other books. "Shakespeare, Milton, Keats. Heavyweight reading." He paused with his finger on a paperback. "Why are these facing the wrong way?"

That served her right, Addie thought.

"They're romances," she mumbled, her eyes fixed on the floor.

"And that's what you really like reading?"

"Do you want to use the bathroom first?" She tried to deflect him. "The blue towel is for you. Er...could you leave your razor and stuff so Lisa and David see it? I'm sorry there isn't much room in there."

"Sure."

When he'd gone, Addie sank to the edge of the bed. He'd find "not much room" an understatement. Although she'd tidied everywhere else, she daren't touch Lisa's toiletries. Addie sighed as a wave of nerves washed over her. She didn't know what was wrong. This was everything she'd wanted. He'd come and he was staying. Tomorrow she'd introduce him to David and Lisa, then show him out, never to see him again.

God, *that's* what's wrong.

Will looked for somewhere to lay out his things as instructed, but there wasn't an inch of space. For a moment he couldn't even spot the toilet. The room was packed with enough beauty products to keep a store stocked for months. Bottles, boxes and tubes lay all around the bath, on the sink, next to the sink and on the window sill, as well as filling a revolving floor to ceiling unit. He counted seventeen shampoos and thirteen conditioners. At first glance it looked like complete chaos, but Will suspected if he were to move a single item, alarms would sound, the gates of hell would burst open and he'd be dragged inside. He put his stuff on the floor.

He stared into the mirror, practiced a seductive smile and then frowned, wondering what he was doing. When he'd pulled up outside the house, he'd sat for a moment with his engine running ready to drive away again. Only he'd taken considerable pleasure in Ed's look of amazement when he'd said he was going out and wouldn't be back. Plus there was something about Addie.

While she was in the bathroom Will had another look around her bedroom. He sighed when he saw the bed she'd just made up on the floor. She hadn't expected him to turn up or had she thought about sleeping with him and changed her mind? From the moment the knife slid out of her trousers he'd suspected there'd be no shag, but he'd hoped for a couch. Will felt a slight pang of guilt as he nosed through her things, but it wasn't as if he was going to steal anything or read her diary, assuming he found one.

He was more interested by what he didn't see than what he did. No TV, no music system, no makeup or jewelry. Not that he intended to take the hundred pounds, but she wasn't rolling in money. The wardrobe held few clothes. Four pairs of shoes. Addie was different.

He pulled open the drawer of one of the bedside cabinets, hoping not to find a knife. A dog-eared teddy bear lay on a pile of cards. *To My Special Girlfriend, To the one I love, To my soul mate, All from Noah.*

So Noah existed and was probably married.

Chapter Four

When Addie returned to the bedroom she found Noah living up to his name. He was nowhere to be seen.

"Shit," she said.

Not a murderer, but a thief. She hadn't thought of that. She wondered what he'd taken. Not that she had much worth nicking, only a camera and the money she'd been going to give him anyway.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Addie threw herself facedown on the bed.

"What's the matter?" Will's head popped up right next to hers from the floor where he'd been lying.

His hair was messy and for the first time he looked vulnerable and uncertain, and Addie's heart lurched.

"Stubbed my toe." She squirmed back across the duvet and leapt up to hop in an unconvincing manner. "You can have the bed. The sheets are clean. The bed on the floor's for me."

"No, it's okay. I'll take the floor."

"No. That's not right. I can't let you be uncomfortable."

He looked at her, then stared at the double bed. Addie followed his gaze and felt a pang of longing. Why was she hesitating? The idea of lying next to him made her bubble with joy, but would he think she was offering more? She stopped hopping. Was she offering more?

"We can both sleep in the bed," she said. "But promise to be good."

"I've never had any complaints."

Addie gulped.

"I promise," he said. "Look, we'll put the sleeping bag between us, okay?"

Addie nodded, wishing the thing would spontaneously combust. She tried not to look at him. He was only wearing navy PJ bottoms. There was a Calvin Klein label on the waistband and a bulge below. Her gaze shot up. His chest was bare. He had tight abs, rounded pecs, broad shoulders and beautiful skin smattered with dark hair that arrowed down his chest and kept going. *Stop right there.* Before she lost control of her hands, Addie shot under the duvet and turned her back, balancing on the edge of the mattress, as far away from him as she could get.

The bed sagged as he lay on the other side.

"Thank you for doing this," she said. "Could you switch off the light, please?"

It clicked off. There was silence for a moment.

"Why did you pick me?" he asked.

"I was desperate."

The snort of annoyance hit her between the shoulder blades.

She turned to face him. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that, but I *was* desperate."

"You've had six months to sort this out, and I can't see why it started in the first place."

"That's because you don't know my mother. But I brought it on myself. I was so desperate to stop her nagging, I added to the long list of 'stupid things done by Addie Winter' and told her, contrary to her expectations, I now had a tall, dark and handsome boyfriend. His name was Noah, and he lived and worked in Manchester. So for the foreseeable future, I'd be spending weekends with him and would not be attending any more family Sunday lunches."

Why was she telling him this? He'd think she was a child, totally dominated by her mother. God, she was. Why couldn't she tell her mother to leave her alone? Tears sprang into her eyes and she blinked.

"I thought after a few weeks I could say we'd broken up, but I could see my mother waiting for me to say it. She expected it every time she saw me and it made me more determined to make it last."

"The nonexistent relationship?"

"I know how bad it sounds."

"So last week you killed my mother?"

Addie heard the laughter in his voice and wondered if he was thinking, *you killed my mother, wishing you could kill your own.*

Last Sunday they'd all sat round the dining table, Noah's empty chair reminding her mother to keep poking an open wound.

"So what's the real reason Noah's not come?" David had asked once the older brothers' children left the table. "His wife not let him out to play?"

"He's not married," Addie said.

"How do you know?" David asked.

"He just isn't."

Her mother Joan gave a snort of disgust.

"I bet he's married with kids," David chortled and then winced. Addie guessed Lisa had kicked him. Addie couldn't reach from where she sat.

Joan pounced. "Is that why Noah never comes here?"

"He's not married," Addie insisted.

"Is he someone we know?" Joan stared at her.

"No."

"Are you ashamed of us?"

Yes. "No."

"So why don't you have a photograph of him?" David asked.

"Noah doesn't like having his picture taken."

"How many children does he have?" Her mother slipped in another question.

"He doesn't have children."

"You should be ashamed." Joan's eyes narrowed.

"Why? What have I done?" Addie asked in bewilderment.

"Did you think about the effect this affair will have on his children?"

Addie wanted to tear her hair out. "There are no children."

"Maybe he's really called Nora and Addie's been hiding in the closet." David laughed at his own joke.

Addie glared at him, but soon-to-be-murdered David, who was never one to step back, particularly if he had his victim writhing on the floor, launched his last guided missile. "If you think about it, Noah's like his name, Noahwhere to be seen. I reckon Addie's made him up."

Flash-frozen under her mother's piercing stare, the breath caught in Addie's throat because David at last had something right. Noah didn't exist.

"So, is David right?" Joan asked. "Or are you a...lesbian?" She whispered the last word, looking as though she wanted to use soap on her mouth.

"No," Addie said.

"So he doesn't exist." Her mother crossed her arms.

"For crying out loud, of course he exists."

As her mother's scornful sniping continued, with David and middle brother Hugh egging her on, Addie grew incensed with the injustice of it. No one stood up for her, not even Finn, who usually did, or her housemate Lisa, who occasionally did when she felt brave enough to provoke her boyfriend's mother.

"What are you thinking?" Will asked, snapping Addie out of her thoughts.

"I got pushed too far. I said your mother had died and next Sunday you'd be there for lunch."

Addie had been faced with one week in which to find Noah, and since she'd not managed to find Mr. Perfect so far in her miserable existence, there was little chance of digging him up inside seven days. Particularly since she needed to come up with someone who matched the guy she'd spent weeks raving about.

Noah had to be taller than she was, dark-haired, handsome and pass for thirty-five. He also had to have a bit of a tan because a month ago, in an attempt to impress her mother, Addie and Noah flew to the Caribbean. Or in Addie's case, a trip to a tanning booth in Wolverhampton, followed by more lies—a broken camera so no photos and a few tacky souvenirs courtesy of a local charity shop. Addie had also boasted about Noah's body, mainly to make David jealous, so flabby stomachs were out.

"I looked for you everywhere," Addie whispered. "I devoted every spare moment of the week to finding you. I had to. If no one ever met you, it would be as good as admitting I'd lied and for once, I wanted to appear to be in the right even though I was in the wrong."

Now her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she could see him better. Even as a gray shadow he made her pulse spike.

Addie sighed. "I even checked into hiring an actor, but the agency wanted five hundred pounds. Yesterday morning, Noah was still 'Noahwhere' to be seen. Hence the gym."

"And there I was," Will said.

Addie smiled. She'd never realized how easy it was to talk in the dark.

"You looked a bit pissed off. I figured if you were already annoyed, I wasn't going to ruin your evening," she said.

He laughed.

Mr. Perfect. Addie sighed. *Oh God, had she said that out loud?*

"So it wasn't the T-shirt?" he asked.

"To be honest, if it had said, 'Don't come near me. I'm a complete bastard', I'd still have launched myself at your water bottle."

The bed shook as he laughed. "I've never heard it called that."

"What?" Addie asked in bewilderment. As she realized what he meant, she was sure she turned the color of an embarrassed beetroot. Thank God it was dark.

"So how are you going to explain the fact that I don't come for lunch?"

Addie's heart snapped in two. "You're going to dump me."

"Why would I want to do that?" His husky voice sent an arrow of hope into her heart. "I could come to your mother's."

The last word killed the hope. Addie sighed. "No, you can't. She'd strangle the truth out of you within minutes. In fact, you'd confess the moment the front door opened. 'I'm not Noah. Addie made me do it. It's her fault.' The Gestapo missed out there, neglecting the use of overbearing mothers as interrogators."

He chuckled.

"Plus, all three of my brothers are policemen, though you'd probably fool David. He's mentally challenged. Since you're going to meet him tomorrow, you *have* to fool him, but Hugh and Finn are nowhere near as gullible. Once David's convinced you're Noah, you can dump me and jet off to Qatar."

"Qatar? So did you have a plan B?"

He'd shuffled slightly closer. Addie breathed in Lisa's lemon soap.

"I had thought of arranging your tragic demise, but my church-going mother would insist on going to the funeral, creating an even greater problem." Addie had chased the idea around her head for a while. "I wondered if I could find a stranger's

funeral to attend, but then I'd have to tell my mother I'd lied about your name. Although I could pretend you'd been stalked by a psychotic ex-girlfriend who'd eventually killed you." She wished she hadn't told him that.

Will went quiet. "Qatar then."

Plan C had involved killing her mother, except with all three of her brothers in the police force she wouldn't get away with it. How inconvenient was that? Plan D involved being beamed up into a UFO by good-looking aliens. Plan E was ugly aliens.

"You've still not told me why I'd dump you," Will whispered. "How about I invite you to Qatar with me? You decline because you can't leave your mother."

Addie was sure his hand lay her side of the sleeping bag.

"She'd never believe that," she said.

"Why don't you dump me?"

"Because no one would believe it, particularly my mother. I've spent six months raving about you, your fabulous job, your amazing penthouse, your wonderful personality, your incredible body and your devotion to your sick mother. You send me flowers and champagne, you took me on an exotic holiday. Why would I dump you? You're the most wonderful boyfriend in the whole universe—charming, thoughtful, kind and considerate."

"You're amazingly astute."

There was a long pause.

"Hey, it's not too dark to see you smiling," he said. "At least say it wasn't all lies."

"No."

She was sure he'd moved a little closer.

"Which part's true?" he asked.

"Er...you've got a lovely body." Addie inched backward.

"It was incredible a moment ago."

"It still is," she said in a strangled voice.

He sighed.

"So what have you been doing while you should have been with me?"

"Potholing, canyoning and whitewater canoeing. A bit weird really because I wasn't the least bit sporty at school. The PE teachers gave me a spoof prize at speech day for the pupil who'd come up with the most extravagant excuses to get out of games."

"What was your best one?"

"That my dad had been arrested for spying. Since he was a senior police officer and the story appeared in *The Yorkshire Post*, he was furious."

Will laughed. Addie could feel the warmth of his body, smell the mixture of beer and toothpaste on his breath.

"Is my father still alive?" he asked.

"No, and you have no siblings. You'll only need to chat to Lisa and David for a few minutes, maybe not even that if we pretend to have a row. Then you can storm off, leaving me broken-hearted."

Will stretched in the bed and put his arm under his head. He couldn't see her very well, but he could smell her—no overpowering, expensive perfume, just a sweet, clean soapy smell. He'd had a surge of blood to his groin when she'd hopped around the bedroom. With that long rangy body in those little red shorts and strappy top, she'd sent him into an instant state of arousal. And now he lay wondering if he dare reach across the few inches of padded nylon lying between them. One touch. If she pulled away he'd pretend it was an accident. Maybe he should try a compliment first.

"You're not wearing any perfume," he heard himself say and winced.

"I don't use it."

"You don't need it. You smell lovely." *Better.*

Silence hung between them.

"Are you going out with a married man? Do you already have a boyfriend called Noah?"

"No," Addie said, turned and fell out of bed, dragging the duvet with her.

Will put on the light and leaned over to look at her lying in a tangled heap.

"I'm not going to touch you, Addie. I'll sleep down there."

"No, it's okay, really."

She threw the duvet on the bed and climbed back in.

Will stared at her for a moment. "Sure?"

"Yes."

"Goodnight, Addie."

"Night."

There was no way she could sleep. She didn't even know his last name. She could have asked, but didn't want to break the spell. Her first time in bed with a man and she only knew his first name. Addie liked the sound of that because it was wild and crazy, and nothing like her. She longed to be bad, hoping a sexy demon lurked inside her waiting to be unleashed, but she suspected she was the good girl her parents had always wanted, otherwise she'd have rolled the other way and kissed him. She couldn't make the first move, but if Will reached for her, she wouldn't resist.

Addie wasn't completely innocent sexually, not if she counted the cinema groper whose hand she'd allowed to slide from knee to thigh because she was part frozen in horror and part excited. Plus there was the Australian surfer she'd met at a party who'd kissed her and made her head spin before he'd thrown up all over her, after which

she'd thrown up too. And Max at university, who'd introduced her to the pain of unrequited love. There had also been offers of sex, elegantly phrased "give us a shag" requests, mainly from drunks and short Turkish men who for some reason found her irresistible, but she'd never dated anyone.

She could hear Will breathing, feel the soft draught of his breath on her shoulder. Addie moved a few inches nearer. He might be dumping her tomorrow, but he'd live on in her dreams. She wondered what he'd do if she turned and moved her arm to his side of the sleeping bag. Would he believe it was an accident? Maybe he'd reach out and kiss her fingers. Addie sighed in happiness. Her fingers, then her mouth. She imagined herself kissing him and was enveloped by a warm glow. That night, it was going to be so much easier to pretend someone loved her.

Chapter Five

When Will woke on Sunday morning, he and Addie lay face to face. Judging by the peculiar lump under his feet, the sleeping bag had migrated in the night. Will hadn't been able to look at her properly before, she always seemed to be moving. Now he had time to study her, he saw a sexy mouth with a plump bottom lip and an upturned upper lip. A mouth aching to be kissed.

Will already sported a morning erection and as he stared at her mouth, he grew harder. He stifled a groan, closed his eyes and tried to think of something other than sex. Jack Magelan and all the work to be done tomorrow. There would be people to upset, people might lose their jobs, though not immediately...then he'd be Mr. Unpopular, not Mr. Perfect at all. He smiled when he remembered Addie muttering that the night before. He knew she hadn't meant to say it out loud, but he was glad she had.

Will knew she was looking at him. "Quit staring."

"I'm not staring."

He opened one eye, caught Addie doing the same and they laughed. Will figured pressing his lips against hers would be a huge mistake. She'd probably break her neck falling out of bed. Still, he was going to try. Pity to waste his hard-on.

As he moved, Addie jumped up. "Would you like breakfast?"

Will sighed. "I wouldn't mind a cup of tea."

She almost danced to the kitchen because he wasn't racing to leave. How many times had she dreamt of waking next to a man? Her imagination hadn't even come close to bringing the joy she currently felt. She'd wanted to touch his face and stroke the stubble that had appeared on his chin to see if it was rough or soft. He looked younger when he slept and a lot less cross and stressed. She wanted to kiss him, she wanted to kiss every part of his face, his eyes, his nose, his cheeks. She wanted to kiss more than his face. She wanted to nibble his shoulder blades and make him squirm. And he wasn't racing to leave! Addie's brain turned into a fruit smoothie.

You haven't paid him yet, her head reminded her and her shoulders slumped. She was behaving like a fool.

Since David was already in the kitchen making a drink, Addie made a point of banging two mugs on the work surface.

David smirked. "Noah turn up then?"

"Of course."

"So why's he not coming to lunch?"

Addie's stomach twisted itself into a complicated pretzel.

"Who said he's not?" Damn, she was an idiot. She hardly waited for the tea to brew before she fished the bags out of the mugs and poured in the milk.

"Likes drinking cat piss, does he?" David laughed.

Addie was desperate to get out of the kitchen.

"Going to drink both of those?" he called after her.

She stamped up the stairs, pushed the door open with her shoulder and then kicked it shut behind her. The tea sloshed in the mugs.

"What's the matter?" Will asked and the scowl dropped from Addie's mouth.

She handed him a mug and didn't miss the look on his face when he saw the state of the tea. "Sorry," she muttered.

"It's okay. Hot water and milk is fine. So what's the matter?"

"They still think you're a figment of my imagination." She thought for a moment. "Make a noise."

"What?"

"Just make a noise loud enough for them to hear."

"What sort of noise?"

Addie flailed around. "Er...a happy noise."

He raised his eyebrows and she blushed.

"Why don't you make a noise?" He leaned back and sipped his drink.

Addie had a quiet seethe, tempted to remind him she was paying for his part in all this. Instead, she sat on the bed and went for a loud moan. "Ohhh." Then watched him trying to suppress his mirth.

"Ohhhh. Yessss," she tried again and now he *did* laugh.

Addie wanted to hit him. Instead she moaned several times, getting louder and louder. She had to make them believe this. "Ohh. Ohhhh. Ohhhh."

There was a knock on the door and she froze in mid-moan.

"Are you okay, Addie?" David called. "You sound like you're giving birth."

"Go away," Will shouted.

Addie heard David say, "Fuck me!"

Well, he believed her now. She directed a beam of pure delight at Will.

"Great, I'll go and cook your breakfast," she said.

"Hey, not so fast. You'll wreck my reputation if you rush off after all that moaning. Wait a few minutes at least." He flicked the duvet over her legs.

Addie tried to gulp quietly. Her mind raced. Maybe making those sorts of noises had been a mistake. Noah was supposed to dump her, which would explain his non-appearance at lunch. They should have been quarrelling, not making love. Now what was she going to do?

She couldn't think with him lying there next to her. She jumped up again. "Left something on," she said and fled.

Addie had started to scramble the eggs when Will walked into the kitchen.

"Smells delicious," he said.

"And I thought you were a recording," David commented as he followed him in. He held out his hand. "Hi, I'm David. Addie's favorite brother."

"Nowhere near," Addie said.

"Pleased to meet you, David."

Addie glared when she saw David checking the fingers of Will's left hand.

"Did you want something?" she asked her brother.

"Lisa wants orange juice."

Addie doubted it. She'd never seen Lisa drink anything other than tea or alcohol. Addie gave the eggs a vicious stir.

"That your BMW outside?" David asked.

"No, I've got a Lexus."

David leaned against the fridge. "Sorry to hear about your mother."

"Thanks. It's a hard way to lose your mum, bit by bit."

Addie glanced round in horror, but Will had a straight face. She hadn't mentioned the flesh-eating virus last week to her mother. Lies had a habit of coming back to bite her.

David continued, oblivious. "Well, our mum's looking forward to meeting you. Addie's gone on and on about her fabulous boyfriend. Mum thought you didn't exist."

Addie opened the dishwasher and looked for the sharpest knife.

"I'm afraid I'm not able to come."

"He witnessed a stabbing," Addie blurted. "He has to go and give a statement."

They both stared at her.

"And I've made arrangements to scatter my mother's ashes in the sea. I hope your mum will understand," Will said.

Oh God, that was a much better lie. Why had she mentioned a stabbing? She put the plates on the table.

"This looks good, Addie." Will smiled at her.

"I'll leave you to it, then." David went back to Lisa without the orange juice.

Addie wondered how he'd ever got into the police force. She put her finger against her lips to warn Will that David might be listening at the door and he nodded.

She watched as Will tucked into scrambled eggs, lean smoked bacon grilled to a crisp, two links of thick herb sausage, fried field mushrooms, half a tomato and a wedge

of crunchy fried bread. She only had one piece of bacon and a few mushrooms and was still pushing most of it around the plate as he finished.

"Delicious," he said, lining up his knife and fork.

Addie gave a little smile.

"A stabbing?" Will whispered.

She winced. "Sorry. Your lie was much better."

He stared at her a moment before he spoke. "I suppose I'd better get dressed."

She nodded, hoping to be invited to the scattering of nonexistent ashes.

Will sat waiting for Addie to finish in the bathroom. She came in wearing tight jeans and a pale blue sweater, and clutching five twenty-pound notes.

"Keep it," Will said. "I haven't had to pay for a hotel room and you fed me."

"No, we had a deal. You have to take it."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do," Addie insisted.

Will shook his head. "*You* dump me."

He picked up his bag and walked out of the room. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, a woman with long blonde hair stepped out of the lounge.

"Hi, Noah. I'm Lisa. We meet at last. Addie's gone on and on about you."

David appeared at her side. "So, how did you two meet?" he asked.

All three spun around as Addie careered down the stairs behind them, making more noise than a herd of elephants after one ripe banana. She slipped on an invisible skin and Will caught her in his arms, saving her from a dive into the front door.

"I was visiting Leeds and Addie picked me up in a gym," Will said, as he set her back on her feet. He didn't let her go. He couldn't.

"Really?" David asked. "I thought—"

"My well-defined muscular body made me difficult to resist." Will grinned. He touched soft flesh at her waist and his thumbs began to stroke.

Addie took a deep breath. "I—"

"We hit it off straightaway," Will interrupted before she made up another terrible lie. "She handed me a bottle of water and looked at me with her fabulous eyes and I was lost."

Addie smiled and Will thought again about her beautiful mouth and how much he wanted to kiss her.

She put her mouth to his ear. "What the hell do you think you're doing? How am I going to explain you dumping me, when you've just said that?"

Will swallowed hard. Her breathing in his ear made him soft at the knees and hard elsewhere.

"David, let's go and get dressed." Lisa pulled his arm.

"In a minute." David cocked his head and stared at Addie.

Will moved Addie so her body blocked the view of the front of his pants. He bent his head to whisper. "You want this to work? David's suspicious. We have to kiss."

She clutched his arms but she didn't run away screaming. Will lowered his lips to her face, brushed them across her cheek, and sliding them down to the edge of her mouth, he kissed her. He didn't have to bend his head far and thought how good that felt. He moaned as Addie's arms tightened around him. Her tongue ran between his lips and slipped into his mouth. Will felt something shift inside him. As he pushed her against the wall, Will was vaguely aware of Lisa dragging David away.

Will wasn't sure what he was doing. He had Addie pinned in front of him. They had their arms around each other. He was kissing her hard and she wasn't trying to stop him. On the contrary, her mouth was as greedy as his. Why couldn't this have happened last night? His knee pressed on her legs and when she let him separate her thighs, a bolt of desire shot straight to his groin. Will pulled away and looked at her. Her eyes had closed, her mouth emitting tiny panting breaths that hit his cheek. He groaned, sought out her beautiful lips and kissed her harder.

Addie ached. There wasn't one part of her that didn't want this. Only she wasn't sure what *this* was. Her ears buzzed and white spots danced a crazy jig in front of her eyes. How come she didn't know kissing was like this? The room reeled and she staggered. Her knees wobbled, but Will held her up, pushed her against the wall. Even so, Addie had to keep hold of him to make sure she stayed upright. Then his hand slid under her sweater to her breast and brushed her nipple. That was all it took. She gasped and shuddered as a fast, spiraling orgasm shot through her.

When she opened her eyes and saw the way he looked at her, she knew he realized what had happened. Her face flooded with heat. She lurched out of his arms and flew upstairs. Addie wanted to scream. They were supposed to be breaking up. In a few moments, David and Lisa would learn that he'd dumped her. Addie should have kicked Will's shins. Instead, she had to explain the kiss. She slammed her door and leaned back against it. She could never explain *that* kiss.

There was a gentle knock level with her head.

"Addie."

She stopped breathing.

"Addie."

She slid down and sat on the floor with her back against the door, feeling as though she'd had her eyes closed her whole life. Then she burst into tears.

"Addie. Open the door."

"Go away. Go to bloody Qatar," she sobbed. "You don't want me, so just go."

Chapter Six

Addie sat on the couch waiting for David and Lisa. Will had wanted her and what had she done? Told him to get lost. She clenched her fists, forgetting she held a bunch of flowers. Originally purchased to brighten the lounge for Will, Addie hoped the recycled carnations might soften her mother. Unlikely now the stems bent at a right angle.

Lisa came downstairs looking flushed, David wore a smug grin and Addie's lip wobbled. She didn't need two guesses to know what they'd been up to. It could have been her and Will if she hadn't panicked.

"You okay?" Lisa asked, looking at Addie's eyes.

"Noah dumped me." Addie gulped back a sob.

"What? Oh, you poor thing. Men are such bastards."

"Hey," David objected.

"You're not a man yet," Lisa teased.

"Why did he dump you?" David asked. "He looked as though he enjoyed sticking his tongue down your throat."

Addie's heart leapt high into the air from a springboard before it splattered onto concrete at the bottom of an empty pool. Maybe Will had enjoyed it, but he wouldn't see her again. He hadn't asked for her phone number or left his. The only lingering trace of him was the spicy aroma of his aftershave.

"What did you do?" David asked.

Of course, it had to be her fault, Addie thought. "Nothing. He's moving to Qatar. Don't tell Mum." And her throat seized up. Tears welled again in her eyes. Will had been perfect. He passed the test. Not a single comment about her height.

* * * * *

Addie sat in the back of Lisa's car, staring out of the window, on the way to her execution. She might have proved Noah existed, but now he'd dumped her, she'd be ripped to pieces. Not that her mother would be surprised, since Addie was plain, awkward, clumsy, rude, had big feet and no sense of style or color. When all you heard were disparaging comments, you started to believe them.

Although Addie didn't think she was plain, she knew she wasn't pretty, not compared to Lisa. How could Addie's boring hair and weird eyes compare to Lisa's sleek honeyed locks and brilliant smile? At Bristol, any interest shown in Addie had been a ploy to gain access to Miss Beautiful. Addie was never more than second choice and when she stood up, no choice at all.

She'd reached the height of five-foot-eleven and three-quarter inches by age twelve and it was downhill from that point. School photos, arranged by height, were a particular humiliation. Only men's shirts were long enough in the sleeve. She couldn't wear pants because the uniform ones hovered above her ankles, and she was stuck in flat, ugly shoes. There was nothing she could do about any of it. Short girls wore sexy high heels to make up for their lack of stature. Fat girls had proper boobs, bouncy orbs that moved seductively under their clothes and they could lose weight. Addie couldn't chop several inches off her legs.

She'd been teased all her life and learned the hard way how to be best friends with herself. Now she kept a happy smile in place, except when she went home to see her mother. Addie took a deep breath of untainted air before she stepped over the threshold, knowing as soon as she walked in, she'd be gripped by an urge to kill herself. The house sucked the life out of her. Dirt wouldn't dare to settle. The carpets had vacuumed lines like a well-mown lawn. Plumped cushions were precisely positioned on two large sofas and every ornament had its place. The photographs lined up on the mantelpiece like dominoes were mostly of her father Silas and her brothers, just a tiny one of Addie, in which she was barely recognizable.

The rest of the family had already arrived. Addie noticed Sally and Miranda, wives of Finn and Hugh, had turned up. Usually they made their husbands bring the grandchildren on their own. Her mother came in from the kitchen. Addie stepped forward to give her the flowers and tripped over two-year-old Richard, who'd zoomed under her feet.

"Watch where you're going." Joan reached for the flowers instead of Addie. "Feet your size, you should take more care."

Addie was certain that if aliens invaded and the first person they met was Joan Winter, they'd leave on the spot.

The flowers drooped in her mother's hand. "White carnations. Thank you. Not struck on them, mind – they remind me of your father's wreath."

Her voice wrapped Addie in barbed wire. "Sorry." She wondered if it would save time to hand out cards saying "sorry" the moment she walked into a room. Alternatively she could have it stamped on her forehead.

"So where is he?" her mother asked. "What pathetic excuse are you going to come up with this time? Another cow leapt in front of his car? Another snake bitten him? Make it good, Adelina. We could do with a laugh."

Addie knew she was making a big mistake, but she went ahead and did it anyway. "He witnessed a fight, so he's had to go and give a statement to the police."

"And his mother's ashes," Lisa reminded her in a quiet voice.

"He's gone to scatter them," Addie said.

"And you hadn't the decency to go with him?" Joan shook her head in disbelief.

Cue onset of a new ice age and her mother temporarily stopped speaking to her. Addie might have seen that as a good thing, but she guessed her tormentor was biding her time. She was right.

Addie steeled herself as she watched her mother inspecting her clothes. Joan wore a smart green dress, her gray hair in a tight bun. Addie's brothers wore white shirts and ties. Their wives were in dresses. Even Lisa was in a skirt. Addie wore jeans and a sweater. She knew she was her own worst enemy, but after a lifetime of being forced to spend Sundays zipped into her best frock, with a velvet bow stuck in her hair, she now wore what she liked and what she knew would annoy her mother.

"Why on earth do you wear pale blue? It doesn't suit you. Makes your face look blotchy," Joan said.

No, that would be the crying.

"You should go for something patterned to take attention away from your height."

While her mother professed to offer caring advice, Addie heard constant, wearing criticism. It had always been the same. No matter whether she'd fought or capitulated, her parents' endless disapproval had molded and contorted her. Her brothers had come in for similar treatment, but seemed to withstand it better than her. Addie wondered if she'd been starved of love because with three livewire siblings, there wasn't enough to go round. She had no memory of being cuddled or kissed. Her mother had never said she loved her.

"Oh, look at Harry. What a clever little chap," said Joan.

Two-year-old Harry was trying to untie his dad's shoelaces. It hadn't escaped Addie's attention that Joan didn't favor the boys over the girls, so it wasn't because she was female that her mother didn't love her.

All Addie's nieces and nephews were nightmares. After returning to Leeds, she'd been lassoed as a baby-sitter, but since inventing Noah, she'd slipped out of the noose. Now she was unattached, she'd have to come up with another excuse.

"You'll have time to baby-sit now," Joan said.

Mind-reading was another of her mother's skills. Addie was going away next weekend whether she could afford it or not. The boys were a pain, but Trixie and Honey operated as trainee agents of Satan. Addie hadn't seen them since she'd arrived and guessed they were upstairs plotting to take over the world.

"Join in the conversation," Joan ordered.

David had his mouth pressed to Lisa's ear. Finn and Hugh argued about football and Sally and Miranda were betting over which of their sons would be the first to be dry at night. Addie had been brought up in a family where striving to do better than others was a way of life. Competition prizes were always being delivered—Lego sets, remote control cars, books and games. Finn, Hugh and David had joined football teams, fencing leagues, swimming clubs, army cadets. If there was an exam to take, they took it and their rooms had been full of trophies and certificates. Addie shied away from

anything competitive, anything that might make her stand out. She made no effort, and drove everyone mad, especially her mother.

Addie felt her mother's gaze land on her and tried to blend into the wallpaper. She should have gone for a pink flowered top.

"Hugh's in line for a promotion. I don't suppose —"

"No."

"Surely you've been working there long enough to make an impression."

Addie shrugged.

"A waste of an opportunity."

It had been her mother who'd pressed Addie to take the job with Booth's. When her father became ill and Addie returned home, the offer of an exciting position with a travel company run by a friend of her father's had been the carrot. Bob Booth promised her a full-time job after a probationary period. He also offered her a dazzling career, exotic travel, rapid promotion and a competitive salary, none of which turned out to be true. Addie didn't count accompanying coach loads of senior citizens as exotic travel. She knew she should look for something better, but her employment record wasn't good. After university she flitted from one company to another, unsure over what she wanted to do and damned at a distance by her mother for every decision she made.

"Addie, go upstairs and tell the girls to wash their hands," Joan said. "Please."

The pair were in the bathroom, Trixie plaiting Honey's long blonde hair. Little twisted strands entwined with what looked like toffee wrappers stuck out all over her head. When Addie looked more closely, she saw several toffees and winced.

"Time to eat," she said.

"We haven't finished." Trixie pouted. "I haven't done her highlights."

"What were you going to use?" Addie asked.

"We found this in Grandma's cupboard." Honey opened her hand to reveal a tube of hemorrhoid cream.

Addie stifled a giggle. "Wait 'til after lunch. I don't think you'd better use this without asking Grandma, okay?"

"Does my hair look nice, Aunty Addie?" Honey asked.

"Lovely. You look like a fairy princess."

Honey went downstairs smiling, to be greeted with a wail from Miranda. "What have you done?"

"Aunty Addie said it looked nice. She said I looked like a fairy." Honey started to cry.

"You look more like a Rasta-fairy," David teased.

"I think you look lovely, sweetheart," Finn told his niece.

"Thanks, Finn," Addie said and her brother laughed until he caught his mother's eye.

The Winter family sat around the large oak table for Sunday lunch. Addie watched her mother at a side table, piling a plate with mashed potatoes, a squillion sludgy sprouts and a thick slice of rare beef edged with soft yellow fat. Even as Addie hoped the serving was not coming her way, it did. There was not one item Addie liked—no peas, roast potatoes or roast parsnips and no Yorkshire pudding, though they seemed to be on everyone else's plate. She didn't ask why, not wanting a lecture about her needing to lose weight. Addie picked up her knife and fork and then put them down again. The smell of the sprouts and the sight of the meat made her feel sick. She was twenty-seven years old. She did not have to eat this.

"Delicious, Mum," David said.

Addie hoped he choked. Finn rolled his eyes at Addie, and cut up his son Harry's food. Addie wished she was sitting next to Finn who'd have eaten her meat.

"Auntie Addie isn't eating her dinner," Trixie said. "She doesn't care about the starving children in Africa, Granny."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," chorused Trixie's father and mother.

"She can't have pudding, can she?" Trixie smirked.

"I want pudding now!" Harry pushed his plate away. He knocked a glass of blackcurrant juice all over the tablecloth and burst into tears.

"See what you've done," Joan snapped at Addie, who sat at the far end of the table, nowhere near the disaster.

Addie took advantage of the flurry of activity to pass Finn her meat and sneak the rest of her meal into the kitchen, depositing the congealed mess in the bin. She turned to see her mother behind her.

"Not hungry? You won't want pudding then," Joan said.

Addie sat and watched while the rest of the family tucked into apple and blackberry crumble, and wondered not for the first time, if she was related to any of them. Her brothers were the image of their deceased father and had been taken for triplets on more than one occasion. The three looked like cuddly lambs, lots of curly fair hair, dark eyes and sweet faces. They'd followed their father like sheep into the police force, but they all loved it. They looked nothing like Addie with her dull locks and weird brown-flecked eyes.

As a little girl, Addie imagined she was a changeling, a princess snatched from her loving parents by elves and stuck with the Winter family. When she'd grown out of fairies, she dreamt she was adopted and one day would be rescued by the woman who'd given birth to her, a mega-rich film star. Now she was old enough to accept she was unwanted and unloved. She just didn't know why.

"So what did his mother die of?" Joan asked.

"That flesh-eating virus," Addie muttered and was rewarded with a shudder of revulsion that went round the table like a Mexican wave.

"And he had to scatter the ashes today? Couldn't he have come here first and then you could have gone with him?" Joan said.

Addie made another attempt to convince her. "I told you he had to go to see the police about the stabbing."

Hugh and Finn looked at her and she knew she'd made another mistake. David grinned. The bastard.

"You said a fight. You didn't mention a stabbing. Where was this?" asked Hugh.

"When?" from Finn.

"Who was stabbed?" from Hugh.

"Does it take all day to give a statement?" from her mother.

Aggravated beyond sense, Addie opened her mouth, inserted both feet, both hands and her last remaining brain cell. "Okay. I give in. He's dumped me."

Her mother broke the stunned silence. "You lied about the stabbing."

"No. That happened." Addie would never admit to lying. She recognized Pandora's box when she saw it.

"He dumped you after that kiss?" David asked.

Addie gritted her teeth. She was going to kill him.

"So what went wrong?" Joan asked.

Not the simple enquiry it might appear. Addie knew her mother was asking why Addie wasn't married to Noah, why their children weren't winning prizes. Her delay in responding fed the fire.

"I'm waiting," Joan said, tapping her fingers on the table.

Addie pleaded for a tornado to sweep away her or her mother, she didn't care.

"Your eyes are red. Do you have a hangover? Men don't like women who drink."

Addie sighed.

"Period pains? Constipation?"

"No," Addie snapped and David sniggered.

"So what are you thinking about?" Joan asked.

"Nothing." Addie knew "wishing I was dead" was *not* the right answer. She wondered if she could pretend to see a spider. They all knew the hysteria that brought on.

"Don't lie."

"Why aren't I allowed to be not thinking of anything? David never looks as though he's thinking of anything. He always looks half-vacant." Addie glared at him.

"Well?" Joan demanded.

There was no escape. "Actually, I'm wondering how to solve the crisis in the Middle East and whether I should take up prostitution to clear my debts."

Her mother gaped at her. Addie's brothers laughed.

Joan's eyes narrowed. "What did you do to Noah?"

"Nothing. He dumped me because he's moving to Qatar."

"I warned you before, you need to change your attitude. You can't go around without makeup, wearing scruffy clothes and expect to keep a man interested."

They'd all walked around on broken glass since their father died, and maybe putting up with her mother's criticism was the price Addie had to pay for getting away with the six-month lie. Noah had temporarily rescued her from a rising flood of despair. At least they all believed he existed. She kept quiet.

"It wouldn't hurt to wear a bit of makeup. A dash of lipstick."

Back on target. Addie's personal guided missile.

"I'll have to change my Christmas letter. I'd put in a whole paragraph about how you'd finally found a lovely man," Joan said. "I despair of you. What do you have to show for yourself? No career, husband, children. No house of your own, not like Lisa."

Addie wished someone would stand up for her. Her brothers had their faces down. Even Finn stayed silent and he was the only one who ever tried to defend her. Lisa flashed her a sympathetic look but kept her mouth shut.

Addie clenched her fists. "I liked Noah, but he said I was hopeless in bed. Maybe I should sleep with as many men as I can to get more experience. What do you think? Any tips for me about that?"

There was a shocked silence and then Addie was sent to wash the dishes.

David waited until everyone was engrossed in the movie and then sidled off to speak to Finn in the dining room. Harry looked up at him from his potty.

"Not finished yet, Harry? You're missing sweeties," said David.

Harry screwed up his face and then smiled at his dad.

"Done," he announced.

He stood up and the potty stayed stuck to his bottom. Finn dropped the newspaper and leapt to his feet. David started to laugh until Finn sent him a warning look.

"Clever boy. Let's sort you out and then you can go and watch TV."

"Takes after you," David said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Finn asked.

"You used to spend hours in the toilet."

"I still do. It's the only place to get any peace. And don't tell Sally you bribed Harry with sweets. She'll blow a fuse."

"You'd have been in here all afternoon."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Finn grinned.

"I wanted to ask you to do something."

"What?"

"The guy that's dumped Addie, there's something not right. I don't think he's off to Qatar. I think they made that up between them. I got his car registration."

"So why don't you check up on him?"

"I'm not supposed to."

"And I am?" Finn laughed.

"Well, no, but I'd get into more trouble than you."

Finn shook his head. "Why bother?"

"I still think he's married and they haven't broken up. You should have seen them kissing. They were like teenagers."

His brother looked at him for a few moments. "Is this about proving you're right or protecting Addie?"

"Protecting Addie."

Finn sighed. "For a policeman, you're a hopeless liar. Okay, give me the number."

"What are you two plotting?" Joan demanded as she came into the room.

"Nothing," Finn said.

"David, a word." His mother beckoned him with one curl of her finger.

Behind his mother's back, David saw Finn stare hard at him and zip his mouth. They both knew he was wasting his time.

"Adelina. Kitchen. Now," Joan roared.

Addie had just sat down after doing all the washing up. When Finn got up too, her heart thudded.

"So he *is* married," Joan said with a smug smile. "All that rubbish about Qatar. You should be ashamed, lying to us. Think of his wife. The poor woman. His children will be damaged forever by this. It's no good telling me it's his fault as much as yours. It isn't. Men can't help themselves. It's their penises."

Addie heard Finn disguising a laugh behind her. She wondered if it was worth speaking. As soon as she opened her mouth her mother leapt in again.

"I hope you used protection. It would be terrible if he passed some disease on to his wife."

"Mum, that's a bit harsh," Finn said.

"I told you he's not married," Addie said. "But what does it matter anyway?"

"Of course it matters if you're still seeing him." Joan glared at her.

Addie looked to Finn for help, but he shrugged.

"If you had half the brains of your brothers..."

And that was it. "I'm going home."

"I'll drive you back," Finn said.

“No, you won’t. I only get to see you for a few hours each week. If she wants to go, she can go on her own. And take that bag of clippings, Addie. You forgot it last week.”

Addie hadn’t forgotten. The clipped out articles started the day she went to university. Whilst scouring newspapers and magazines for competitions, her mother came across items Addie needed to read to improve her life, so she cut them out to post to her. No note or letter, just large recycled envelopes full of pages on what to do if you have big feet, long legs, short hair, no bust, no dress sense, a lisp (she hadn’t), no idea how to apply makeup, low self-esteem, webbed feet and a beak. Every time an envelope arrived, a black cloud enveloped Addie’s heart because even at a distance her mother still wanted to control her.

As she left the house, she dropped the bag in next door’s wheelie bin. She caught a bus to the multi-screen cinema in Kirkstall and watched two crappy films to ensure she got home after Lisa and David had gone to bed. Addie knew she should never have come back to Leeds. She should have stayed as far away as she could.

Chapter Seven

Addie waved to Fred as she hurried across the yard to the office. He waved back, but her favorite coach driver had a grim look on his face. Already in danger of being late, she hadn't time to ask why. Addie saw the *Booth's Travel* sign lying on the ground and wondered if it had fallen off in the night. Maybe Fred had the job of putting it back.

Bob Booth had built up his business from a single travel agency, established in 1975, to a swarm of them now strategically placed in major towns in the north. Booth's Travel also ran a fleet of coaches and when Royal Ascot had temporarily moved to York, Bob expanded in a small way into corporate hospitality. Addie had worked part-time for Booth's for just over a year, in a sales and admin role she could have done straight from school. The lingering dream that Bob would one day recognize her worth and appoint her managing director had made it difficult to leave.

As Addie rounded the corner, she saw two men on ladders fastening a board in place. *Magelan's*. She slammed to a halt. *Magelan's* were a large leisure company based in the south. She'd seen their ads on the internet and in the *Sunday Times*. Bob had sold up. Addie was stunned.

Only the thought that she'd soon incur the wrath of the sales director, Delia Carne, or Genghis as she was known to the rest of the staff, dragged Addie into the building. Genghis was tall, though not as tall as Addie, with short red hair and steel gray eyes. A match ready to be struck and Addie always seemed to be the one doing the striking.

When she walked through the door, Julie, who manned reception and the telephone, beckoned her over. "Seen our new name?"

Addie nodded.

"Genghis and Bob are in with the new people. Three men."

Addie hurried into the open plan office most of the staff shared. At the far end was a corridor of private rooms occupied by Bob and Genghis among others. Addie pulled off her coat. She had no idea how the takeover would affect her. She might lose her job. If it hadn't been for the money she wouldn't care. But the requirement to have a reasonable amount breathing life into her bank account at regular intervals was a necessity. Even though the Jefferson-Smiths helped with the mortgage, Lisa still relied on Addie's contribution to the household expenses. Plus, Addie had debts of her own.

She looked round the room. Everyone huddled in their cubicles muttering into phones. No printers whirred, no keyboards clicked. No surreptitious surfing of YouTube, just the muffled murmur of worried voices. Addie could guess what everyone was doing—ringing wives, husbands and partners with the news of possible redundancies, retirements and relocation.

“Better look busy, Addie. New brooms sweeping clean and all that,” Graham said as she sat in the booth next to his.

“I don’t need to look busy, I am busy.” Which was more than could be said for Graham, a large Australian pest, similar to a kangaroo, bulky and belligerent, but less attractive and less active. Graham didn’t lift a finger if he didn’t need to. He had the natural charm, but not the svelte figure of a rattlesnake.

Graham was the senior sales dog’s bollocks. Whatever he claimed to do, he managed to delegate most of it elsewhere. He made a big thing of his expertise in arranging the foreign coach travel, which, as far as Addie could make out, involved the carting of over-sexed teenagers to France on part-exchange visits with their pen pals. Graham’s French was terrible. Addie had thought she’d give herself appendicitis laughing when he’d told her he thought “*Moi aussi*” meant “I’m an Australian”.

“There’s bound to be some redundancies.” Graham rolled round on his chair to talk to her. Addie swallowed when she saw he was wearing his dangerously tight brown trousers and the purple shirt. Versace—he’d let everyone know, but they were fighting a losing battle to cover his body.

“You must be worried then,” she said.

“Why?”

“If we’ve been taken over by a bigger organization, all the foreign paperwork will be done centrally.”

Graham looked so concerned that Addie felt guilty. For at least three seconds.

“Delia says I don’t need to worry,” he mumbled.

Addie winced as Graham cleaned his ear with his finger.

“But you’re only part-time,” he pointed out, putting the same finger in his mouth.

Addie refrained from asking whether Genghis’ comment had come before or after she’d got out of his bed. Genghis had done a good job of keeping the affair a secret, but she knew Addie knew. Addie presumed Graham must have some redeeming feature for him to have attracted Delia, because he was her exact opposite—disorganized and lazy. Maybe he was hung like an elephant. Addie shuddered.

She settled down to her first job of the day, printing invoices for the previous month, and at the same time began to research Lincoln for a forthcoming trip.

* * * * *

The important people remained behind closed doors all morning. Daisy Chain, child of stupid parents, and secretary to Bob and Genghis, took coffee in a few times, but emerged with no information other than the fact that all three guys were gorgeous and Genghis was being nice. Genghis and nice didn’t usually appear in the same sentence.

The longer they were cooped up in there, the more nervous everyone became. People began flitting between partitions to chat, spreading rumors of death, destruction

and plague to ensure everyone stayed as worried as them. Various senior people went into Bob's office, then returned to their own cubby holes and closed their doors which made everyone even more paranoid.

When *the* door opened and the five came out, eyes dropped from the top of the partitions to focus on computer screens. It was as though they were in a war zone and someone had yelled "incoming". The increased noise of tapping at keyboards sounded like an oncoming swarm of locusts. Yellow-bellied cowards, Addie thought, keeping her own head up. The next moment she was on her knees on the floor, her heart battering her ribs to get out of her chest, so it could make a run for it.

The noise fell away and Addie listened to Bob thanking them all. She wanted to look again to make sure she'd not made a mistake, but there was little point because she hadn't. Will stood between Bob and Genghis. *Shit*. Next to Genghis was the blond one from the gym. *Double shit*. And the other side of him stood the third guy. *Triple shit*.

Addie scuttled across the floor like a giant crab to reach Joe's cubicle. He stared at her as she crouched at his feet. Addie pretended to be inspecting his chair leg and then moved on to Margaret, then Lizzie, then Charlotte the harlot. Voices were coming down the other side of the room as Addie crawled in the opposite direction. She reached the photocopier, wondering if there was time to dig an escape tunnel. She could hear Genghis introducing people.

Addie couldn't do this now. Running away from trouble was second nature. She was always reluctant to accept inevitability, particularly when it stared her in the face. Plus, her stomach was threatening to eject a slice of toast and coffee. All she could think about was escape.

"What are you doing?" whispered Joe, who'd followed her to the copier.

Addie cringed. Joe's voice at a whisper, could carry in a crowded football stadium.

"Lost an earring," she said, forgetting she wasn't wearing any.

She saw a herd of feet heading her way and shot hunched over in the opposite direction, colliding with the water cooler, sending the whole thing rocking so that a mini tidal wave threatened to topple the bottle. Addie had to wrap her arms around it and dance for a few seconds before it calmed down enough for her to let go, then she dashed on, ricocheting from one object to another, swerving at the last moment away from Genghis' precious aquarium. Finally she turned the corner and could breathe.

Addie heard the men having a short chat with each person in the room. Genghis even introduced them to her bloody angel fish, Gabriel and Gideon, which should have sent warning signals, but it wasn't until Addie heard the word "garage" that she panicked. She'd been listening when she should have been escaping. Now she had a choice of three doors—the Gents, a cupboard and the garage. Addie made for the cupboard.

She sat on the floor in the dark and waited.

"What's in here?" Addie heard Will say. *Well of course he bloody did*.

"A small storeroom," Delia said.

The handle jiggled above her head. Addie wedged herself between the door and the shelves opposite, pressing her feet against the lowest shelf.

"It seems to be locked." Will again.

"There isn't a lock. There's nothing valuable in there," Delia said.

Addie braced herself, but the next moment, she slid forward on her bottom as the door was forced open behind her. She concertinaed the top half of her body between the two lowest shelves. The light went on.

"What on earth do you think you are doing?" Delia asked.

"Looking for something." Addie kept her face hidden.

"What?"

"Er..." Her mind went blank. *Great timing, brain.*

"Would you like to explain what you could be looking for in the dark?"

Genghis had a lot in common with her mother. She'd scented weakness and wouldn't give in until she'd ripped out Addie's throat.

"The light?" Addie tried, still crouched down with her back to them.

"The light switch isn't on the floor. Get up. Mr. Magelan would like to meet you. Maybe he should reconsider."

Addie got up and turned. Now was the moment for a meteorite to hit the building, but she'd accept a flash flood or a voracious man-eating plant as reasonable alternatives. The older guy put out his hand. He was laughing.

"Jack Magelan."

"Addie Winter."

She couldn't look at Will.

"Have we met before?" Jack asked.

"We've never been introduced, I'm certain," Addie said.

She watched the blond one's eyes flick between her and Will and knew he'd recognized her.

"Hi, Addie, I'm Ed Mansell," he said. "Will's brother."

Addie shook his hand and then looked at Will. "Hello, again," she said.

"Will Mansell." He held out his hand.

Addie felt as though she'd been asked to pet a great white shark. She swallowed hard and put her hand in his. His face was blank. Will shook her hand so fast it was hardly a shake at all. Addie cringed with humiliation when she realized he wasn't going to acknowledge he knew her.

"Addie only works for us part-time. She's a general dogsbody," Delia said.

Addie bristled. "I need a pay rise then. I thought I was a private dogsbody."

Ed turned a laugh into a cough.

"Excuse me," she muttered and fled to her desk, her face burning.

* * * * *

Addie kept her head down all morning. She looked as though she was working hard, but she wasn't. She sat struggling with the invoicing when Daisy came over.

"Genghis has made me so mad I can't speak," Daisy said.

"So you're not going to tell me why?"

Sarcasm was lost on Daisy. "Course I am." She perched on the edge of Addie's desk. "I've got to do the secretarial work for both the new guys as well as her. I mean that's like doubling...tripling my work load."

"Poor thing." Addie tried to sound sympathetic.

Since Daisy had plenty of time to do her nails, plan her week's TV viewing in fluorescent orange marker and spread gossip, no wonder the prospect of working a full day appalled her.

"Still, they are gorgeous," Daisy whispered. "Even the older guy. He's worth millions. Magelan's is one of the largest travel and leisure companies in the country. I've been on Google. Jack's married with seven children. He's a devout Catholic. Seven boys. Fucking hell."

"Yep," Addie said. "It probably was."

Daisy got that after a moment and giggled.

"What about the other two?" Addie asked.

"Management consultants from London. Brothers. Not married. Will's the eldest. He's the one with dark hair and gray eyes. They're on contract to Magelan's 'til Christmas, but they have another job in Leeds so they'll be in and out of the office. Ed's lovely. I really like him. Mr. Sexy Eyes. Parents live in Shropshire. No pets. Apparently, they've rented a house in Alwoodley. Will's favorite color is black. Ed's is red. Will drives a Lexus. Ed has a Porsche. He said he'll let me have a ride in it. They both like Thai food, but Ed doesn't like bony fish...oh, or jelly."

"God, Daisy, do you know their collar size as well?"

"Both seventeen."

Addie laughed.

"I was going to check on shoe size, but I didn't want them to get the wrong idea," Daisy said.

Addie guessed they already had the right idea.

"So what's going to happen? Should I ring the Jobcentre?" Addie asked.

Daisy shrugged. "Everyone's been called in, including drivers and the managers from the travel agencies. Genghis said they're going to speak to us all this afternoon. Bob's bugged off to buy a yacht and Jack Magelan's gone back to London. I bet it's Will who does the sacking."

Daisy moved on, spreading the Ebola virus and Addie sighed. How much did she need this job? Working two days a week in the language school didn't pay enough to

live on, but she couldn't work alongside Will Mansell. He and his brother were probably sniggering over poor desperate Addie, who'd not only invented a boyfriend, but paid a guy to sleep with her and then exploded when he kissed her.

The Chinese whispers in the office reached epic proportions. Charlotte the harlot joined Daisy in the scaremongering. They were all going to lose their jobs. Anyone over twenty-five would be sacked. Less than two years on the job? You're out. Anyone wearing green would join them. Over twenty-five, with less than two years service and wearing green, Addie was doomed. The only believable whisper was that those who'd managed to get their tongues up Genghis' backside would survive. No wonder Graham looked unconcerned.

Addie opened a new document, typed a few words, fiddled around with the font for several minutes in an attempt to fill the paper, realized it looked as though a child had done it and then reduced it back to normal size before she let it print.

Dear Sir,

Please accept my resignation, effective immediately.

Yours faithfully,

A. Winter

She signed it, dated it, folded the paper in half, folded it again, sidetracked by thinking about the rule that said you could only fold any piece of paper a particular number of times. When Addie looked at the chunk in her hand, she groaned in frustration. Lisa and her bloody origami.

"What you got there?" Graham asked, looking over the partition.

Little escaped Graham's attention unless it was work that needed doing.

"Shopping list." She pushed it into her pocket.

Addie couldn't face Will Mansell every day and she was sure he didn't want to face her. He hadn't even wanted to acknowledge he knew her. How could she maintain a professional relationship with someone who'd jammed his thigh between her legs and seconds later given her a knee-trembling orgasm? She couldn't. It was time to leave. She knew she *was* a dogsbody. They took advantage of her because she was part-time, and if it wasn't for the fact that groups of day trippers asked for her by name, she doubted she'd get to do the coach work, which was the only fun part.

Her life was a mess. She worked in two jobs she didn't much like, to earn money to live a life she didn't much like. Her mother hated her and Addie was too afraid of losing the little love she had from her brothers to tell her mother what she thought of her. But if this morning's embarrassment wasn't a push to tell her to get off her backside, she didn't know what was. Addie worked herself up into such a state of anxiety, she pressed an odd combination on her keyboard and faced a blank screen. In trying to sort that out, she knocked her files to the floor and in bending down to pick

them up banged her head on the desk. She was going to throw up. She jumped to her feet with a hand pressed against her mouth, and fled past Will's brother.

"Do I look like a tarantula or something?" Ed asked Graham as they watched Addie sprint away.

"Addie's weird."

Ed frowned. He was tempted to ask in what way, but as Graham brushed crumbs of dandruff off his tie and shirt, Ed decided he didn't want to know.

"So how do you like working here?" Ed pulled up a chair.

Within two minutes Ed knew all he needed to about Graham Dixon. The only thing that interested Graham was Graham. It was Ed's job to chat informally to staff while Will did the formal bit and provided them with a copy of Jack's mission statement for *Magelen's*. Ed was glad they hadn't been the ones to come up with "Working The Dream". It sounded like a buzz phrase for a theme park. In addition to finding out a few home truths, Ed knew those already doing the job often had the best ideas on how to improve efficiency. In Graham's case, Ed doubted it. Graham knew how to talk, knew some of the signal words, but didn't know how to make sense.

"Of course it's difficult to overstate the essentiality of maintaining practical continuity," Graham said. "Obviously all my staff should be emotionally responsive to the changes this takeover will bring. We need to ensure we remain open-minded to the working procedures that will undoubtedly have to be instigated. Indeed I look forward to the challenge." Then he beamed.

Ed wondered if he'd spent a long time practicing or whether bullshit came naturally. He suspected the latter.

"What's your opinion on the post-processual situation in the marketing of holidays?" Ed asked, not having a clue what that meant, if indeed it meant anything.

Graham paused. "Er...a good thing," he said.

Ed frowned. "Really?"

"In some circumstances," Graham added, "but obviously not in others." He pulled at the knot in his tie.

Ed began to enjoy himself. He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me more. What post-processual situations have you been involved with?"

Ed watched Graham's face turn bright red.

"Excuse me while I go drain the didge...the didgeridoo," Graham said.

Ed suspected Graham didn't need to take a leak, but probably intended to text someone and find out what post-processual meant.

Chapter Eight

By the time Addie slunk back to her desk, Ed was chatting to Charlotte the Harlot who did sales and admin like Addie. Charlotte was nineteen, dumb as a rock, but soft and sweet as cotton candy. Addie could hear Ed talking about profiles, areas of experience and positive attitudes and she saw the way Charlotte smiled and the way Ed smiled. Charlotte was as lazy as Graham except when it came to pulling guys. In a choice between her and Charlotte for a job, Addie knew she wouldn't stand a chance.

Just as Ed headed in Addie's direction, Daisy called her to see Will. Addie's feet felt encased in lead.

"He's all right. A bit miserable," Daisy said when she finally got there. "He's not as cute as Ed."

"Isn't he?"

"I haven't seen him smile yet."

Will had a lovely smile. She sighed.

"You'll be fine, Addie. Imagine you're talking to Noah."

Addie made a strangled noise.

"What did I say?" Daisy asked.

"We're not going out anymore."

"Oh. Well, Will's nice. He won't eat you. Take him his coffee."

Of course he was nice to Daisy. He was Mr. Perfect and Daisy was Miss Perfect—petite, pert and pretty with curly blonde hair, though she wasn't perfect at her job. Addie had stood in for her once, and when she handed Genghis two pages of phone messages, there had been an outpouring of vitriol because Daisy never bothered her boss with that quantity of calls. Addie knew Daisy worked under the impression that if it was important they'd ring back, so why bother taking a message.

If Daisy made a mistake, every male within hailing distance fell over themselves to tell her it wasn't her fault, she shouldn't blame herself. Last June she'd booked Bob on a plane to Londonderry when he'd told her, "London, dearie." She'd burst into tears and Bob just smiled and told her not to worry. If that had been Addie, they'd have had the guillotine erected in the yard and the knitting needles clacking before it was time for another coffee break.

With her heart well and truly in her mouth, Addie went through Daisy's office and into the one beyond. Will sat at his desk.

"Take a seat," he said in a gruff voice.

Addie put the coffee in front of him, trying to look anywhere other than his face. She reached behind her for the chair and sat at an angle, bending the arm over with her bottom so the whole thing tipped up, sending both her and the chair crashing to the floor. Addie sprang to her feet, ignored the raging pain in her side, and tried to put the chair right again, but it was in two halves. She stood there with a piece clutched in each hand as Will stared in disbelief.

"Sorry. I'll pay for a new one."

He walked around, took the pieces out of her hands, tossed them into the corner and pulled over another chair.

"Sit down. Don't move," he said. "Don't even breathe."

She pulled the wedge of paper from her pocket, began to get up, thought better of it and tossed it toward the desk. It flew straight into his coffee. If Addie had aimed, she'd have missed. Will flicked it out and the mug tipped over, flooding his desk and keyboard.

"Oh God." She dashed out of the room to fetch the kitchen roll from the side of Daisy's coffee machine.

Will grabbed it from Addie's hand. "Let me," he snapped. "You sit down and don't move."

But Addie hovered, flapping her arms like an enormous hummingbird as he mopped. Daisy came in with a wet cloth.

"Thank you, Daisy."

Will smiled at Daisy, but when he turned to Addie, he looked like he'd taken a mouthful of sour milk. Addie shrank a little. In the end, the mess was gone and Daisy was gone. Addie wanted to follow her, but Will shut the door.

"I have to go." Addie was desperate to leave the office, but when she moved, Will blocked her way. Addie stepped sideways.

"Wait," he said.

He reached out and as his hand latched on to her arm, Addie stiffened. She wasn't sure how long passed before she realized he wasn't going to let her go. She made a tiny mewling sound of distress and he released her so suddenly, she stumbled backwards. Will jammed his hand into his pocket.

"Please sit down while I read this," he said, and Addie sat.

He undid the wet mess. Addie got to her feet.

"Sit," he said and she dropped back on the chair.

"You don't need to bother talking to me. If you don't mind, I'll wait 'til the end of the day before I go." She jumped up again.

"Do you ever keep still, just for a minute? You're not resigning."

"You can keep my month's wages in lieu of notice and the holiday pay as well and maybe take the money out for the chair...oh, and if you need a new keyboard...if

there's not enough I could give you a check. Only maybe you could wait a few weeks before you cash..." Addie slowed as she registered what he'd said. She bristled. "You don't need to sack me. I'm leaving. I said it first." She winced. That sounded very adult.

"I'm not firing anyone or making anyone redundant. At least not today. No exceptions. Not even for you, though I have to admit you tempt me."

"You can't stop me resigning." Addie stared at his mouth.

"No, but I can make you work your notice, and according to your file, that's a month. You've no vacation days left, so like it or not, you're here for another four weeks. Sit down."

Addie hesitated.

"Please," he said more gently and smiled.

Addie sat, thinking she'd have rolled over, sat up and begged when he asked like that.

"Now, let's pretend we've never met," he said.

And all at once, there was no air in the room.

"Tell me what you do and what you think of Booth's."

Addie wished she was dead.

By the time Will let Addie leave, her tan had vanished. He had the feeling it had shrunk back under her skin in terror. She was scared of him and he didn't like it. From the moment she'd walked into the room, his heart felt as though it had been put in a vise. She wanted to resign because of him. When she tried to leave the room he'd grabbed her. What had he been thinking? She could have accused him of assault or sexual harassment. He should have released her.

Will had told himself to, but his fingers hadn't moved. The only thing moving was his pulse, jumping like a panicking frog. He imagined his thumb stroking her skin, and only when his brain registered what he was about to do, did he let her go. Then he'd been plain mean. He'd opened his mouth and spoken without letting his brain do a quality-control check. He was an absolute idiot.

Ed stood outside his office talking to Daisy. Will pulled him in and slammed the door.

"I need you to remind me how much I love what I do for a living," Will said.

"You love what you do for a living." Ed stared in the corner. "What did you do to the chair?"

Will paced round the office. "Addie did it."

"The one from the gym."

"She's a walking disaster."

"So what's she done?" Ed perched on the edge of Will's desk.

“Apart from hide in a cupboard, destroy a chair, make me tip coffee over my keyboard and resign on the day we arrive?”

Ed gave a chuckle. “Right, apart from that?”

“Does there need to be anything else?”

“No, but clearly there is. Did you sleep with her?”

“No...Yes... No.”

“And you’re known for your decisiveness. Like to run that by me again?”

“No,” Will said. “I don’t want to talk about Addie Winter. I don’t want to think about Addie Winter. I don’t want Addie Winter working here, but I don’t sack anyone on the first day. It’s one of my rules.”

“Along with not sleeping with women from work, but you seem to have already broken that one.”

“First of all, I didn’t know she worked here and secondly, I didn’t exactly sleep with her.”

Ed laughed. “The sex was that good?”

“There was no sex,” Will said. “Well, not really.”

“Just as well.”

Will glared at him.

Ed glared back. “This was supposed to be an easy job. Why are you making it difficult?”

“Get Genghis in here and find another chair.”

Ed looked at him. “Genghis?”

“Delia Carne. Addie told me.”

Will thought how Addie had gabbled nonstop for ten minutes, without once looking at him. All he’d been able to think about was what she’d look like naked. He’d had to shuffle his chair further under the desk so he could adjust his cock. He hadn’t listened to most of what she’d said. He just heard the words Genghis and Carne and wanted to laugh.

Ed brought in another chair and Genghis.

“Good work on the press release, er...Delia,” Ed said. “I’ve amalgamated your paragraphs into Jack’s statement, so let someone do a final check and then hand it on to be distributed.”

“Give it to Addie,” Will said. If she had a lot to do, she’d stop thinking.

* * * * *

Addie intended to make use of her flexible lunch hour to disappear for sixty minutes after Will came back and so reduce the amount of time she spent in his vicinity, but the moment he returned, Genghis came straight to her desk.

"Check through this press release and issue it to the usual agencies, bring me what you've done on Lincoln and have the monthly accounts on my desk within the hour."

"Shall I do the mail shots as well?" Addie mumbled under her breath. "And if you stick a brush up my backside I'll sweep the floor while I'm at it."

There was no way she could take a break now. Daisy sidled over as Delia went back into her office.

"Has she just given you the press release?"

"Yes."

"I usually do it." Daisy looked hurt. "I know the guy at the *Yorkshire Post*. He's cute."

"Please, have it," Addie said. "I have enough to cope with."

"What do you think of the Mansell brothers?" Daisy whispered. "Aren't they gorgeous?"

"Not bad."

"Ed is really nice. He smiles like an angel."

"Don't underestimate them, Daisy. They may have the faces and bodies of gods, but they're here to make sure Jack Magelan gets value for money. They'll manipulate us until we fit whatever space they want."

"Sounds like fun." Daisy giggled.

"The Harlot shouldn't have any problems. She can practically turn herself inside out."

"You're just jealous."

Yes, Addie thought, she was.

Joe took a late lunch and brought Addie a chicken salad sandwich, but since they were all forbidden to eat at their desks and Addie drew the line at eating in the loo, she hid the food in a drawer and took surreptitious bites while she worked. She'd just taken a large mouthful of bread and lettuce when Genghis and Will began walking in her direction. Dropping her head below the desk, Addie chewed as fast as she could. Swallowing while bent double was not easy, but when she sat up and they were in front of her, her mouth was empty. Fearing a stray crumb, she ran her tongue over her lips but stopped when she saw Will's face. He looked as though he wanted to—no, that couldn't be right.

"Are you eating lunch?" Genghis snapped.

"No," Addie said. It was three o'clock. More like afternoon tea.

"You're eating something." Genghis narrowed her eyes.

"Do you want to check?" Addie offered.

"You know the rules about food on desks."

"Absolutely," Addie said, thinking the food wasn't *on* her desk. "I'm eating my pencils." She snapped the end off the one in her hand, put it in her mouth and chewed.

Genghis looked at her as though she was mad. The wood of the pencil wouldn't have been too bad, but Addie had the metal tip, complete with eraser, wedged in her teeth and she couldn't spit it out while Mr. Perfect stood there, biting his lip to stop himself laughing. She pushed it under her tongue and winced when the metal scratched the bottom of her mouth.

"Mr. Mansell needs to see the old files. Go and show him where they are," Genghis said. "Have you handled the other jobs I gave you?"

"Yes to the press release. I haven't reconciled the accounts, nor swept the floor." *Oh God, I sound like I've got half a pencil in my mouth.*

Genghis glared at her. "You better speed up then, and I didn't ask you to sweep the floor."

Addie rushed ahead of Will so she could sneak a hand to her mouth before she was tempted to swallow. He stayed at her heels when she went to collect the keys from Daisy, followed her round the side of the garage and up the stairs to the store room.

"There's no rush," Will said, as she struggled to get the key in the lock.

Yes there was, because Addie was afraid of being alone with him. She wasn't sure she could stop herself kissing him. She dropped the keys twice as Will stood leaning against the wall with his arms folded.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone as clumsy as you."

Addie winced. "Sorry."

She wrenched the door open. The light switch wasn't easy to spot so she nipped inside to flick the switch and fell over a box.

"You have to be the most awkward person I've ever met."

Addie's heart recoiled in pain. How could she like someone who spoke to her like that?

"They're all in there. I'll go back now."

"No you don't. Stay in case I need a hand."

Addie lingered by the door as he pulled open the filing cabinet. He'd taken off his tie and opened the collar on his shirt. She could see a triangle of flesh. *I've see his bare chest*, Addie thought and a warm glow swept through her. Aware she was staring, and at an area somewhat lower than his chest, she choked back a mortified wail of despair. What was she thinking? No, she didn't want to pursue that either.

Will looked back at her. "What's on your mind?"

Addie blushed. He laughed and moved toward her.

"Are you wondering if it could happen again?"

"No," flew from her mouth, then she paused. "What?"

"Just one kiss?"

"No, look what happened when you kissed me last time."

He gave a slow smile. "That's why I want to do it again. Why do you think I wanted you to bring me over here? I want to push you up against the wall, yank down your panties and fuck you until you scream."

Only none of that happened. He just opened the filing cabinet and told her she could go. Addie made the rest up on the way back to her desk. Thick cock, heavy balls, gentle hands and those soft lips whispering she was sexy and gorgeous, so hot that she'd set him on fire. *Yeah, right.*

Will closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the musty air. That had been close. He hadn't realized Delia would get Addie to bring him up here. He had to avoid being alone with her. When she'd bent down twice to pick up the keys he'd wanted to push her on the floor and rip off her panties. Will shuddered. As they'd walked here, he'd been petrified she'd see the distinct ridge in his pants and run away screaming.

What the hell was the matter with him? Will felt almost out of control and he didn't like it. He'd wanted to say something witty to impress her and instead been unkind. He made her nervous, which was why she was clumsy. She made him nervous, which was why he was mean. Will thought he'd not said anything so inappropriate since he'd asked his teacher why she had a moustache. He hadn't meant to be cruel then, either.

Will wished he'd asked Addie to stay. While they were working, he might have found the right words for a change. He had no idea what it was about her that he found so appealing but his cock was now hard enough to hurt. Will glanced at the door. Three steps and he'd opened it to get the key and then locked it from his side. Hardly professional to be wanking off in a cupboard at work but Will had a feeling if he didn't ease the ache in his belly, he'd be walking around all day clasping files to hide the bulge his crotch.

He flipped open the button on his pants and pulled down his zipper. His escape-artist cock practically leapt out of his boxers and Will smothered a laugh. *Christ, how old am I?* He leaned back against the door of the windowless room and rubbed the silky head of his dick, smearing his fingers with pre-cum. Did she suck cocks? Would she suck his? Will closed his eyes and imagined Addie on her knees looking up at him with those gorgeous eyes, imagined her wet lips wrapped around his cock head, her tongue dipping into the little slit and then swallowing him.

His hand moved faster, jerking harder. The other hand searched for a tissue, found one and Will let himself move towards detonation. His hips bucked and his breathing quickened.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Will whispered. "Addie."

With that word, he came. His cock pulsed into the tissue and delicious shivers of release rolled through his body. Will wondered if she'd swallow every drop.

Chapter Nine

After Addie had taken the accounts to Genghis, Daisy dragged her to the Ladies' room.

"Guess what?" Daisy's eyes flashed with excitement.

"We've won the lottery and never have to come to work again."

"We don't do the lottery, do we?" Daisy looked puzzled.

"No, Daisy."

"He's asked me out."

Addie's heart fluttered. "Will?"

"God, no. Ed."

"Oh, right." Heart flutter over. "Have you forgotten you have a boyfriend?"

Daisy pulled a face. "No, but Ed's my boss."

That's all right then, Addie thought.

"The Harlot is livid and Beth is being bitchy because he chose me. He had such a good pick-up line."

"What did he say?"

"He said, would I like to go out for a drink. And I said, what if I said no? And he said, why bother when we both know eventually you'll say yes." Daisy beamed.

"Wow." Addie tried to sound impressed.

"Should I have my hair up or down?" Daisy asked. "I'll put it up and then maybe he can take it down. You ought to do something with your hair, Addie. It will take your mind off Noah. Give you a fresh start."

Back at her desk, Addie thought about that. She couldn't turn back time. All she could do was move on. It was a big thing to her, not Will. Maybe he hadn't told Ed, or maybe they'd do their sniggering in private. On the other hand, everyone in the office would now know Addie and Noah were no longer an item. Daisy was reliable in entirely the wrong way.

Addie did want to do something with her hair, but knew she couldn't achieve a miracle and turn into someone whose locks undulated like glossy paint. She'd rather go to the dentist and have fillings without anesthetic than be subjected to hours of sitting looking at herself in a hairdresser's mirror.

It was a waste of time saying "slight trim". Hairdressers only ever heard "heavy cut". Up the mirror would go to show the back of her head and she'd swallow the scream of horror, and say it was fine. Even worse, she'd leave a tip, but the moment she got home, by a roundabout route in case she met someone she knew or scared small

children and dogs, she'd wash it herself. Then pull at it, as though she could drag a few inches out of her scalp to make it longer. The salon had been well named – *Curl up and Dye*. Exactly what Addie had felt like doing every time she emerged.

On the way home from work Addie called to buy hair dye. Her hair had always been the same color – brown. Not sun-kissed light brown or that dark shade of polished wood, but a drab, muddy color. She was torn between a blonde highlighting kit she should buy because she was “worth it” and a packet offering bright auburn tints guaranteed to “enhance the beauty of the gift nature had bestowed upon her”. The auburn tints won, not because they were the cheapest, but because she knew she wasn't worth it.

Addie intended to reinvent herself. Lisa would do the cutting and dyeing. She couldn't make any worse a job than the hairdresser. Tomorrow Will wouldn't recognize her. He'd stop looking at her as though she was a piece of chewing gum stuck to his shoe. She'd be a different person and start searching for another job and a new life, away from Leeds, maybe away from England. But if Will asked her out, she'd say yes.

* * * * *

By the time Will got back to the house he was exhausted. Ed had disappeared from work at 7:00 and left him with Genghis. Will almost called her that a couple of times. He had a feeling she wouldn't have found it amusing. He dropped his jacket on a chair in the kitchen, opened the fridge and then closed it. He was too tired to cook. He fancied an Indian takeout, but he wouldn't call with an order until he'd checked whether Ed had eaten, otherwise he'd lose half his meal. Ed had an uncanny ability to arrive just as Will started to eat. He picked up his mobile.

“What do you want? I'm in the middle of something here,” Ed said.

“Anyone I know?”

“Possibly.”

“Daisy, by any chance?” Will asked.

“Yes.”

Will sighed. “I'm about to order a takeaway. I presume you've eaten.”

Ed laughed and Will felt better. He knew why. Daisy wasn't Addie.

* * * * *

Addie softened Lisa up by cooking a butternut squash risotto for their dinner, before she showed her the box of hair dye. “I want to look different.”

“This is going to be so much fun.”

“Don't get too carried away.”

"Isn't that the point? Wrap that tea towel around your shoulders. So, how are you feeling?" Lisa asked, as she started to cut.

"Aren't you supposed to ask about my holiday? And where's my magazine?"

"Don't change the subject. Heard from Noah?"

Decision time. "In a way."

"What sort of way?"

Addie thought about it. "It's a long story."

"You think this is going to be done in ten minutes. I'm an artiste."

"I thought you only used to do your Gran's dog?"

"Yeah, so? Noah?"

"When I got to work this morning, I found Booth's had been taken over. The new owner has brought in management consultants to chew, swallow and digest us."

"Are you going to be crapped out the other end? I hope you don't lose your job, Addie. I need your rent."

"Yeah, I know." She'd keep the fact she'd resigned a secret.

"What's this got to do with Noah?"

"When I say this is a secret, Lisa, I mean a secret between you and me, and not you and all your friends and certainly not David."

"You've got me intrigued now."

"Watch what you're doing with those scissors. Christ, is that a razor blade?"

"Yes, hold still and keep talking."

"You're going to be pissed off I haven't told you this before, but it was because of David."

Addie told her everything, except for the fact that she'd had a knee-trembling orgasm when Will merely kissed her. Lisa didn't stop cutting and she didn't say anything.

"Sorry," Addie muttered.

"I guessed."

"You guessed?"

"I was suspicious after a month or so. It all sounded great at the beginning, but you didn't even have a photo of Noah and you love taking photos. Then, when that guy said you'd met him at a gym in Leeds, I knew for certain. God, Addie, you're a complete idiot. Six months, what were you thinking?"

"No more nagging mother."

Lisa tipped her head on one side. "Ah, good point."

"It sort of gathered pace like a rolling stone. Only they do gather moss. They gather a whole load of crap. I thought I'd pretend for a couple of weeks and then I couldn't stop and it got more and more complicated. Noah made me happy."

"Except he didn't exist."

Addie winced as the scissors brushed her ear. "Well, no."

"What the hell were you doing those weekends you said you were in Manchester?"

"Stayed in youth hostels, climbed mountains, jumped in rivers."

"I always wondered why you came back bruised and aching. I thought it was vigorous alfresco sex."

Addie gave a little smile.

"So when you lured the real thing to your room, you slept with him?"

Addie blushed. "Not in the way you mean. We kissed and I thought...well, he wants to forget it ever happened."

"I can't believe the guy turned up at Booth's. I mean fucking hell, what were the chances of that? You need to do the lottery this week."

"Ha ha."

Lisa frowned. "*I am* a bit pissed off you didn't tell me before now. We're supposed to be friends. I do understand about David. One look from your mother and he'd blab, but think about it, Addie, what's the worst that could have happened? Your mum is already horrible. It's like she thinks you're the child of Satan or something."

"I wanted to prove them wrong. At least they all think he exists." Addie had wanted to prove someone could love her and been caught in her own lie.

"So, this new hair is to attract Will?"

Addie felt her face glow. "I don't want him to look at me and see the person who asked him to pretend to be her boyfriend." No point lying to herself. *I want him to be my boyfriend.*

Ninety minutes later, the transformation was complete. Addie's hair had been sliced, dyed, streaked, dried and attacked with straighteners. Lisa stood her in front of the flat's only full length mirror. Addie's mouth fell open.

"Do you like it? It's great, isn't it? It suits you. You should have let me do it before. I didn't realize I was so talented. That was one lucky dog."

Addie was silent.

"Addie, it really is lovely. The reddy color will tone down as you wash it."

Addie nodded and the woman in the mirror moved her head. She flinched. So it was her. She'd been convinced she was looking at another self in a parallel universe.

"Say something," Lisa wailed.

"It looks so different." Addie managed to speak.

"Good or bad different?"

"It's great, Lisa, thanks." She looked like an enormous pixie, spiky hair sticking up all over her head.

“To show your gratitude you can make me a cup of tea and give me a check for your share of the gas bill.”

Chapter Ten

Will had a lot on his mind. He had check lists of what he needed to accomplish by the end of the week at Magelan's and at Enerchex, the other company. He also needed to ring his mother and he had to ring Vee. She'd called him twenty-seven times, left twenty-seven messages and fifteen texts. He'd responded with one text "I'll ring soon" rather than the "fuck off" he felt like tapping in. He wasn't just trying to avoid her, he was running away from her. Will hoped he'd run far enough.

It was still dark when he arrived at Magelan's. He hated these gloomy winter mornings. Will looked for a parking space, pulled in, then changed his mind and reversed at speed in an arc round a small blue car and into the spot on the other side. There was a slight bump and Will swore. Grabbing his briefcase from the footwell, he got out and glanced at the rear of his car. Will didn't see anything and assumed he'd hit the curb.

Addie opened her eyes to find herself flat on her back in a nest of damp shrubbery. Her head pounded and heart raced. After a brief struggle to sit up, she gave in and lay back in the bushes. What happened? She'd arrived early because she wanted to look for a job online while the office was empty. She'd walked into the yard and seen Will's car coming, then crouched down, hoping he didn't spot her.

It took several minutes for her brain to sort things out. He'd hit her with his car. Addie tried moving her limbs, relieved they now seemed to be working. She pulled herself out of the undergrowth, stood on wobbling legs and clung to a branch. Her coat was covered in leaves and twigs. The contents of her bag lay strewn around and when she bent to pick them up, she zoomed head first into blackness and fell to her knees taking shaky breaths.

She left her grubby sandwiches for the local fox. There was an ominous crack in her mobile phone, but it was out of credit and hadn't worked in a reliable way since David borrowed it. She hoped it was broken, one less way for her mother to drive her mad. More concerning was the blood on her ankle and the holes in her hold ups. When her eyes moved to her watch, Addie realized that far from being early, she was now late.

She stumbled across the car park, brushing the debris from her coat as she went. As she went through the door, Julie pulled a puzzled face. *She doesn't like my hair*, Addie thought, her heart sinking. The receptionist pointed to her cheek as she talked on the phone.

Addie took a detour via the visitors' toilets and stopped short when she saw her reflection. There were several smudges of mud on her face and a trickle of blood running past her ear. She grabbed a handful of paper towels and cleaned herself up. She

took off her hold ups and threw them away. There was a deep scratch on her lower thigh. Blood stained her skirt and ran in a red streak to her ankle. Addie wiped it away. She ran a brush through her hair and yelped when she caught a raised lump. She daren't spend any longer in there. She couldn't cope with the wrath of Carne or the fake-sympathy of whiney-voiced Beth.

Addie limped into the office to find Will had gathered the staff together. He stopped talking and everyone turned to look at her. At her hair.

"Nice of you to join us," Will said.

Addie slunk to her seat. She didn't hear another word. She felt sick, but she couldn't move. Blood was still trickling down her leg. She fumbled in her pocket for a tissue and wiped it away. Addie lowered her head to the desk. She had no idea how long passed before Genghis yelled in her ear, "You don't come to work to sleep. What's the matter with you? You're late and you can't keep your eyes open. Keep your personal life from interfering with your job or you won't have a job. I'm giving you an official warning."

"Fine," Addie muttered, unable to raise her head from the pile of files, but thinking if she could muster enough energy for one final act, she'd strangle Genghis. Her phone rang and she reached out to pull it to her ear without lifting her head.

"My office, now," Will said.

It took a superhuman effort to get up. Addie felt drunk, but without the nice fuzzy feeling that went with it.

She knocked once and almost fell when Will flung open his door.

"Take a seat and try not to break it."

His voice was brittle and cold. He didn't even like her, let alone love her. He never would. Why would she think cutting her hair would make a difference? She didn't want to have a crush on him. She was too sensible to waste her time and energy on someone who'd never like her. She tuned back in.

"And just because you're working a month's notice doesn't mean I have to accept irresponsible behavior."

"Sorry I was late. I—"

"I'm not interested in excuses. Get here on time, but that's not the reason I wanted to speak to you."

His voice grew louder. Addie wondered what she'd done.

"What right did you have to change the press release? It was given to you to check for grammar and inaccuracies. I thought I could trust you. You're obviously bright, but for some lunatic reason you take it into your head to add irrelevant details."

"I—"

"Fortunately, only one publication received the amended version."

"I—"

"Are you trying to make some point here, Addie? I told you that you have to work your notice. Stunts like this are only going to result in a bad reference. Is that what you want?"

Daisy had done it, Addie realized, but he wasn't going to listen. He was stamping round the room like an angry bull with a herd of cows just out of reach.

"That's not the only thing. Who told you to send out the invoices?"

Oh God, more? "I'd—"

"Didn't it occur to you, if this company is no longer trading as Booth's, it was possible we might want to let people know?"

"But—"

"There's a letter to be sent to every customer, every supplier, and it goes with every piece of correspondence that leaves this office. The only thing I wanted to come out of here yesterday was the press release. The correct press release."

Addie hadn't sent out the invoices. She'd printed them, put them in envelopes and left them unsealed. She had no idea how they'd ended up being sent. Addie couldn't think straight. She didn't want to be shouted at. She needed to lie down. She got to her feet and walked out.

"Where do you think you're going? I'm still talking to you."

So what?

Genghis caught hold of Addie's arm as she passed. "Graham has a pile of work to do. If it's not too much trouble, do you think you could give him a hand?"

"What else do you want from me? You going to boil my bones and make stock?"

"What did you say? What on earth is the matter with you?"

Addie could feel Will watching, his eyes searing holes in the back of her head. He should offer his services to the army. Addie trekked the hundred miles to her chair, taking a zigzag route between walls and partitions, crevasses and ice ridges. Will thought she was stupid and she was, but not for the reason he'd said. She didn't care what Genghis thought.

An envelope lay on top of her files. She ripped it open. A written warning. Addie embellished it several times with her date received stamp and pinned it up on the board behind her computer. She reached for her keyboard to log on, but her fingers froze when she couldn't remember her password.

After several minutes, Addie gave up and opened the top file. When she heard most of the office getting up to go to lunch, she looked down in dismay. She'd done nothing all morning.

"I like your hair," Ed said, scooting across on Graham's swivel chair. "Really cute."

Addie wanted to cry. He was the first person who'd said anything. She tried to say thank you and instead a tear fell from her eye. She turned her head.

"Addie, are you okay?"

"Fine." She grabbed another file.

"You don't look fine." Ed took hold of the arms of her chair and pulled it away from the desk so that she faced him. Well, she would have been if her gaze hadn't been fixed to her knees.

"What's wrong?"

Ed's finger swept another tear from her face and a surge of heat flashed through her. What the hell was the matter with her?

"I was in an accident."

"When?"

"On the way to work."

She heard a sharp intake of breath.

"That's why you were late? What happened?"

"I was knocked down by a car."

"Christ, why didn't you say something? Did you go to hospital? Do the police know?"

"No."

"I'll call them now. Where was this?" He took out his mobile.

Addie reached out and laid her hand on his for a brief moment. "No."

"Why not?"

She looked up. "It happened in the car park."

"Whose car? Please say it wasn't mine."

"A silver Lexus."

Ed jumped to his feet. "Will knocked you down?"

"He didn't see me. He reversed into me. I was bending over, er...picking something up."

"Don't make excuses for him."

Ed bounced like a rubber ball. "God, he could have killed you. Where are you hurt?" He sat down again, lifted her face by the chin and looked at her. "My God, your head. You're concussed."

"I cut my leg."

He reached toward her knee and then drew his fingers back.

"I'm okay," Addie said. "Forget about it. Don't say anything. It doesn't matter now. It's not important."

Ed looked at her. "That's the saddest load of sentences I've ever heard."

"I mean it," Addie said. "It wasn't his fault. It was gloomy and I was in a dark coat."

"How hard did you hit your head?"

Addie's fingers moved to the lump and winced.

"I think I might have been knocked out for a while."

"God, Addie, you should see a doctor."

"I'm fine."

"Well, let me buy you lunch."

Addie shook her head. "I have to work through to make up the time. Not hungry anyway."

"You will be later. Can I take you out for something to eat?" he asked.

"What, today?"

"No, next March. Of course today – tonight. Say yes." He turned on a lighthouse smile.

"No."

The smile went out.

"Really?"

Addie squirmed. "You don't have to be nice to me, Ed."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"I'm not used to it. It makes me uncomfortable."

* * * * *

Addie's day went from terrible to diabolical. Genghis had been easier to stand while contained in her office. Now she'd moved in with the herd, staying in permanent circulation, there was no escape. No one dare play Sudoku on their computer, in case she appeared at their shoulder. Though Addie knew they would have got away with it, because Genghis only had eyes for her.

Word spread that Addie had received a warning for being late, had issued an outrageous press release and posted invoices without authorization. Addie wondered why they didn't put her down for insider trading and false accounting while they were at it. Daisy stayed away and since Addie knew she'd probably been desperate to tell her about her date with Ed, she guessed Miss Chain felt guilty. But not guilty enough to admit what she'd done.

Joe handed Addie a packet of peanut M&M's before he showed her a copy of the press information sheet that had sent Will into meltdown. Addie could see why. His management consultancy team were described as "The All Man Mansells" and "Londoners with the faces and bodies of Gods, whose firm and sexy hands are skilled in manipulating and molding to bring out the best in people". Daisy had done a bit of manipulating of her own. Addie tipped the whole packet of M&M's into her mouth and crunched the lot.

The invoices were another matter altogether. Daisy wouldn't have deliberately set out to get her into trouble, so maybe Genghis had. When Bob Booth appointed Addie,

he told Genghis she shouldn't waste Addie's ability. But Genghis didn't have a degree and had no intention of promoting her. She ensured Addie got the worst jobs, boring stuff, and Bob forgot his plans.

At four o'clock, Addie received another command to go to Will's office.

"I've just had a phone call from a Mrs. Wilberforce."

Doreen Wilberforce was a professional complainer who had her local councilor and the police on speed-dial. With Booth's, she angled for free trips. It was a game. Sometimes Genghis gave in, sometimes she didn't. Addie thought it was pure spite that made Genghis pass the call to Will, because everyone in the office knew what Doreen was like.

"She claims you refused to stop the coach so she could relieve herself," Will said.

Addie sighed. "There's a toilet on board."

"She was too unsteady to use it."

Probably due to the two halves of lager she'd drunk in the pub before they'd set off.

"We were on the motorway," Addie said.

"Ever heard of rest stops?"

She never turned down a request to stop, but Doreen's demand that they pull up on the hard shoulder of the motorway so she could wee behind a bush, happened to be illegal. Addie started to explain and then gave in. What was the point? He didn't want to listen.

She turned her mind to tomorrow, a trip with the senior section of Meanwood Amateur Dramatic Society, the MADS. The following two days she was teaching, so she wouldn't have to see Will again until Monday. She should have been relieved, but disappointment surged through her. Why did she still like him so much, when all he did was shout at her? Every time she looked at him, she remembered the kiss. Addie swallowed hard. He was still talking and she had no idea what he'd said.

Will couldn't believe Addie Winter. She sat there not listening to a damn word. She'd tuned him out. He wondered if she was ill. There was an unhealthy tinge to her face and some odd marks. They looked like scratches. He bristled at the thought of someone hurting her. Maybe it was her hair that had made her look different. It had gone from smooth to spiky. The color was pretty, like a pile of autumn leaves. He liked it.

"Are you all right?" Will asked.

"No," Addie muttered, putting her hand over her mouth and sprinting out of his office.

Pregnant, Will thought in alarm. Had he been right all along? Going out with a married man and pregnant. He should never have had that drink with her. The woman was a liability. He'd had a lucky escape. So why didn't he feel lucky?

* * * * *

Addie found Finn waiting when she got home. Lisa had let him in.

He stared at her. "What did you do to your hair?"

"Wanted something different." Addie slumped on the couch.

"Looks nice."

"Thanks, Finn. What have I done now?"

"What's wrong with your mobile, Addie? I've been trying to call you all day."

"Not sure." She wasn't about to tell him it had died in a car accident.

"I have something to tell you." Finn sat beside her. "You've been lied to. The man you've been seeing, his name's not Noah, it's Will Mansell."

Addie closed her eyes for a moment. She should have known this would come back to bite her. "Noah was a nickname."

"And the surname Davies was a nickname too?"

Ooops. She needed to think fast, but her brain was moving at koala speed.

"How do you know his real name?" she asked.

"David took his car reg. I checked it out."

Bloody David. He was so dead.

"The car's registered to an address in Blackheath, London, not Manchester. I don't know what web he was spinning, Addie, but I hope you're not seeing him again. Would you like me to get someone to go and have a word with him?"

"No."

"If he's hurt you –"

"He hasn't hurt me. Just let it go, Finn. It's not what you think. I didn't want anyone to know his real name because I thought one of you would check up on him. He's been in trouble and I knew you'd have a fit if you knew my boyfriend had a record."

"Christ, Addie. You don't go out with anyone for ages and then pick a crook?"

She cringed. "He's not a crook. It was a mistake."

Finn rolled his eyes. "You know that's the first thing most of them say when they get picked up. It's a mistake. It wasn't me."

"Leave it, Finn. Don't go looking into his background. I told you he dumped me."

"You sure?"

Addie nodded. "Absolutely."

Her brother looked her straight in the eyes. "Are you still seeing him?"

"I swear to you, I'm not going out with him."

Finn stared at her for a moment with his policeman look and Addie held his gaze. Years of practice paid off. Finn nodded.

"Are you all right, Addie? You look a bit battered."

"Fell over in the parking lot this morning and banged my head. You know me. I can trip over a pattern in a carpet. I'm fine."

But she wasn't fine. As soon as he'd gone, she went to bed.

* * * * *

Will was working on his laptop when Ed arrived back at the house with a Thai takeout. His eyes still fixed on the screen, Will took the container from Ed and carried on working.

"Did you notice anything odd about Addie today?" Ed asked, a fork in one hand and the remote in the other.

"Apart from the fact that she's from an entirely different planet?"

"Apart from that."

"No."

"Not even her hair?" Ed asked.

"It suited her."

"Is that all?" Ed asked. "You didn't think she looked...knocked about?"

"She did look a bit untidy. What's your point?"

"You didn't notice anything else?"

"What?" Will turned to look at him. "The fact that she managed to annoy me yet again?"

"Why the fuck have you spent the last two days picking on her?" Ed snapped.

"I haven't."

"Yeah, you have."

Will stopped eating. "She was late for work. She looked a mess. She added her own little gems to the press release. I accept she was joking, but thank God the company had the sense to check. She issued invoices without authorization. I had a complaint about her and she raced out of my office while I was still talking. She's been asking to be picked on."

"Did you ask her why she was late?"

"She was late. There's no excuse." Will dug his chopsticks into the carton.

"She was late and looked a mess because you knocked her over."

Will gave a short laugh. "What are you talking about? I didn't touch her."

"In the car park this morning, you hit her with your car."

Will froze with the chopsticks at his lips. The lump of chicken dropped back in the container and splashed his shirt.

"You know, I think that's the first time I've seen you truly shocked," Ed said.

"That wasn't funny."

"Addie didn't think so."

Will tossed the chopsticks onto the table and walked over to his brother. He still wasn't sure whether Ed was serious. "You're telling me I hit her with my car?"

"Yes."

And when Ed looked at him, Will knew and his world tilted. He sank on to the couch, trying to swallow the lump in his throat and failing. It stayed there like a chunk of half-chewed bread, threatening to choke him.

"Oh God, why didn't she say anything?"

"I have a feeling she was lying unconscious in the bushes." Ed continued to fork coconut rice into his mouth.

Will stared at him in horror. "How do you know?"

"Because I notice things. I notice people. She spent the day in a daze. She had a cut by her ear, a blood stain on her skirt and a not-there look in her eyes. I persuaded her to tell me what happened and then she said it didn't matter, it wasn't important. She didn't want to make a fuss."

"Oh fuck. I have to go and see her." Will grabbed his car keys and his jacket.

"She also told me not to tell you," Ed called after him.

"But you did," Will yelled back.

* * * * *

"She's asleep." Lisa kept the chain on the door. "She's been in bed since she got back from work. I don't think she's feeling well."

"I need to speak to her."

"Just go away. You hurt her. Addie sobbed and sobbed, now leave her alone."

Sobbed? Oh God. "Look, please, let me in for a few minutes. I need to make sure she's okay."

Lisa wavered, then gave way. "Five minutes."

The light was on in Addie's room. She was asleep on top of her bed, wearing those shorts. Will swallowed. Her legs were so long. Then his eyes settled on the bruises and the scrapes on her thigh. He could have killed her. He'd hurt her yesterday when he pretended he didn't know her, and he almost killed her this morning. He wanted to hug her and tell her he was sorry, but he didn't want her to wake, so instead he pulled the duvet around her.

All this was his fault. He made her clumsy. How could he have even thought she was pregnant? She'd thrown up because she'd been concussed and it was his fault. She'd probably been trying to hide because every time he saw her, he shouted at her. The only reason he shouted was because if he didn't, he'd have pulled her into his arms and kissed her. But Ed was right. He *had* picked on her. He had no idea what it was

about Addie that made him behave in such a churlish way. Will swallowed. Yeah, he did. He liked her. More than liked her. So why was he scared?

Chapter Eleven

Addie stood waiting in the pub car park in Meanwood when Fred pulled up in the coach. She ached. She'd fallen asleep early last night and slept through without waking, which was unusual. The bruises on her legs looked horrible and more marks had emerged overnight. The lump on her head had gone down, although it was tender when she touched it. At least the headache had vanished.

"Morning, gorgeous," Fred called as the door hissed open.

"Morning, handsome," Addie called back.

"Someone set fire to your hair?"

"Thanks, Fred."

Addie yawned. She wasn't looking forward to carting forty-five senior citizens on a trip to the seaside, but it was better than being stuck in the office all day with Will and Genghis taking it in turns to glare at her.

"Got your ear plugs?" Fred asked.

Addie smiled. "Keep any requests to yourself."

The MADS liked to sing on the journey and for some reason, probably to torture her, they always wanted Addie on the coach.

Addie stood at the foot of the coach steps as several couples approached. She greeted most of them by name, ticking them off her list.

"Good morning, Mary, Geoff. Forecast is for blazing sunshine and no wind. Got your suntan lotion?"

The couple smiled. They were wrapped in thick coats with matching woolly hats and sheepskin mittens.

"Morning, Gordon. Remembered your sandwiches? I've brought peanut butter and marmalade if you want to share."

"I'll share anything with you, Addie. You can have some of my tongue. It's ox. Lovely and thick."

Addie laughed and stepped on board. "Please move down the coach and take your seats, ladies and gentlemen. We won't be moving until you're all sitting down and have your belts fastened."

"My belt's already loose," Stan said as he passed her, tugging at the waist of his trousers.

"Stop making me excited." Addie fanned her face with her clipboard.

They were like puppies, she thought as every passenger stopped to chat at each seat they passed. Fred kept glancing at his watch. He was worse than Genghis for running things on time.

"Just ask the nearest good-looking man to help, if you have any problems," Addie called. "Sit down, Gordon. I said a good-looking man."

There was a roar of laughter. Several minutes later there were still people standing, Fred was gnawing the steering wheel, but everyone was on board. Addie switched on her microphone.

"Right, welcome everyone. I'd like to say a few words about the company you're traveling with today. We're now part of the magnificent, marvelous, magical Magelan Empire." The alliteration was greeted by a chorus of boos. "It's similar to the British Empire, but bigger." Cheers. "According to the three well-dressed men in Armani suits who descended the day before yesterday, disappointingly not on camels and with no gifts at all," boo, "we're to be massaged, squeezed and pummeled into a more streamlined shape."

"I could have done that for you," Gordon shouted.

"You put your back out last time," Addie shot back. "One of the changes Magelan's have introduced, in accordance with their target of an impossible one hundred and ten percent punctuality, is to issue each coach with a special piece of equipment. This is to be used to help any slow passenger locate their behind on the seat they've paid for. I have in my hand, a fully-charged cattle prod and I've been trained to use it."

There was another loud ripple of amusement.

"Everyone wearing their belt?"

"Come and check," Gordon yelled back.

"I'm dying to try out this cattle prod. I just need a little thing to attach it to. Sure you want me to walk up there?"

"No little things up here, love."

Fred set off and Addie twisted round to kneel on the seat.

"Right. Now we're underway, good morning everyone."

"Good morning, Addie," they all called back.

"Magelan's would like to welcome you all on this day trip to Bournemouth."

The chattering ceased.

"Oh no, sorry, that was yesterday. Today we're off to Robin Hood's Bay. There'll be some great views on the way of the Yorkshire Moors. Well, there would be if the sun was out, but since that only happens three times a year we may not be lucky."

"I bet the prices are going to go up now," Doreen Wilberforce said.

Suspecting she hadn't paid for this trip, Addie thought she had a nerve.

"Booth's have always given value for money, and although our name has changed, our excellent service won't," Addie said.

"So what will change?" a male voice called from the rear. Addie didn't see who it was.

"I'm hoping for smarter coaches with reclining beds, gourmet meals, wine and on-board masseurs," she said.

"How soon?" Gordon asked.

"That's just for me," Addie called back. "And sit down, Gordon, or I'll make Fred stop."

He was worse than a child. They'd only gone a couple of miles and he was on his feet already.

"Can we have a singsong?" asked Rita, Stan's diminutive wife.

Addie groaned. The singing drove her nuts.

"We'll vote," Addie said. "All those in favor of spoiling my day and frightening every animal within a ten-mile radius, hands up."

Yes, that would be everyone, Addie thought.

"Those against?" She put up her own arm as always, but this time saw one arm raised at the back, too. She couldn't see the face it belonged to.

"Outnumbered again. Rita, they're all yours."

Addie twisted round, slumped in her seat and switched off her microphone. As Rita launched energetically into "Oklahoma", Addie opened her book.

Will moved down the coach seat by seat, crouching in the aisle to speak to the passengers, asking them their opinion of Booth's, whether they'd heard of Magelan's, why they chose one firm over another. He already knew most of those on board were regulars, people who booked several times a year, both day trips and short breaks. Nearly all were keen to tell him how much they loved Addie, that she made the journey almost as much fun as the destination. From the moment he'd seen her step onto the coach, Will could hardly believe she was the same person.

When Will dropped into the seat beside her, Addie felt as though she'd been tossed onto a hotplate.

"I have a lot of apologizing to do," Will said.

"Fasten your seatbelt." She wanted to bite off her tongue.

"I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that cattle prod." He smiled. "And I haven't got a little thing you can attach it to."

Addie grew even hotter. He shifted in his seat as he reached for his belt and his thigh brushed hers. A flicker of lust licked between her legs and her nipples tightened.

"First of all, I'm so sorry for knocking you down yesterday. I'm appalled by what happened. I knew I'd hit something, but I thought it was the curb."

"It was dark," she mumbled.

"How's your head, the cut on your leg?"

Addie's eyes shot to his. "How did you know about my leg?"

Will looked confused. "Didn't Lisa tell you?"

"What?"

"I came round to your place last night. I saw —"

"You were in my room?" Addie's throat closed up.

"I was worried, Addie. I'd knocked you out. You should have been in hospital. You might have a fractured skull."

His leg touched hers again and she caught her breath. It crossed her mind that the leg nudge had been deliberate.

"How long did you stay?"

"I left at four. I fell asleep," Will said.

Addie thought she'd have to kill Lisa now as well. At this rate she'd have enough experience to get a job as a hit-woman with the Russian Mafia.

"So, are you okay?" Will asked.

"Do you think the double vision will go soon?"

He looked so mortified, she laughed.

"That wasn't funny. I could have killed you."

"It wasn't your fault. I was wearing a dark coat and trying to hide."

"Why?"

"It's the only winter coat I have."

Will frowned. "Try again."

Addie wriggled in discomfort. "I didn't want you to see me."

"Why?" he repeated.

"Because I don't like it when you shout at me and don't listen." *And because I fancy you so much you make my heart do weird things in my chest.*

Will turned to face her. "I'm a good listener. I've never been accused of not listening. Talk to me and I'll listen now."

"I didn't send out those invoices. I wasn't sure they were legal if we'd been taken over. I was going to ask before I took them to the post. I didn't change the press release. I gave it to someone else. As for Mrs. Wilberforce," Addie lowered her voice, "she wanted to stop on the hard shoulder of the motorway. She makes up reasons to complain and sometimes gets a free trip. Genghis knows what she's like."

Addie saw from his eyes that he believed her.

"Who set you up?" Will asked.

She shrugged. "It only matters that it wasn't me."

"I'm really sorry. Usually I don't make judgments without hearing all the facts."

"What happened this time?"

"You, Addie. You happened this time."

Addie could feel him looking at her, but she couldn't move her gaze to his.

"You were so desperate not to let me see you on Monday morning, I was angry," Will said, "so I pretended we hadn't met and that was wrong."

"I thought the three of you were laughing at me."

He shook his head. "I didn't tell Ed and Jack anything. Ed guessed where I spent Saturday night when he saw you hiding in the cupboard. I didn't tell him what you'd asked me to do. Can we be friends?"

Addie gave a little smile.

"No more ideas about resigning?"

It was a minor miracle she kept the smile in place. All that concerned him was not looking bad. She was still leaving.

"Do they sing all the way there?" Will whispered.

"And most of the way back."

Will groaned. Addie risked a glance. He'd closed his eyes. A lock of his hair had fallen over his forehead and her fingers itched to push it back. His hair was dark, but there were strands of gray at his temples.

"What are you looking at?" He hadn't opened his eyes.

"Gray hair."

"I didn't have any until I met you. And the suits weren't Armani, by the way, but this sweater is."

"It's very nice," Addie said, wishing she was wearing something other than cheap jeans and her old fleece with the large brown moose on the back. Where was a fairy godmother waving a magic wand when you needed one?

"How did your Sunday lunch go?" Will turned to look at her.

"Couldn't have been better. My niece came downstairs with her hair wrapped around toffees and it was my fault. I gave my mother flowers that reminded her of my father's wreath. My clothes were disgraceful and I was blamed entirely for the fact that you dumped me. You retained your sainthood because you proved my mother right—you were far too good for me. She's particularly pissed off because her Christmas letter has to be rewritten to ensure every one of her friends and relations know her pathetic daughter is still single and desperate." *God, cut out my tongue*, Addie thought in horror.

"You're just wishing you hadn't told me that," Will said with a smile.

"Had I known you were a mind-reader, I'd have asked Ed."

His face fell. "You don't mean it."

"Stop reading my mind," Addie whispered.

"I told you that you should have dumped me."

“And I told you that would never have worked. I don’t know why I bothered inventing Noah in the first place. I’m back where I started. I’m sorry I asked you to do it.”

“You’re the first woman to regret spending the night with me,” Will said in her ear.

Addie squirmed on her seat. Well, that wasn’t a surprise, and she hadn’t regretted spending the night with him, only wished she’d been brave enough to reach across the bed.

“I can’t tell you how upset that makes me and how desperate I am to put things right.”

Bloody hell. How come he only had to talk to her to make her panties damp?

“Do you want me to move?” Will muttered when she didn’t say anything.

She shook her head. Despite the fact that her body burned from being so close to him, she was in heaven not hell. If any part of him touched her, she’d spontaneously combust, but she’d go happy.

“What are you doing on the trip anyway?” she asked.

“Research, plus I wasn’t sure you’d be able to make it after yesterday.”

Addie’s slender hope that he might have come because he wanted to be with her, dissolved into nothing.

* * * * *

“Be back no later than three thirty,” Addie repeated as everyone climbed off the coach. “If you miss the bus, we’ll pick you up next month.”

“She’s bossy, that one,” Gordon told Will as he got off.

“You know how much you like to be dominated, Gordon.” Addie winked at him. “Make sure you buy me a stick of rock in case I need to smack you round the head on the way back.”

“I’ll buy the biggest I can find.”

“In that case, I know just where to put it.”

Gordon laughed. Out of the corner of her eye, Addie could see Will listening. Fred locked up and followed the straggling line of passengers toward the steep hill which dropped down through the village to the sea. Will stood there in his dark jeans and Armani sweater, tall, dark and shivering. Addie slung her backpack over her shoulder.

“Three thirty?” he repeated in dismay.

“It’s a day trip. They’d feel a bit short-changed if I’d said – oh look, there’s the sea, we’ll be heading back now.”

Addie hesitated and then set off after the others.

“Hey,” he called.

She turned. He looked like a lost little boy, standing there with his hands pushed deep into his pockets, the wind blowing his hair.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"For a walk."

"Can I come?"

"If you want." Did she sound as though she didn't care one way or the other? If she did, it was a miracle.

By the time they reached the edge of the car park Addie could see the tan leaching from his face. She took a bright yellow waterproof jacket out of her backpack. "Here, put this on."

"Don't you want it?"

"I had the sense to wear a fleece."

"But not enough sense to avoid buying one featuring a large moose."

"If you're going to be rude about my fleece, I'll have the jacket back."

"And what a lovely moose it is too," Will said.

Addie smiled.

"Do you have enough peanut butter and marmalade sandwiches for me?" he asked.

"No, but there's a fish and chip shop."

"Great." Will smiled. "So what's the history of this place?"

"Smuggling center in the eighteenth century. The locals could pass contraband from one end of the village to the other without it leaving the houses because there are so many secret ginnels and bolt holes."

"What's a ginnel?"

"A narrow passageway. You'll see when we get further down. This village is a maze of cobblestone streets and alleys. The women used to pour boiling water onto the heads of the customs men as they went past. The place is awash with art galleries, antique shops, book shops and little cafes." Damn, she'd turned into a talking guide book.

On their way down the hill, they overtook most of the coach passengers. The smell of the sea grew stronger. Addie took a deep breath of the cold, salty air.

Will was entranced by the village of red-roofed cottages that clung to the cliffs as the road dropped to the sea. Vee would have hated this place. She'd have whined and moaned before they were halfway down the hill. In fact, she wouldn't have got off the coach. Actually, she'd never have got on the coach. But Addie looked at home here. Her face, devoid of make-up, had a healthy glow. Her haircut and the new color suited her. Even in that stupid fleece she looked sexy. Maybe they could find a secluded, sheltered spot and he could check out what lay underneath. Or even better, a local hotel. Will's heart jumped. He was her boss. This wasn't appropriate.

They reached the bottom of the hill and Will gawped.

“Good, the tide’s out,” Addie said.

The place would have looked a damn sight better if the tide had been in. Instead of the golden beach he expected, ahead of them lay craggy stretches of ugly black scars, dotted with pools left by the retreating sea. All his recent holidays had been spent on white sandy beaches washed by warm turquoise water. Robin Hood’s Bay looked as grim and menacing as an alien planet.

“When did you last go to the seaside?” Addie asked.

“A year ago.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Antigua.” With Vee. There had been a lot of sun bathing, drinking and sex.

“These rocky outcrops might look unappetizing, but there’s something special to see here. Watch your step.”

She was more sure-footed and also wearing suitable shoes. Addie was already crouched down looking at something by the time Will picked his way to her side.

“An ammonite,” he said in surprise.

Addie looked up and beamed. “These scars are one hundred and seventy million years old, limestone and blue shale pressed under the sea. The place is teeming with fossils.”

They spent so long bent over, a little boy came up behind them with a fishing net.

“Have you found a crab?”

“No, a fossil. It’s called an ammonite,” Addie said. “Can you see any more?”

The boy touched the mark with his fingers. “I’d rather catch crabs.”

Will and Addie shared a smile.

“Mum,” the boy yelled. “Come and look. They’ve found a satellite.”

* * * * *

As Will stepped over the next lot of rocks, he slipped, and without thinking, Addie reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He didn’t let her go. Addie raised her eyes to his face and he tightened his grip. She curled her fingers around his and had to fight hard not to burst into tears of joy.

“Let’s walk down to the sea,” Will suggested.

Let’s throw ourselves into a snake pit. *No problem*, Addie thought. *Just keep hold of my hand.*

They picked their way around the seaweed-fringed rock pools, the clouds casting such dark shadows, the water around them looked bottomless.

"What are you thinking?" Will asked.

That she'd never had her hand held like this.

"You're going to wreck your shoes and get your feet wet." Addie was so pathetic she wanted to kick herself in the head.

As soon as they reached the sand, he let her go. "Race you," he said and started to run.

"Look out for quicksand," Addie shouted and Will slammed to a halt. She shot past.

"Wow, this *is* quick sand," she yelled.

She heard him laughing as he came after her. Will reached the water before her, but Addie didn't mind. Years of her brothers beating her meant she never expected to win anything.

The sun came out and Will whirled around on the sand with his arms outstretched. "This is great."

The wind was whipping the surface of the sea into foam. The wind direction and strength were just right. Too tempting for Addie. She took off her backpack, unzipped it and pulled out a red packet. She knew she was about to show off, but couldn't help it.

Will came to her side. "What's that?"

"Power kite."

Addie shook the material and twisted out the lines. The wind caught the kite and she dug her heels in the sand as the red and blue fabric shot straight up.

"Shit," Will yelled as she let it pull her into the air.

Addie laughed with delight. She had to be careful doing jumps. She didn't want to end up in the water and she still ached from yesterday. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Will desperate to have a go. He stood there looking like a model out of a glossy magazine, with the sea and the light behind him, the wind whipping the yellow jacket. She wished he was hers.

Addie performed a few more maneuvers and then called him over. "You know you're going to ruin your shoes."

Will smiled. "Do you think I care?"

And your trousers and my jacket, Addie thought as Will crashed onto the sand, but after a few mishaps he got the hang of it and Addie smiled as he whooped and yelled. She slipped her camera out of her bag and took a few shots while he wasn't looking.

They took it in turns to fly, but the wind was strong and it didn't take long before Addie's arms ached.

"I'm hungry now," Will said, helping Addie wind in the lines.

"If you're a good boy you can have an ice cream."

Will grinned. "Last one back buys the chips and no more jokes about quicksand." He paused. "Unless there really is quicksand. In which case, please tell me. I still have nightmares about that scene in *Lawrence of Arabia*."

"And *The Neverending Story*?"

"I wasn't going to admit to watching that."

* * * * *

Clutching open trays of fish and chips, they made their way to the harbor wall and sat with their feet dangling over the edge.

"Delicious," Addie mumbled, stuffing a huge chip between her lips.

Will watched Addie devouring the greasy food and thought again about Vee, who would have starved to death rather than put a single chip in her mouth. Vee was so determined to keep her fabulous figure, that eating wasn't fun, it was a trial. She repeatedly told him he was the reason she went to such extremes. All the dieting, exercise, skin treatments, hair, nails, everything, it was for him, because she loved him and wanted to make him happy by looking beautiful for him. Will had wanted *her* to be happy, to do things for herself, not for him, but he couldn't make her see that.

He didn't want to think about Vee. He smiled at Addie.

"I need a drink," he said as she put the last chip in her mouth. "Coffee or beer. You choose."

Addie led him to the pub.

"What would you like?" Will asked.

"Anything but gin and tonic."

He grinned. "I did wonder. Go and find us a quiet corner."

Will came back with a beer for himself and white wine for Addie. He sat next to her on the bench seat.

"You know, when I saw you on Monday morning I thought I was hallucinating," he said.

"At least you didn't hide in a cupboard."

"Only because I didn't know where they were. I thought you said you were a teacher?"

"And sales and admin. Three days at Magelan's, two days teaching."

"You didn't fancy doing something with Japanese or working in Japan?"

"I didn't much like Japan," Addie said.

"Why not?"

"Mainly because I got stared at all the time, and since I always seemed to be lost and wandering in the wrong area, people stared at me even more."

He used his thumb to trace a circle on the back of her hand, and Addie's knees shot up, rocking the table. They both grabbed their drinks.

"Stop teasing me," she pleaded.

Will squeezed Addie's leg. "I can't help teasing you. It's like being with a nervous teenager. How come you can flirt with Gordon, yet with me you act like a mistreated Lurcher?"

"I—I—" Addie stuttered.

"Let's forget I'm your boss and that we're at work. Pretend we're on our own. You know something is happening here, Addie. My heart's galloping. I suspect yours is too. But if you really want me to stop, I will."

She shook her head. Will smiled. He wasn't sure that he could anyway.

Chapter Twelve

"Where are we going?" Addie asked as Will set off up the hill.

"Back to the bus."

"Why?"

"Wait and see."

It was a steep climb. Addie had to stop and take a breather part way, but Will kept going, bounding ahead like a frisky mountain goat. When he realized she wasn't with him, he came back and grabbed her hand. Addie's heart skipped merrily even though her legs couldn't. His hand felt warm and soft, and Addie thought about his fingers touching her breast, tweaking her nipple, slipping into the wet folds between her – Her toe caught a crack and she tripped. Only Will's firm grasp stopped her falling headlong.

"Okay?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What were you thinking?"

"Why?"

"Because I've realized you're only clumsy when you're nervous. What were you thinking?"

"What I was going to cook for my tea."

"Lying to your boss?"

"Thought you weren't my boss."

"Lying to the man who wants to press his naked body against your naked body?"

Addie clamped her mouth shut.

"You want to know what else I'm thinking?" Will asked.

She wasn't sure that she did. She could already feel the muscles clamping deep in her core.

When they got within sight of the vehicle, Will slowed and released her hand.

"Shit," he muttered and Addie thought she'd never been so happy and so annoyed to see anyone in her life.

Sitting on a wooden bench in front of the coach, like Cerberus before its kennel, was Doreen Wilberforce.

"You should leave the bus open," she said. "I've nearly frozen to death waiting here."

Addie released a shaky sigh. No, it was better that she'd been saved from what she knew would be humiliating.

"I'm so sorry. You poor thing." Addie fought back the temptation to hug Doreen, who regarded her with complete astonishment.

Will stared at his watch. "It's only ten to three. You're not due back yet."

"Well, now you're here, I'd like to get on," Doreen said.

"Of course you would. I'm so sorry you've been kept waiting," Addie said.

Both Will and Doreen turned to look at her. Addie was a little disconcerted neither of them appeared convinced of her sincerity. Will unlocked the driver's door and then pressed the release on the passenger door. Addie followed Doreen on board.

"Apart from being cold, did you have a nice day?" Addie asked as Doreen slumped on a seat near the front. "Robin Hood's Bay is lovely, isn't it? Did you go to the museum? Find any nice shops? Buy anything nice?" Addie could feel Will trying to edge her on.

"I was overcharged for my tomatoes."

Addie started to commiserate, but Will shoved her forward.

"Miss Winter and I are just going to discuss her position in the company," Will told Doreen as they passed. "We'll try not to disturb you."

At the back of the coach, Will gestured for Addie to sit next to the window, out of sight behind the on-board toilet. He peeled off his jacket and sat next to her. As he reached for her shaking hand, Addie jumped up.

"I'll see if Mrs. Wilberforce is all right."

Will yanked her down.

"She might..." Addie stood up again.

"Might what?" Will asked.

Addie hovered.

"Sit down," he said. "Mrs. Wilberforce is fine. She's not big enough for you to hide behind."

Addie's knees bent and she dropped in the seat next to him. She couldn't look at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "What's making you so nervous?"

"I was wondering what I could do if the handbrake failed on the coach and—"

He put his finger on her lips. "Shut up."

Addie swallowed hard.

"I want to kiss you," he whispered.

All her internal organs braced themselves.

"Promise you won't run away this time. I've never had that effect on anyone before, well apart from when I was seven and tried to kiss Lisa Prescott. She ran too, straight to the headmistress. I had to apologize in front of the whole school and consequently didn't get to take the class hamster home for the holiday. I never got over it."

Addie knew he was nervous too. He used his thumb to stroke her wrist, drawing little circles with the edge of his nail. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight of his hand holding hers.

"Why did you run away on Sunday morning? Why wouldn't you speak to me?"

Addie closed her eyes.

"Look at me, Addie."

Her eyes snapped open. His eyes were as dark as ever, but now they were full of something else. He wanted her. She could see it in his face. No one had ever looked at her like that before. She felt a surge of heat between her legs and her heart began to jump like a kid on a trampoline.

"You can't believe how hurt I was," Will said. "I always thought I was good at kissing, but it seems you were so horrified you couldn't wait to get away from me."

How red was her face? "You know that's not why I ran."

"I only know what damage has been done to me," Will whispered, edging a little closer.

Addie wondered if she had an organ that wasn't trembling in excitement. "You don't look damaged. You look perfect."

"Mr. Perfect."

Addie's shoulders sank. "Oh God, I *did* say that aloud."

He dropped his hand to her knee and ran his thumb up her jeans to the top of her leg. When he slid his fingers under her fleece, she jerked as hard as if she'd touched an electric fence.

"Steady," he said in a whisper. "Let's take this off. That moose is watching and it's making me nervous."

Addie let him pull the fleece over her head. Will tossed it onto the next seat. He moved his fingers back onto her skin, ran his thumb along her waist at the top of her jeans and then stopped in the center of her stomach. Addie knew why.

"You don't look the type," he said.

"I'm not."

Will lifted her t-shirt. When he slid his fingers over her navel and touched the little silver screw that pierced it, her skin fluttered. To Addie's intense delight, his fingers trembled.

"So if you're not the type, why did you have it done?"

"To piss off my mother."

Will laughed. He put his mouth next to her ear. "Sit on my lap."

Addie was horrified. "I can't. I'll crush you."

Will's eyes opened wide. "Why on earth would you think that?"

"I'm...I'm big."

"You're tall, you're not big. I'm six four. You're what...five ten?"

She nodded. Near enough. When had she ever been smaller than someone thought?

"Six inches' difference. Nicole Kidman is taller than you."

"I bet she wouldn't sit on your lap either."

Will smiled. "She might. I've never had the chance to ask. So what's wrong with being tall?"

"I'm very sensitive about my height," Addie mumbled.

"I like tall girls."

"You're just saying that so I'll do what you want."

"And is it working?"

"No."

"Tell me what's wrong with being tall?" Will repeated.

Be careful, Addie told herself. He doesn't need to hear the whole sad story. Offer a teaspoonful not the whole reservoir.

"Tell me," he urged as his fingers twisted the screw in her navel and unlocked the key to her heart.

A small crack appeared in the dam wall.

"I've been teased about my height for as long as I can remember—people asking what the weather was like up there, calling me lanky, scraggy, beanpole and worse."

"What sort of worse?"

Addie hesitated. "Being called 'sir'."

"What?"

"People think I look like a man," she whispered as more water trickled from the widening crack. She wished she hadn't said that, wanted the words back.

"They must be blind."

Addie knew she should shut up, but in an attempt to make him forget the last comment, her tongue launched into hyper-drive.

"My mother forced me to have ballroom dancing lessons to make me more graceful, but I had to be the guy. I stuck it for four weeks before I started going to the cinema instead. She didn't find out for seven months. Then she made me learn the violin."

"Can you play the violin?"

"Not after I sat on it."

Will laughed.

"I don't like standing out. It makes me feel uncomfortable and that makes me clumsy. I'm not small and cuddly. I'm not sweet. I'm never going to be a kitten in a man's arms, just a sack of concrete." The water poured out now from a massive gash. Addie was incapable of halting the flood and frightened of what she might say next.

But it was Will who shut her up, putting his thumb against her lips. "Let's risk it. Sit on my lap. I want to give you a cuddle. I need warming up."

She allowed him to draw her onto his lap and move his face close to hers. Addie could feel his eyelashes brushing her cheek and she shook in his arms. *Oh God, what if he feels that damp patch between my legs?*

Will was angry Addie had been teased like that. She was so blatantly female with that cute face and her beautiful long legs. Will liked long legs, particularly when they were wrapped around his waist or over his shoulders. He swallowed hard. He wanted to kiss her, but he was scared of freaking her out. The tip of her tongue flicked out to wet her lips and the last vestige of his control disintegrated.

He wrapped his arms around her, bent his head and kissed her. She gave a little gasp and Will took advantage of that to press his tongue forward in a tentative exploration. She melted. The tension rushed out of her body as she changed from angular bones to soft, gentle curves. Her hands threaded into his hair, she moved against him and Will slid his tongue deeper into her mouth, reveling in her sweetness. Addie sucked gently and heat flooded his body. Will groaned deep in his chest.

He moved one hand around her back to bring her closer and slid the other down over the seam between her legs. *Damp?* Addie gasped into his mouth and lurched against him as she panted.

"Addie," he groaned. "God, you go off like a rocket."

She tried to get off his lap, but he wouldn't let her.

"Stop it. No running away. I want to know, is it just me that can make you come so fast or does this happen all the time?" He breathed into her ear. "I hope it's just me."

She touched his cheek with her fingers and Will caught his breath.

"Shit," he hissed, pushing her back on the seat. He stood up, and grabbed Addie's jacket to hide the bulge in his trousers.

Doreen Wilberforce stood glaring at him. "I've left my umbrella on the bench. I need to get off the coach."

Will cast an apologetic glance at Addie. As he reached the driver's seat he saw a couple of passengers walking across the car park followed by Fred. Will swore under his breath and waited to hand over the keys. Addie came up behind him, back on duty.

"Have you had a good day, Dot?"

"Lovely but freezing, Addie."

"Don't ask Gordon to warm you up, whatever you do. He has his own special technique he's dying to try."

"I heard that," Gordon said. He handed Addie a stick of pink rock.

"You shouldn't have," Addie said.

"No sucking. You'll rot your teeth." He winked at her.

Will sat on the front seat and closed his eyes, imagining what they might have got to up with more time and more privacy. He still hadn't figured Addie out. He was starting to think she had a split personality. A confident, smiling, flirty female with these passengers and a quivering wet kitten if he touched her. Will stifled a groan. He quite liked that. Maybe she acted like a kitten, but had a tigress inside her, waiting to be unleashed. Will wanted to add Big Cat Trainer to his resume. He imagined himself peeling off her clothes and didn't manage to stifle the groan this time. Now he had to keep tight hold of the yellow jacket.

Addie greeted everyone as they returned. Every so often, she glanced at Will who appeared to have fallen asleep. He leaned against the window, eyes shut with her jacket draped over him. Addie felt as though the day had been something she'd dreamt. Somehow she'd made Noah real. Will wanted her. He'd held her hand, made her sit on his lap and he'd kissed her. What a kiss. She wanted to do it again. Do more.

Counting the passengers was always a nightmare. Addie had to repeat it at least five times. They either multiplied like amoeba or disappeared like chocolate-chip cookies. When she was satisfied everyone was back on board and they'd not picked up some foreigner looking for a bus to Manchester, not one of her finest moments, Fred set off. Addie sat next to the sleeping Will and fastened her seat belt. She turned her head to look at him. His face was flushed. He was too hot. Addie tucked her fleece under the seat and reached for the jacket. Will's hand shot out.

"Leave it."

"I thought you were hot," Addie said.

"I am. And bothered." He opened his eyes. "I could strangle Doreen Wilberforce."

Addie smiled and opened her book.

"If you're going to read, what can I do?" Will complained. "I'll be bored."

The jacket had slid partly over her lap. Addie was just about to push it back when Will's hand landed on her zip. She went rigid with shock.

"Don't," she whispered.

"Don't what?"

Will stroked her stomach and Addie trembled.

"You have to stop," she said.

"Why? No one can see." He moved his head closer to hers.

His breath tickled her ear and she bit back a whimper.

"They can hear," she whispered.

"So are you noisy when you come?"

Heat engulfed her as though she'd stepped into a desert. Addie knew she had to move seats. She was on fire. She'd never really understood when it said in books that

people couldn't help themselves, that they were consumed with the desire to satisfy their needs at whatever cost. Now she did.

She crossed to the other side of the coach, struggling to control her breathing. Then fixed her eyes on the moorland scenery, willing her heart to stop racing. She was pathetic.

When Doreen shuffled forward to ask if they could make a toilet stop, Addie reacted like she'd been shot. Her book flew out of her hand and she squeaked the request to Fred. She didn't look at Will.

Fred found a pub that would accept coaches and Addie told everyone they had twenty minutes, no more. Will didn't get off and Addie didn't dare get back on, so she followed the others. Moments later, Will joined them. Addie wondered if there was a back way out. While she dithered, he crept up on her.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked.

"Gordon's getting me one."

Will's hand clamped on her elbow and he pulled her to one side. "What the hell's the matter?"

"I don't like stopping on the way back." She knew that wasn't what he meant, but she couldn't have the other conversation. "It's a nightmare getting them all back on the bus."

He gave a little smile. "What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean?" Addie faltered.

Will cocked his head on one side. "Yes, you do. I know this isn't appropriate, but can't you forget I'm the boss for a while? There's something unresolved here and I don't think either of us will be able to settle until it is. Come back to my place."

There it was.

"If you get them all back on the coach before half past, I'll think about it."

Will grinned and Addie smiled too. It was impossible not to. He was so gorgeous and confident and there was as much a chance of him getting them on board before half past, as Addie discovering her bank account had changed color.

Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, they were still six passengers short and Will had lost his grin. Addie watched him sprint back to the pub and moments later the missing MADS dashed back to the coach. Gordon carried his pint, sloshing liquid as he hurried along. Will bounded up the steps.

"What did you promise them?" Addie asked as he sat beside her.

"Nothing."

She looked at him.

"Next trip half price," he panted.

Addie looked at her watch. "You're still two minutes over."

"I'll make up for it later."

"*The Sound of Music*," someone shouted and Addie groaned.

"What's the matter?" Will asked.

"If we stop, they drink. That wakes them up and then they sing again."

The strains of "Climb Every Mountain" grew as the bus began to pull up the next hill. Will laughed, grabbed her hand and squeezed hard.

Chapter Thirteen

It was six thirty by the time everyone disembarked in Meanwood. Fred went off for a smoke, leaving Addie and Will alone on board. Will watched as Addie walked up and down the aisle.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making sure no one's left anything."

"Have they?"

"No." She picked up her bag and jacket. "Bye then."

Disappointment surged through him. "Aren't you coming back to the depot?"

"It's easier to get a bus home from here." She stepped off the coach.

"Addie!" he called. As she turned, he swallowed hard. "You *have* left something."

"What?"

"Me."

Even in the gloom, Will saw the familiar blush creep over her face.

"I'll drive you home." He waited to see what she'd do.

She stepped back on board.

Will held her hand all the way to the depot. He still thought she might bolt if he gave her the chance. Was this wrong? Because he was her boss—yes, but Will didn't care anymore. He thought they'd both be more relaxed once they were in the Lexus, but he was wrong. It was as much as he could do to keep from stopping his car and dragging her onto the backseat. Addie sat playing with the strap on her bag, curling it over with her fingers and occasionally casting shy little smiles his way. She chattered nonstop about her brothers. It thrilled him that she was nervous too.

But Will still tussled with his conscience. As her boss, he should know better. He did know better. This was exactly what Ed did. Exactly what Will gave him grief about. Sleeping with the staff. But Addie was so sweet and kind and cute and so not like Vee, his willpower had been vacuumed out of him. Will was mesmerized. He ached for her in a way he hadn't felt for years, ached in a way he'd never felt for Vee and that both thrilled and frightened him. He knew Addie wanted this too, she was simply nervous. Her hand trembled when he held it. Her skin fluttered at his touch. The fire in her burned as fiercely as it did in him. He'd flirted with her all day and she'd flirted back.

He wanted to get her in his room, strip her naked and kiss her all over. Kiss her long legs all the way up from her toes. He wanted to suck her clit into his mouth and make her come all over his face. Will missed the road and had to turn around. Thinking about Addie was dangerous. Arousal pounded through him. Every part of his body

tingled with excitement. He'd had an erection for what seemed like hours. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been as horny as this, not even when he was a teenager. Once he had her naked in his arms, Will knew the chances of him lasting for anything approaching a respectable length of time were not good.

By the time he pulled up next to Ed's Boxster, Will's heart was beating so hard he thought she could probably hear it. He went round to open her door and as she stood, he pulled her into his arms.

"I want you so much, I hurt," he whispered.

He felt her knees go and clutched her tighter. For a moment, Will couldn't move. He stood holding her in his arms, feeling as though walking into the house was a bigger step than it looked.

As Will pulled Addie through the front door, Ed came out of the kitchen. His brother's gaze flashed between the pair of them and for a moment, Will thought Ed looked disappointed.

"And what have you brought back from the seaside?" Ed asked.

Will tossed him Addie's stick of rock.

"Want to hear about the day I've spent doing your work as well as mine?" Ed called as Will pulled Addie toward the stairs.

"No," Will said.

The moment they were in his room and the door was closed, Will thrust her back against the wall and pressed his lips against hers. It was an urgent, desperate kiss and she responded by opening her mouth wider. Will's tongue sank deep and he groaned into her throat. Her hands slid up his back until her fingers twisted in his hair. The kiss was electrifying. Will hadn't thought he could be more aroused. He'd been wrong. He forced his lips away from hers.

"Addie, if you've changed your mind about this, you need to tell me now, because I'm about to explode."

"Don't stop kissing me."

"I don't think I can."

Addie's self-control had begun to evaporate the moment she'd seen him on the coach that morning. Now she wasn't sure anything could have stopped her doing this, including World War Three breaking out next door. His kisses sent her spiraling into meltdown and she was both scared and excited by the way she felt. He'd moved from teasing, flicking and nibbling to all-out consumption. Addie tore herself away long enough to grab a gulp of air and then Will claimed her again. He moaned into her mouth, his hands all over her. Everywhere he touched, she caught fire. She wanted to cry from the sheer joy of it.

Will rested his forehead against hers. "Addie, oh Addie," he whispered.

She thought if he'd told her he wanted to kill her, she'd have let him. How could that be? His fingers slid under her fleece, peeled it over her head and dropped it on the floor. Hands glided over the front of her t-shirt, around her breasts and squeezed, making her gasp into his mouth. He pulled her against his body and she felt the long ridge of his erection pressing against her stomach. *Oh God.* Her legs were shaking. Addie was a little more scared than excited. It was a good job he wasn't a murderer.

He moved his mouth to her ear. "Are you on the Pill? Please say yes, because I'm not sure my legs are going to carry me more than the two steps to the bed."

"No, but..."

They were both breathing heavily.

"But what? I had a test, Addie. I wouldn't risk —"

"Not that. No — I — but —" Addie couldn't make her mouth work. She needed to tell him this was her first time, but she was embarrassed and couldn't get the words out.

"Sorry. I can't think straight. Right. Condom. Don't move. Don't take anything off. I want to do that."

He kissed her on the nose and left the room. The moment he released her, Addie slid down the wall onto the floor. Her legs wouldn't hold her. She was terrified. He thought she'd done this before and she hadn't. Addie knew it all in theory. She'd read about different positions, places guys liked to be touched, where women liked to be licked. Her sex education had come from romance books and her brothers' magazines, the ones they hid on the top of their wardrobes. Her mother's advice about sex had been a single sentence, delivered a few days before Addie left for university. "Keep your knickers on." Addie had.

Will slammed back into the room and she jerked against the wall, banging her head.

"What are you doing down there?"

He pulled her up and peeled her t-shirt over her head, tossing it aside. Addie fought off the desperate desire to cross her arms over her chest. Her hands twitched at her sides.

Will stared at her. "God, you are so beautiful."

And now my jeans are soaked. How was she going to explain that? What if he thought she'd peed? Addie gave herself a mental slap. *He wasn't the one without experience.*

He feathered her nipples through her cotton bra and dropped his head, sliding his mouth from her neck to her breast. Addie lurched and Will pulled back a little.

"What is it?"

She couldn't speak. Every time he put his mouth on her, she felt she was going to explode. How could she tell him that?

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

Addie tried to think of something to say. Not the truth, not that she was incandescent with desire and that the fuse he'd lit this morning was burning a fast and sizzling trail toward a stack of dynamite.

“Congenital abnormality,” she whispered. “I flinch when I’m touched.”

He laughed. “So it happens if I touch you like this?” He kissed her collarbone and Addie’s skin jumped.

“Or like this?” His mouth dropped back to her nipple and she twitched.

“There’s no way I can do this slowly. You’re driving me nuts,” Will said.

He tore a button off his shirt in his haste to remove it, fumbled with his zip and then with hers until he only wore boxers and Addie stood in her mismatched bra and pants.

“Red pants,” he muttered.

Addie was mesmerized by his skin, the smell of it, a mixture of spice and sweat, the feel of it, hard and hot against her body, and it grew hotter as they rubbed against each other, hands touching, exploring, his strong thighs brushing hers. Will backed her to the bed.

“I’ve nothing against the carpet, but since the bed is right here…”

They lay side by side, kissing, legs entwined, and Addie thought she’d never have enough, that she could just lie there forever, kissing him, holding him. He made her feel safe, wanted. This was what she’d spent nights dreaming of and it came nowhere near the real thing. Everything they did was an adventure—the way Will slid her breasts free from her bra, the way he lapped at her nipples—and all the time he kept kissing her. Addie was shocked when she realized they were both naked. How had that happened?

She was almost disappointed she’d missed it. These were memories she wanted to treasure, memories she wanted to relive over and over. Will’s tongue trailed a circle around her nipple before setting off on an exploratory mission south. When he licked her navel, Addie clamped down so hard on her urge to come, she went stiff as a poker.

Will laughed. “Addie, relax. It’s okay.”

No, it wasn’t. She needed to tell him…something. *Oh, that’s so nice.* Thumbs stroked her nipples while his lips kissed a path over her stomach. Where was—*oh God.* Addie felt as though a thousand elastic bands had snapped inside her. She gasped and Will moved up to cradle her in his arms.

“Sorry, sorry,” she muttered.

“Sorry? You’ve got to be kidding me. I don’t think I’ve ever been so flattered in my life. The downside is, I’m too desperate to wait any longer. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Will reached for a condom. Oh God, she hoped he didn’t want her to put it on. *Keep it.* Addie beamed the thought to him. Their heads were so close together surely the message would get through. She watched as he struggled to open it and it slipped from his trembling fingers.

He pressed the packet into her hand. “You do it for me.”

Thank you, God. I owe you for that, Addie thought. She couldn’t open the thing either. She’d lost all coordination. Will took it back and began to rip it with his teeth.

“No, let me,” Addie said, thinking—*hole—pregnant*. Moments later, she held an unpleasant-looking but pleasant-smelling greasy blue circle in her fingers. *Blue!* She gawped at it.

“Ed only had flavored ones, so excuse the color.”

“What flavor?” She licked it. “Blueberry. Umm, quite nice.”

“It’s supposed to be on before you do that,” Will growled. “Hurry up.”

Addie stared at the condom as though it was something she’d never seen before. She hadn’t. Well, she’d seen one on TV, but she’d never held one.

“Addie! Quit staring at it. Roll it on.”

Her gaze dropped to his cock. She’d never been this close to one of those before either. *Wow*. She touched him as gently as she would a trapped butterfly, ran her fingers down the length of him, tracing the bulging vein, feeling the velvety softness of the skin, the curly dark hair and thinking how amazing part of a man’s body could get so rigid. He was like an iron rod, a marble column, a tree trunk. Addie had to suppress a giggle. Not the time or place.

“Addie! Quit staring at my cock like it’s an alien.”

She had to laugh then and he reached to brush her lips with his thumb.

“It’s incredible. You’ve gone so long and hard,” she whispered, still trailing her fingers up and down.

Will chuckled. “Yeah, well that’s what cocks do when they have somewhere cozy and warm they want to explore.”

She wondered if it was as stiff as it looked and squeezed harder. Will gasped and Addie glanced up.

“Stop playing and put the condom on for me, Addie. Please.”

She placed it over the tip of his penis and somehow everything went wrong. She wasn’t sure whether the foreskin was supposed to move down or stay up and how far the condom would stretch. It didn’t seem very long. This was a bit like putting on pantyhose that were too short. Did she need to pull from the bottom or push? Will gave a yelp and yanked the condom off again.

“Sorry, but I don’t think it’s big enough,” Addie said.

He sighed and reached for another. This one was lime green.

“I need to apologize,” Will said.

“I really don’t mind about the color.”

“No, not that.”

Her heart shrank. “What?”

“I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I was desperate a minute ago. Now I’ve moved beyond desperation. I’m in imminent danger of not being able to last more than—I daren’t even guess. Normally, I have more self-control, but I’ve been building up to this since that knife fell out of your pants.” He hesitated. “No, before that, from

the moment I saw you in the gym and let's not forget you've been driving me wild all day. But I want this to be good. I don't want to disappoint you."

"You couldn't disappoint me," she whispered.

He looked her in the eyes and gave a little smile. Will lowered his head to kiss her neck, nibbling along her collarbone before moving up to her mouth.

"Tell me what you like," he whispered, "because if you touch me again in the next few seconds, you're not going to be impressed with my performance."

"I-I—" She couldn't speak.

"Does this feel good?" Will dropped his head and licked around her nipple, drawing it into his mouth, sucking gently.

Addie felt the pull between her legs. Her eyes closed and her neck arched. How could licking her nipple make her ache there? She moaned deep in her throat. Ohh, it felt good. Something was happening to her. Again. *Shit*. No. Good.

"I'll take that as a yes," Will said, his voice husky.

He pushed his hand between her legs and she gulped as his finger slid a little way inside her.

"Oh God, you're so wet and tight," Will groaned. "It's no use fooling myself into thinking I can wait. I can't."

Addie could feel her muscles clenching, tension building inside her, a tightening sensation throughout her body. There was something she'd been going to tell him, but she'd forgotten what. Will pushed her legs either side of his hips and she felt the hard length of him between her thighs. Addie wrapped her legs and arms around him and lifted her body to press her face into his shoulder. She was making weird little gasps, winding tighter and tighter. *Oh bugger. Hurry.*

"Wait for me. I want to be inside you," Will whispered.

Wait? How? The accelerator was stuck down. There was no brake pedal.

Will pushed a little way into her and she inhaled sharply at the invasion. He pulled back.

"I thought you were ready. Am I hurting you?"

"No," Addie lied.

She pressed her face harder into his shoulder to hide her eyes, put her hands around his back and tightened her grasp, rocking her pelvis against his, encouraging him to thrust hard inside her. Slow and easy warped into hard and fast as Will slid fast and deep into her and she bit her lip. Pain and pleasure for both of them rode side by side.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, Addie. Why didn't—you haven't—" Then Will could no longer speak.

Addie clung to him as one of his hands roamed up her spine, the other settled under her backside. Their bodies were locked tight as he surged into her, shuddering as

he was gripped by a series of long, powerful spasms. Then they lay motionless, though Addie could feel the wild beating of their hearts lying one on top of the other and it was somehow the best part of all.

Chapter Fourteen

When the bell rang, Ed put the DVD on pause and wandered to the door. When he opened it, his mouth also opened in complete shock. Manicured fingernails reached forward and lifted his jaw back into place.

"Cela n'est pas attrayant, Ed."

"What are you doing here?"

Vee walked past him into the house.

"Where do you want these?" the taxi driver asked, a large bag on his shoulder and a case in each hand.

Ed grabbed the luggage and carried it into the hall.

"Il a été un ange. Le payer," Vee called from the lounge.

Ed got the pay him part. "How much?" His mind raced.

"Twenty quid, mate."

Ed pushed twenty-five pounds into his hand and slammed the door.

"Ou est Will?" Vee came back into the hall.

"Out."

"His car's here."

Ed tried to think. "He's gone for a walk to give me a bit of space."

"Why do you need space?"

"I've got company," Ed improvised.

Vee flashed one of her smiles. Oh God, the French bitch was gorgeous, he thought. Vile, but gorgeous.

"I should have known. Never takes you long. Which is his room? I want to freshen up. Is there a bathroom?"

"There's a toilet down here," Ed said.

"I need a shower." She moved toward the stairs.

"Vee, what are you doing here?" he asked in a loud voice, hoping Will could hear.

"I need to talk to Will."

"So what's with the luggage and how did you know where we were?" Ed did *not* want her living with them.

"So many questions and none of the answers concern you."

She took another step toward the stairs and Ed leapt forward.

“Let me check if the bathroom’s free. There’s a bottle of champagne in the fridge. Why don’t you open it?”

He breathed a sigh of relief when Vee turned and walked toward the kitchen. Ed ran up the stairs. He was not in the mood for this shit.

Will rolled away from Addie to pull off the condom, then turned back. She didn’t know what she saw in his eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” He stroked her cheek.

Before she could speak, the door flew open and Ed burst in. Addie yanked up the sheet.

“What are you doing? Have you gone mad? Ed!” Will nodded his head toward Addie. “We’re in the—”

“I need you both in my room. Now,” Ed said.

“Fuck off.” Will stood up.

“Vee’s downstairs,” Ed blurted.

Addie’s heart pounded in her head. Who was Vee?

“Vee is downstairs,” Ed repeated. “I told her you’d gone for a walk and I had my girlfriend here. Both of you get in my room. Once Vee’s in your ensuite, you can sneak out.”

Ed grabbed Will’s robe and threw it toward Addie. She struggled into it before she got out of bed. She moved fast, picked up her clothes, grabbed her bag and went out of the room. The first door she tried was the bathroom. She didn’t take a breath until she was locked in. Then she gasped as if up to that point she’d had hands around her throat. She’d been stupid. Will had a girlfriend called Vee. She’d turned up and Addie was history. Her heart was ablaze, the pain so bad, she thought she might die.

Addie took off the robe. The breath caught in her throat when she saw the smudge of blood on her inner thigh. She cleaned herself with wet toilet tissue and flushed it away. Her fingers fumbled as she dressed. One tear escaped as she fastened her jeans and she rubbed it away in anger. She looked in the mirror. Still the same person. Still gawky Addie. She ran her fingers through her hair, tried to smile and failed. Tried again and still couldn’t do it because she’d been reminded yet again that no one wanted her.

Ed attempted to tidy Will’s room. He smoothed out the sheets and pulled the duvet back into place. Grabbing the box of condoms, he looked round to check Addie had left nothing. Will stared at him.

“Is the bathroom free?” Vee called from downstairs.

“Yeah,” Ed called back, “only pour a couple of glasses of that champagne before you disappear with the bottle.”

Since Vee was not only the most unstable woman he'd ever met, she was also the most selfish, Ed was positive she wouldn't have already thought to do that, so it gave them an extra minute or so. He put Will's clothes in his arms and pushed him to the other bedroom.

There was no sign of Addie.

"Where is she?" Will mouthed.

"She must be in the bathroom. Fuck. I've just told Vee it's free."

As Ed came out of the bedroom, he caught sight of Vee at the bottom of the stairs and closed the door on Will.

"This is Will's room," Ed said as she reached the landing. "You can use his ensuite."

"So why've I had to wait?"

"Because I don't want you settling in. It's Will's room, not yours."

"Bring my cases up."

Ed bristled. "You're not staying here, Vee."

"Just for a little while. Will won't mind."

"Yes, he fucking will."

"We'll see." She slammed the door.

Ed's shoulders slumped. He didn't understand why Will couldn't see what a bitch she was. That wasn't true. Will did know she was a bitch, which was why he'd divorced her, but he didn't know how bad she was. Will had been away in New York when Vee came round to Ed's flat with a bottle of champagne. By the time he'd opened it, Vee had draped herself over his couch. He should have pushed her out the door then, but he hadn't, he'd given her the benefit of the doubt.

Nothing happened. Not much anyway. Not on his side. There had been some groping and touching and Ed had called her a taxi and sent her home. Vee had never forgiven him for rejecting her. And he'd never forgiven her for telling Will that he'd come on to her. Ed didn't tell Will exactly what Vee had done, only that she was trying to drive a wedge between them. Will said he believed him but Ed wasn't sure he had. The day Will announced he and Vee were splitting up had been one of the happiest of Ed's life. Only Vee was a leech, she wouldn't let go.

Maybe he shouldn't have saved Will from being caught in bed with another woman. Maybe he should have let Vee walk in on them. Only Ed was certain who would have come off worst in that encounter and it would have been Addie. She was probably pissed off with both of them, but better that than having Vee come at her with a knife. Ed wished Jolene, one of Will's post-split girlfriends, had gone to the police after Vee attacked her, but instead she'd dumped Will.

By the time he'd hauled Vee's luggage into Will's room, Vee was in the shower in the ensuite. Ed went back to his own room and found Will dressed, sitting on the bed holding a bra.

"Where is she?" Will asked.

"In the shower."

"Not her, you idiot. Addie."

"I'm not the bloody idiot. You are. Addie's in the bathroom. You need to get out of here. Leave Addie to me. I'll take her home. I told Vee you'd gone for a walk to give me and my girlfriend space, so stay out long enough to get cold. When you get back, get rid of her."

Once Will was out of the house, Ed went to the bathroom and knocked on the door. No answer, no sound from within. He tried the handle. The room was empty. Ed's gaze slid to the open window. As he took the three paces toward it, he had a sudden vision of a body on the ground and his pulse spiked until he looked down. There was no flat roof, no drain pipe. He would have thought twice about making the drop unless the house had been on fire, but maybe that's what it had felt like to Addie.

Ed ran downstairs and grabbed his keys. He drove to the bottom of the road and pulled up next to his brother.

Will bent his head to the window. His eyes widened when he realized Addie wasn't in the car.

"I don't know where she is. She must have dropped out the bathroom window," Ed said.

"Christ." Will's shoulders slumped. "I need to talk to her. I—find her, Ed, make sure she gets home safe. I didn't—I—" He hesitated. "It was her first time. I didn't realize."

Ed stared at him in shock. "You complete fucking idiot. How could you not know?"

"She didn't tell me. I thought she was playing. Shit, I feel terrible. It would have been okay if Vee hadn't..." Will's voice rose. "What the fuck is she doing here? How did she find us? Everyone knows better than to tell her anything."

"Go back and get rid of her. I'll find Addie."

Ed hadn't intended to spend the evening doing anything more strenuous than having a long soak in a hot bath. With a bottle of cold beer in his hand and his computer balanced on the washbasin, he planned to lie back in comfort and watch a film. Now he was going to have to drive round the streets of Alwoodley looking for a pissed-off, possibly hysterical female.

It took Ed ten minutes to find her. She sat alone at a bus stop. He pulled up and lowered his window. "Addie, get in. I'll drive you home."

She didn't move. No hysteria. No crying. No fury. Just a sad, pale face. Ed wanted to kill Will.

"Are you all right?" he asked and could have kicked himself for his stupidity.

Addie could still feel where Will had been inside her, but he didn't care about her. Not enough anyway. He wanted her gone. Ed wanted her gone because a woman called Vee had arrived. Addie was overwhelmed by the pain of complete humiliation. So

stupid to think someone that attractive wouldn't already have a girlfriend. Stupid to think he might want her for anything other than a quick fuck. He was her boss. What had she been thinking?

"Get in, Addie. Let me drive you home. Please."

Everything ached – her leg from yesterday, her head, between her legs. Her heart.

Ed got out of his car. "Come on, Addie," he said, his voice soft and gentle. "You'll be ages waiting for a bus and it's started to rain. Let me take you home."

Addie picked up her backpack and got into his car.

"Where do you live?"

She whispered her address.

* * * * *

By the time Will walked back into the house, he was freezing. He felt terrible, but not because he was cold and wet. He looked at the stairs, turned away and went into the kitchen. He knew what would happen. He'd shout at Vee, she'd cry, he'd feel guilty and try to make her feel better and then it would only be a matter of time until the next explosion. The bottle of champagne stood open on the kitchen table. He turned and walked to the stairs. What was the point in putting this off?

He pushed open his bedroom door.

"*Salut*, Will."

His ex-wife lay curled up on his bed with only a towel wrapped around her.

"*Que fais-tu ici?*" he demanded, slipping into her native tongue, asking what she was doing there.

Vee pouted. An expression with which he was all too familiar.

"That's not nice," she said.

"I thought you were in Paris staying with your parents." Will glared at her. He'd hoped she'd never come back to the UK.

"We had an argument. They don't care about me. They don't want me."

Will had heard all this before.

"You're wet. *Tu fais froid?*" Vee asked. "Let me warm you up." She uncovered herself, posing on the bed like a centerfold model.

Will tried to keep his eyes on her face. He pulled his fingers through his damp hair.

"You don't belong in my bed, Vee."

"But you're my husband."

"Ex-husband. We're divorced, remember?"

"Ah, *pas exactement.*"

Will's heart lurched in his chest like a dog trying to escape a leash. "Not exactly? What does that mean?"

"We're still married."

Panic scuttled through his veins. Will shook his head. What the hell was she talking about? "No, we submitted the draft settlement. The *notaire* prepared it. The bloody French lawyer cost me a fortune. We signed it. The hearing –"

"I said we'd changed our minds."

For a moment, time stopped. "What?"

"I told them I wanted to try again."

Will tried to rein in his fury. "How dare you, Vee? This was all sorted."

"I want to try to again."

Will chewed his lip. "What happened to Jean-Claude?"

"The *cochon* was sleeping with a waitress." Vee started to cry. "Why do people always do that to me? They always hurt me."

Will was tempted to remind her that she'd hurt him, but he didn't. How did she think it made him feel when she slept with other men? Vee cried harder. Will squirmed. He felt helpless when women cried. It made him want to do anything to stop them—give them his car, his credit cards, Ed's Star Wars figures, anything. His desperation stemmed from the way his mother used same tactic of emotional blackmail when he and Ed were little. Crying to get them to cuddle her, crying if they didn't work hard at school and crying so they wouldn't leave her like their daddy. It worked then, too.

Vee sobbed and Will looked at her in despair. Confrontations always made her cry. Her crying made him feel guilty. Feeling guilty weakened his resolve. He hated this. Her parents had fucked up her life and left her as fragile as a glass rose.

"Don't you love me, Will?"

"Yes, but not in the way you want. Not anymore."

Vee got up and walked over to put her arms around him, leaving the towel behind.

"You're lying. Part of you still wants me no matter what you say."

She nestled against his chest and Will kept his arms motionless, trying to imagine she wore clothes.

"What's wrong with me?" she asked.

"Nothing." Nothing he wanted to list now, anyway.

"Then why don't you want me? Don't you think I'm beautiful?"

"You shouldn't have come here, Vee."

"I wanted to be with you today," she said. "Just today."

Will glanced at the luggage in the corner.

"Don't you remember this day?" she asked.

He was at once on alert. "No."

"The day we lost our baby, Will. The day our little baby died. You're the only one who understands."

Then he believed the tears and let himself hug the memory of what had been inside her.

A child hadn't been planned, but he'd been ecstatic at the news. He thought it would put things right between them, stop Vee straying. The first time she'd had an affair, he'd taken her back and given her another chance because she swore it would never happen again. Then two days after she'd told him she was pregnant, he found her lying naked in the arms of their equally naked next-door neighbor.

Once the neighbor had grabbed his clothes and left, Will told Vee the marriage was over. She drove off in a flood of tears, crashed the car and lost the baby growing inside her. At her bedside in hospital, Will offered her another chance. A mistake. A month after she'd been discharged from hospital, he found her in the arms of one of his friends. That really was the end.

Only it wasn't, because although he moved out of their flat, Vee constantly called him to sort out some problem, real or imagined. She always came to him in times of crisis and she always seemed to be in a crisis. It hadn't escaped Will's notice that most of her difficulties could be sorted out by taking her to bed, or as Vee had once described it, giving her a "get-better fuck". What he'd thought would be no-strings-attached sex, had turned out to be anything but.

Will knew Vee was unstable and that made him feel worse. After he'd removed his belongings from their home, she'd taken an overdose and had her stomach pumped. Ed had talked him out of taking her back then. Now Ed had stepped in again. They both knew what would have happened if Vee found him in bed with Addie. Vee had stalked and threatened Jolene, a previous girlfriend. It had cost Will a fortune to sort that out. Jolene could have brought charges. He sighed as Vee snuffled in his arms. Ed thought he'd done the right thing this evening, but Will wished he hadn't. He wished Addie had her arms around him and Vee was in a taxi going back to the station.

"This has to end," Will said. "You have to stop running to me every time you're upset."

"But you're the only one I can rely on. You are the one good thing that has ever happened to me."

Why did that make him so miserable?

"Find some other idiot to lean on. I won't do this anymore." Even to his ears his voice lacked conviction.

"I thought you'd understand because of our baby."

"Was it ours?" Will wanted the words back. He always ended up saying things he didn't mean, things he regretted. Although he had wondered if the baby was his.

"Don't be horrible, Will. Jean-Claude was horrible to me."

Will doubted that. Jean-Claude, a good-looking French car salesman, barely out of his teens, hadn't been able to believe his luck when Vee threw herself at him.

"I missed you. I wanted to be with you. Can't I even have a kiss?" She went up on tiptoes to reach for his face.

Will pulled back. "No."

"You're my husband. We made promises to each other. I love you, Will."

"I returned the divorce papers to my lawyers. As far as I'm concerned, we're not married."

"Come to bed. I want you to make love to me, make me feel better."

She slid her hand between his legs.

"No," Will croaked and moved out of her reach.

He saw Vee stiffen.

"Look, get dressed and I'll take you out for something to eat," he said. "We can talk, try and sort out this mess with the *notaire*."

They'd eat and talk, but he knew they wouldn't sort anything out.

He sat on the bed. Vee emerged from the bathroom fully clothed, makeup reapplied, all traces of tears obliterated. Her eyes weren't red. Just like his mother.

Chapter Fifteen

Ed drove without speaking, though Addie could feel him sneaking glances. She had pressed herself as close to the door as she could. Her hands shook on her lap but she wasn't cold, hot air blasted from the vents. She needed to pull herself together. If she was to salvage any vestige of pride she had to pretend this didn't matter. Will had done her a favor. Now, when she looked at a guy she fancied, she didn't need to wonder if he'd be the one to take her virginity. She'd made love for the first time. No, they'd fucked. Addie winced. She'd been fucked. That was okay. It didn't have to be love. And it had felt good, except for what followed, when she'd been thrust away like a used tissue.

"Are you all right?" Ed asked.

What sort of stupid question was that? Addie thought and then took a deep breath. This wasn't his fault.

"Yes. Third exit at the island."

"Will wasn't expecting her."

So that made it all right did it? Will should have told her he had a girlfriend. He'd flirted. But then Addie had too. She'd been asking for it. She'd turned him on. She'd heard her brothers talk about cockteasers. Was that what she was? She'd bloody well had an orgasm when he'd barely touched her. More than once. And he knew. He knew what he did to her. But she couldn't help it. She was so out of control she might as well have been on drugs. Will probably thought she was on drugs.

"Turn left," she said. "Straight on 'til the traffic lights. Then right."

"Vee's a bitch," Ed said.

But she was the one with Will now.

"Two houses past the shop. It's the house by the lamppost."

The moment Ed pulled up, Addie flung open the car door, desperate to escape. But to her astonishment, the moment she stood, her legs collapsed. She hit the wet pavement hard. Ed was out in a flash and by her side.

"I'm okay." She struggled to her feet, mortified. "I tripped."

Ed clicked his key to lock the car and held on to her. "Let's get you inside. It's this one, right? Where's your key?"

"My bag." Addie fumbled in her backpack. She saw the kite Will had played with, remembered his happy face, and the key fell from her fingers. Ed picked it up.

"Do you live on your own?"

"No, with Lisa." Addie froze. "If she's in, say I'm drunk."

The house was empty.

"I'll be fine now. Thank you for the lift," she said and made her way upstairs.

Ed watched her get slower and slower like the bunny without the branded batteries. He couldn't leave her like this. He'd wait until her housemate came home.

"Could I make myself a coffee?" he called.

Addie seemed to come back to her senses. "Help yourself."

Ed went to look for the kitchen. He wished Will hadn't told him it was her first time. His brother had hurt her. Ed could see it in the way she held herself, the way she moved and spoke. It was in her eyes and Ed knew how she felt because he'd had his heart broken too. Twice. The first time was when Susie Burton had aborted his child without telling him. The second time when Ariel had chosen a career in New York over life with him. After that, Ed hadn't let himself get attached to anyone. He'd mended his heart with Superglue and Addie had to learn to do the same. Life was sometimes shit. Deal with it.

Addie didn't cry until she stood in the shower. Sex. That was all Will wanted. God, she was stupid. She knew what men were like. She had three brothers. She grew up with them talking about girls they'd pursued, groped and scored with, like it was some game. It would have been nothing to Will. He'd be laughing about it by tomorrow, forgotten by the day after and she'd remember forever.

She scrubbed at her skin, rubbed until it was red. Had she thought he was going to ask her to marry him? He must think she was pathetic. She *was* pathetic. No, he'd think she was pathetic if she made a big thing about it. She had to get over it. It had happened. It was a one-off fuck and at least they'd both got something out of it. He got laid and she was no longer a virgin. That was a good thing. She had to keep telling herself that. So why the tears?

Because it had felt so good up until it had felt so bad. Will's gentle fingers, the way he breathed in her ear, the feel of his wet tongue teasing her nipple, his beautiful cock. Addie gulped back her groan. How could she ever face him again?

When Addie walked into the lounge she stared at Ed in shock. He sat on the couch holding a mug.

"I thought you'd gone."

"I didn't want to leave you on your own."

"So you're the nice brother?"

"Not really."

He gave her a wolfish grin and Addie saw a hint of Will in his smile.

"Can I get you something to eat?" she asked. "Are you hungry? Do you like beef stroganoff?"

His eyes sparkled. "You bought enough for two?"

"No, it's my own. I'll cook you dinner as a thank-you for bringing me home."

Ed followed her into the kitchen and leaned on the counter watching as Addie worked. She set the rice on to boil, chopped onions and while they fried, sliced the beef and mushrooms. She lined up paprika, salt, pepper and sour cream.

"It smells great," Ed said.

Addie opened her mouth to reply and then closed it again. She cleaned up as she went along so finally just two pans sat on top of the stove with two plates warming. She'd thought of lots of topics of conversation and not been able to bring herself to start any of them. So much for acting as though everything was normal.

"Addie?" Ed paused. "For once in my life, I'm lost for words. I don't know what to say to you. Maybe if you ask me—"

"How tall is she?" Addie put the plates on the table.

She saw from the look on his face, that hadn't been the question he'd expected.

"About five-five."

Addie bit the inside of her cheek. So Will lied about liking tall women.

"Would you like something to drink? There's beer in the fridge."

Ed helped himself to a Dos Equis. "You want one?"

"No, thank you."

For a few moments they ate in silence.

"This is delicious," Ed said, forking the beef into his mouth.

"I like cooking. I'm good at cooking." But no good at anything else. Addie knew she sounded inane.

She pushed the food around on her plate, designing a simple maze with the rice, driving a strip of beef along the path, then destroying what she'd created, starting again, not eating a thing.

Don't ask anything else about Vee, she told herself. You don't need to know how long they've been going out, what she looks like, what she does. You don't need to know she's far more beautiful and delicate than you, that she sits on Will's lap without arguing, without crushing him, that no one ever mistakes her for a man.

Whatever she learned would not make her feel better.

Ed finished eating. "That was very good, Addie," he said. "If I didn't have better manners, I'd lick the plate."

"I'm glad you liked it." She continued to play with her food. She'd not eaten one mouthful.

"Addie?"

She raised her eyes to his.

"I'm sorry —"

"No, it's fine." Addie made a lightning-fast interruption. "It's just never happened to me before. Isn't it guys who have to shin down drainpipes when husbands turn up? At least that's what happens in the movies. I'm okay, really. No problem." *Too much protesting you're fine. Shut up.*

"You didn't need to drop out of an upstairs window. God, you could have broken your neck."

"You seemed desperate that she didn't know I was there. Besides, I was worried she might be bigger than me and beat me up." Addie made an attempt at a smile, but doubted she'd succeeded.

"She's like a puff of wind," Ed said.

A black cloud enveloped Addie's heart. How could he know that wasn't what she wanted to hear?

"I didn't know about her," Addie said. "Will didn't say he was in a relationship. I should have asked. I— So how about you? Have you ever had to escape down a drainpipe?"

"I once hid in a wardrobe. I knew the guy was bigger than me and he'd have definitely beaten me up. I spent two hours in there, sitting naked on a pile of uncomfortable pointy-toed shoes waiting for him to go to sleep."

She gave a little grin. Then the front door slammed and Addie jolted like she'd been hit by lightning. Lisa stormed into the kitchen and came to an abrupt halt.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"The person you share your house with," Addie said.

"Very funny. God, Addie, I can't believe you've brought home another strange man. This is getting to be a habit."

"Ed, this is Lisa. Lisa, meet Ed. Before you say anything else, he's Will's brother."

Lisa slumped at the table and stared at Addie's plate.

"Beef stroganoff. You lucky bastard. Is there any left? I didn't get the meal I expected."

"I'll heat mine up in the microwave. I only played with it. Is David on duty?"

"No, I finished with him."

Addie's head shot round.

"I think dinner at Yo! Sushi was because he was going to ask me to marry him, so I pulled the plug beforehand in Revolution."

"I have three older brothers. David's the youngest," Addie told Ed.

She put the warm stroganoff in front of Lisa.

"Is he upset?" Addie asked.

Lisa gave a short laugh. "I told him at 8:30. He went through shock, denial, anger and acceptance, and at 8:35 asked if he could have a goodbye shag."

Addie saw Ed biting his lip so he didn't laugh, but his eyes crinkled at the edges.

"So he's okay?" Addie asked.

"Well, yeah after I said yes to the shag."

"Lisa, you're terrible."

"But he's good in bed or in this case, the gents' toilet and who knows when I'll get laid again." Her eyes flicked toward Ed. "So what's Will's brother doing here eating your fabulous stroganoff?"

"I gave Addie a lift."

"Oh God, you can speak. I've gone off you now." Lisa laughed. "Pity because you're not bad looking. Don't tell me that's your Porsche outside?"

"Yes."

"Wow. Good plan, cooking for him, Addie. It must be serious. I never cooked for David."

"If you had, he'd have finished with you ages ago. You can't even cut the bread straight."

"I wish he had finished with me. It's much harder to dump than be dumped."

"I don't think that's true," Addie said in a quiet voice.

"How would you know?" Lisa retorted. "You've never dumped anyone. You remember how upset I was at uni, when I dumped Max?"

Addie drew in her breath. For two weeks Addie had imagined she was Max's girlfriend. They lived in the same hall of residence and had an owner-pet relationship—he whistled and Addie came running. She also came running when he didn't whistle. She sat near him at dinner, stood behind him in the bar and followed him to the campus. She'd been continually under his feet, desperate to please him, when all he wanted was for her to fuck off. It was only later Addie realized, in those two weeks they were supposed to be a couple, Max didn't take her anywhere. It was Lisa he wanted.

"I need a drink. Do you two want a glass of wine?" Lisa asked.

"No, thanks. I have to go." Ed got to his feet.

Addie went with him to the door.

"Thanks again for the meal," he said.

"You're welcome. Thank you for driving me home."

"I'm sorry about what happened."

"It really doesn't matter," Addie muttered.

Ed moved toward her and she thought for a moment he was going to kiss her, but instead he hugged her.

"You're lying," Ed whispered in her ear. "And Will's an idiot."

Finishing with David had been such a distraction to Lisa, she missed the fact that Addie was not her normal self, until a single tear gave her away. Lisa poured her a large glass of wine and took her into the lounge.

"All right, I give in," Lisa said. "Tell me everything."

"If you're giving in, aren't you supposed to tell me everything?"

"I'm begging here, Addie. Where did you find him? He is so gorgeous."

Minds on different roads. "I told you. He's Will's brother."

Lisa raised her eyebrows. "Are you making up for lost time or something? Working your way through the family? Are there any more?"

"Just two brothers, and there's nothing going on between me and Ed."

"Well, he looked concerned about you."

"He's a nice guy."

"Only nice? How about Will? He was very insistent I let him in last night."

"Turns out he already has a girlfriend."

"Oops. Does Ed?"

"No idea," Addie said.

"Cooking for him was such a smart move. He'll be back."

"I don't think so."

It hadn't escaped Addie's notice Lisa made no reference to David. Her brother and housemate's relationship was not just over, but buried under six feet of concrete. One fumbled coupling on Will's bed had scarred Addie for life.

"So what's really the matter?" Lisa pressed.

"I was with Will when his girlfriend turned up."

"With him where?"

Addie twisted her wineglass by the stem. "His bed."

Lisa winced. "What happened?"

"I left. She stayed."

"Bastard. So what was he like? As good as your imaginary Noah?" she teased.

Addie took a deep breath. "He was the first man I've ever slept with."

Lisa started to laugh and Addie burst into tears.

* * * * *

Will made it clear to Vee she could only stay temporarily and she was not sleeping with him but in the third bedroom. He lost part of that deal as soon as Vee saw the size of the room.

"There's nowhere for my clothes."

That was true and Will realized if he gave her his bedroom she'd have her own bathroom which might stop Ed strangling her within the first few hours or stop Ed killing him for giving in to her. So Will moved into the smallest room and made up the single bed with a spare set of sheets and his coat. He'd have to buy another duvet unless Vee left quickly. Well, he'd buy another duvet.

He pulled the chest of drawers across the door to stop her coming in and make it difficult for him to get out. Will lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. Guilt surged round his bloodstream like fast-acting poison. He kept thinking about Addie, how he'd ruined what should have been something special for her. Her first time and she'd been bundled out like she didn't matter. How had he turned out to be the bad guy? That was supposed to be Ed.

"Will?"

Vee knocked at the door. The handle turned. Will pulled the pillow over his head.

Chapter Sixteen

Ed sat in the kitchen eating breakfast when Vee walked in wearing one of Will's shirts. Only two buttons were fastened. She slumped at the table.

"Is there any orange juice?" she asked.

"Get up and look, you lazy cow."

Vee sighed, but got up and opened the fridge.

"How long are you staying?" he asked.

Vee turned and pouted. "You say that as though you don't like having me around."

"So you do have one brain cell?"

"You're not funny, Ed."

She slammed the carton of juice on the table, splashing Ed's cereal. He moved his bowl.

"I wasn't trying to be. I thought you'd gone to see your parents."

"My grandmother is ill. They went to visit her."

"Why didn't you go?" Ed asked. "Does she hate you too?"

"She smells."

Ed raised his eyes from his breakfast and realized she was serious.

"I had the chance of a few weeks' work in Leeds, so I decided to come and stay with my husband. What's wrong with that?"

"Let's see...you don't have a husband, you're divorced, you don't like working and you should have asked first. Is that enough?" He gave her a broad smile.

"Fuck off, Ed. I don't care what you think. You're wrong anyway. Will and I are still married. The divorce hasn't gone through."

The smug look made Ed's heart sink. "What does Will have to say about that?"

"We're going to try again."

Ed tried to keep his face neutral, but his mouth twitched and his cereal sat like cannon balls in his stomach.

"I know what you're thinking. Men are so transparent. Stay out of our lives or I'll tell Will about Susie Burton."

Ed made certain his face showed nothing this time. "What are you talking about?"

Vee smiled. She lifted her finger in the air and waved it in front of his nose. He was tempted to bite it.

"If you'd married her, she wouldn't have wanted the abortion. You forced her into it."

Ed had no idea how Vee had found out about Susie. As usual, she twisted the truth to suit her purpose. Will didn't know about the abortion. It had happened after Vee had lost her baby and it hadn't been something Ed wanted to share.

Will walked in yawning and Vee jumped to her feet, throwing her arms around him. Ed couldn't tell from his brother's expression whether he was happy or not. Will looked deathly in the morning.

"I've been telling Ed I'm going to be staying here until Christmas," Vee said, turning to grin at Ed.

"That's not what I said, Vee." Will pushed her away. "You can stay here until you've found somewhere of your own. I'll help you look."

"But Ed doesn't mind if I stay. You don't mind, do you Ed?"

Ed tipped the rest of his breakfast down the sink and walked out before he strangled her.

* * * * *

Will didn't get to Magelan's until ten thirty. He scanned the office, but when he saw Addie's empty chair, his gaze faltered. Her other job. He'd forgotten. Will muttered a greeting to Daisy and Genghis and slumped at his desk. He was reaching for the phone when the door slammed and Ed strode in.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

"She was supposed to be in Paris. How did I know she'd take it into her head to come to Leeds? I don't even know how she found out where we were. When I do, someone's going to get fired."

"I wasn't talking about her. I don't give a shit about Vee. I'm talking about Addie."

Will bristled. "That has nothing to do with you." He picked up a file, opened it and pretended to read the contents.

Ed leaned on Will's desk. "Vee says you're still married."

Will winced. If he'd been a hermit crab, he'd have backed into his shell.

"The French lawyer fucked up the paperwork. I rang to check. I'll sort it out."

"So you're not getting back together?"

Will raised his eyes. "Do you even have to ask?"

"Yes." Ed stood up and paced round. "Will, you have to stop her slinking back every few weeks and screwing up your life."

"How? I thought coming to Leeds was far enough, but she's even managed to get a bloody part-time job here."

"The bitch is manipulating you."

"I know." Will sagged and put his head in his hands.

"I don't want to live with her. Make her go away. Put her in a hotel. I'll pay," Ed said.

"I'm working on it."

Ed bent his mouth to Will's ear. "And I'm not deaf. As long as you keep fucking her, Vee's not going to leave."

Will clenched his jaw.

"What are you going to do about Addie?"

The wall came straight up, solid steel, six-foot high. Will leapt up and stood in front of him. "I didn't fucking rape her. She wanted it as much as I did."

"For fuck's sake, Will. Listen to yourself."

Will dropped back to the edge of his desk and dragged his fingers through his hair. "I never let her think it would be anything more than a quick fuck." He rushed on, not talking to Ed, but to himself. "I gave her the chance to stop and she didn't want to."

"Why was she still a virgin? Have you thought about that? She's pretty. She can't have been short of offers. Chances were she was saving herself for someone special. Was that you?"

Will looked up. "Why the fuck not?"

"You think you can make love to someone so sweet, and then just walk away without them being hurt?" Ed gaped at him.

"You did," Will said.

For a moment, there was silence.

"You fucking bastard," Ed said and walked out.

Will sat on his chair and put his head in his hands. What the hell was he doing? He'd thought his life would take a turn for better in the north and instead it was going downhill faster than a sledge. Vee wouldn't leave him alone. She'd pounced on him this morning as he walked into the bathroom, stuck her hand down his sleep pants and grasped his morning woodie before he'd had time to blink the sleep out of his eyes. He wasn't proud of what happened next. She'd begged and he'd fucked her. Why the hell had he done that?

Well, he knew why. He just wanted to get rid of her, but it had been a mistake and it wouldn't happen again. They were using each other, but enough was enough. He didn't want Vee, he wanted Addie.

The moment he and Addie had made love, he'd felt wonderful and then terrible because of what followed. He'd forgotten what making love could be like—the excitement, the thrill of being touched by new hands, exploring a new body. He'd found as much pleasure in making her happy as he had in pleasing himself. Now he'd wrecked it by pandering to his neurotic almost-ex wife. Only maybe Addie didn't have to know. Will wanted to forget it had ever happened and start again.

Addie filled him with longing for what he could have in his life. She'd made him wake up and realize how far he'd let things slide. Vee had wormed her way back in

when he should have made the break permanent. Addie was sweet and loving, and Will knew he'd hurt her in a way he could barely comprehend. Pretending he hadn't made him a coward.

He wished Ed hadn't come into the bedroom. He wished Vee had walked in, seen Addie in his arms, taken one look, run out and disappeared forever. Only Will knew it wouldn't have happened. Vee would have gone crazy. She was obsessed with him.

Ed retreated to his office and leaned back against the door. He'd just seen something different in his brother that he didn't much like. Will was lying to himself so he didn't feel bad. How many times had he done the same? Slept with a woman knowing she wanted more than a one-night stand? More times than he could count. Ed told himself that if he kept things short and sweet, no one got hurt. It was a lie.

After he'd been burned by Susie and Ariel, he'd moved from being a long-term relationship kind of guy to the sort who specialized in one-night-stands. Now, that was all that was expected of him and Ed felt trapped by it. Women who thought they could change him, tame him, turned him off. The keener they became, the less he was interested. There was some irony in the fact that while most of the young women in this office seemed determined to throw themselves into his arms, the one who hadn't, the sweet, innocent one from the gym, the one Ed thought was cute and that maybe he'd like to ask out on a proper date and not rip her clothes off, had thrown herself at Will.

Will took out his mobile and called Ed.

"Sorry. Come back in here. Please."

When the door opened, Ed's jaw was taut.

"Sorry," Will repeated. "Was Addie upset? What did she say? Was she okay?" His shoulders slumped. "Shit, of course she wasn't."

Ed leaned against the wall next to the window. "She pretended she was."

"What did you tell her?"

"Nothing. She didn't ask me about Vee. Oh, except for one thing. She wanted to know how tall she was."

Will swallowed hard.

"She also said it was partly her fault because she assumed you didn't have a girlfriend."

"Christ."

"You're a complete shit, Will. You know that?"

"Yes."

"You're supposed to be the sensible older brother. Mum's always telling me to try and be more like you."

"Fuck."

"Pull yourself together. Get rid of Vee and apologize to Addie."

"Right."

"That is what you want?" Ed asked.

Will knew what he wanted...he just didn't know if it was what he deserved.

"Well, make up your mind, otherwise you might find you're too late." Ed walked out again.

Will knew what he ought to do. Leave Addie alone. She wasn't at work today, which should have been a good thing, only it wasn't. He was disappointed he wouldn't see her lovely face. Maybe he should send flowers to say sorry. Only sorry for what? Sorry he'd got carried away, that he'd taken advantage of her, that Vee had turned up? Sorry he'd let Ed take charge of a situation he should have handled himself? Will didn't want Vee, he wanted Addie. He'd blown it.

* * * * *

Addie and Lisa stood waiting for the bus to Leeds, shooting misshapen ghosts into the cold air every time they exhaled. Addie thought she'd never been so relieved she had another job to go to. The idea of facing Will or Ed filled her with horror. Her self-esteem flopped around at her feet like a fish out of water. She'd rerun the whole day in her mind, time after time, trying to convince herself she was making a big deal out of nothing. She knew acting as though it had never happened—in fact forgetting it had ever happened—was the key to survival, but she couldn't. Conducting inane conversations with struggling students at the language school was just what she needed to stop the neurons in her brain shooting down cul-de-sacs all ending in Will.

Addie and Lisa groaned in unison as the bus passed the gray building where they worked. They rose to their feet.

"Remind me why we do this?" Lisa asked.

"Because you have a mortgage to pay, you love clothes, shoes and nail varnish, and you didn't get the job with the diplomatic service."

"Rub it in why don't you."

They jumped off the bus.

"Nor the job with Greenpeace or that London stockbroker."

"We're not paid enough for this," Lisa whined.

"We're being tortured by foreign teenagers. How could we ever be paid enough?" Addie held the door open for Lisa.

"Are you in tonight?"

"I wish. I'm babysitting for Finn. They're meeting Trixie's teacher. She's definitely not paid enough."

"Excuse me, where is the principal's office?"

Addie and Lisa turned. A pretty woman smiled at them. With flawless skin and green eyes, she looked as though she belonged on the pages of a magazine, not in the classroom.

“End of the corridor, turn left. There’s a sign on the door,” Lisa said. “By any chance, are you the angel who’s going to help me with French conversation? Evelyne Marchaux?”

“That’s me. Are they that bad?” Evelyne said with a laugh.

“Worse,” Lisa told her. “The most important piece of advice you’ll get. Never turn your back.”

Addie knew Lisa was right. Mobile phones with cameras were banned, but that meant nothing. A couple of the teachers had already featured on YouTube. She and Lisa split up and Addie made for her first class. At least the ones who wanted to learn Japanese were better behaved.

* * * * *

That night, Will sat in his car a little way down the road from Addie’s house, a bunch of flowers on the seat beside him. Lisa had told him Addie wasn’t home, then slammed the door in his face, so he guessed they’d been talking. He decided to wait. He was cold, but he didn’t want to go back to the house and Vee. Ed wasn’t there to dilute her. He’d gone out with Beth. Will had no idea how he managed to date a string of women from work and still remain on speaking terms.

Will had spent the last twenty-four hours thinking about Addie. In the middle of looking at accounts, she slipped into his mind and took over. When he ate his lunch, he thought about the fish and chips they’d shared. When he talked to any of the women in the office, he found himself thinking how they couldn’t compare to Addie. He loved the way she blushed, her sense of humor, how she laughed at his jokes, the way she smiled, that crazy screw in her navel and the gentle dip where her neck met her shoulder and... Will groaned. There must be something annoying about her. She flinched when he touched her. He gulped. She couldn’t help it and he rather liked it.

Maybe she read horoscopes. He hated that. She probably couldn’t navigate and muddled up right and left. He was certain she’d eat with her mouth open, help herself to the parts of his food he always liked to save ‘til last. She’d continually moan she was looking fat, she’d ask questions that were impossible to answer without causing a blazing row and... Will stopped. That was all Vee.

He almost missed Addie’s return because he wasn’t expecting her to arrive in a flashy BMW. Will rubbed a circle on his misted-over windshield and watched as a tall, fair-haired guy walked with her to the door. As the man leaned toward her, Will held his breath. He thought they might be kissing and he was furious. Last night she’d been in bed with him, now she was with another guy. How dare she? Then Will remembered what she did had nothing to do with him. He’d let her leave because Vee had turned up. Not just leave, she’d dropped out of a first floor window because she thought he

hadn't wanted her. He hadn't phoned to explain. He hadn't sent flowers. He'd brought them, but he was too late.

Will drove off in a temper, but had to stop at the end of the street to wipe the condensation from the windshield. He threw the flowers in a waste bin. He didn't want Vee to think he'd bought them for her. He pulled away and then had to stop again. He still couldn't see where he was going, but the blurriness wasn't from the windshield. Will wiped his eyes and took out his mobile.

"Hi, it's me."

"Hello, you. What are you up to?"

Will felt better hearing his mother's voice. Their relationship had improved once she'd remarried. "On my way home."

"Another late night? You work too hard, Will."

"Um."

There was a long pause.

"I'm waiting," she said.

"Vee's in Leeds."

"Oh."

"I don't know how to get rid of her."

"Poison?"

"Very funny, Mum."

"All right, strangle her. I'll give you an alibi."

Will managed a chuckle.

"You *do* know how to get rid of her. You have to be firm."

"The divorce hasn't gone through."

His mother groaned. "Do you still want it to?"

"Christ, yes."

"Then do the right thing. Make it happen. Don't let her back into your life, Will."

"How are you?" Will asked, hoping he didn't have to tell his mother Vee now lived with him and Ed, albeit on a temporary basis.

"Changing the subject or do you really want to know?"

"Changing the subject."

His mother laughed. "I'm fine thank you, William. Thomas and I were about to de-worm Mollie."

"No more detail," Will pleaded. "I better go."

"Tell Ed I've forgotten what he sounds like."

"Right."

"Bye, sweetheart. Love you."

“Love you, too.”

Will smiled. His mother was so much happier now she was married to Thomas, proof there was life to be had after a divorce.

Will drove back to the house and went in to face Vee. He’d move her out. Tomorrow.

“Will, is that you?” she called.

“Yes.”

“Count to ten and then come into the kitchen.”

Will stopped short when he walked in. She’d put candles on the table and he could smell food cooking. Vee never cooked.

“You’re later than I thought you’d be, so it might be a bit dry.”

Will knew what she was trying to do, but he didn’t know whether it was better to let her fail or stop her trying in the first place. He had no appetite, but she’d gone to so much trouble and it was so unlike her, he gave in and opened the champagne she’d bought. The drunker she was, the more likely she’d fall asleep before they began to argue.

* * * * *

When the bell rang, Addie thought Finn had come back after dropping her off. There was no one there, but an enormous bunch of flowers sat on the step. For a split second, her heart leapt because she thought they might be from Will.

“Ooh, who’s sending you flowers?” Lisa asked as Addie walked into the kitchen.

“Yours.” Addie plonked them on the table.

Lisa grabbed the card. “David must have blown his entire beer budget. *Dear Lisa, sorry, sorry, sorry. I miss you. Fancy a pizza?*”

“I think the romance gene missed him.” Addie grinned and then the doorbell rang again. “It’ll be David with a pizza.”

It was. When the pair of them walked into the kitchen, Addie realized it was all back on. It was that easy.

Chapter Seventeen

Will was amazed Addie hadn't spotted him. Maybe he'd underestimated his espionage skills, or overestimated her powers of observation. As she walked away from her house on Saturday morning, he followed her in his car and then followed the three buses she caught. There had been several panicky moments when he thought he'd lost her, convinced she'd got off without him noticing, and another heart-banging moment in Keighley when he had to make a quick decision over where to park. On a Saturday morning this close to Christmas, he thought it a miracle when a space opened up in front of him. Fortunately, Addie's height made her stand out and he continued to play James Bond on foot.

Sadly, Will had no idea what he was doing. He wanted to talk to her, but he didn't know what to say, so until he could think of something sensible, he continued to trail her. After he'd eaten the meal Vee produced on Thursday, Will had a terrible night. A combination of stomachache from her cooking and listening to her sobbing in the adjoining room because he refused to sleep with her. Last night, Ed drove straight from work to London for the weekend. Will felt guilty because he knew Ed would have stayed in Leeds if Vee hadn't been in the house.

When Will had left for Enerchex yesterday morning, he'd made it clear to Vee that he didn't want to see her there when he got back. He hadn't made it clear enough. After a long day at work, trying not to think about Addie, he returned to Alwoodley still thinking about Addie and found Vee lying across the coffee table, wearing a black leather outfit and surrounded by a selection of sex toys. He was both appalled and sad.

"You always liked to watch me get off with a vibrator," she said.

No, he thought, it was *her* who liked to get off with a vibrator in front of him.

"I need more than that now, Vee."

Not the best thing to say. She'd come at him with a cock ring and Will felt sick. No problem with the cock ring, just with her. He pretended to get drunk and then pretended to pass out, facedown on the couch. He stayed there until he was sure Vee had given up. He was disgusted at how weak he was.

Addie walked into a shoe shop and Will resigned himself to a morning spent doing what he used to do with Vee, albeit at a distance and without him using his credit card. He slipped into the doorway of a chemist as she stopped again. He wanted her to look up, see him and smile so he could sweep her into his arms, but she walked around with her eyes on the pavement, looking so unhappy it made his heart ache.

One hour of shopping was enough for Addie before she headed for Cliffe Castle museum on the far side of town. For warm, free entertainment, it was hard to beat. She cheered up as she wandered around. Her eyes took in an Egyptian mummy, fossils, cases of crystals and gems, walls of stained glass, Will, and stuffed specimens of local wildlife. *Roll that again.* Addie thought she was hallucinating, but when she turned he was still there, next to the stuffed badger.

"Sorry. I had no idea you were in here. I didn't follow you," she said.

"No, I know. I followed you."

Will gave a sheepish grin and her mouth opened in a silent *oh*.

"I need to talk to you."

When he put out his hand, Addie watched her hand rise to meet his. He tugged her outside and pulled her into his arms.

"I can't stop thinking about you." He breathed into her ear and Addie forgot how to think. "When you're not with me, I'm miserable. When you are with me, you drive me crazy. When I look at you, I don't ever want to be apart from you."

Addie forgot how to speak.

"Will you let me explain? It's not what you think. Please?"

She managed one nod.

"Hungry?" Will asked.

She shook her head, then nodded.

Will laughed. "That sort of covers it."

"If you nod in Bulgaria it means no and if you shake your head it means yes," she said. *God take me now.*

"Is that right?"

Anxiety twisted her stomach. It reminded Addie of her first cliff jump, the worry that if she misjudged the leap, she might crash into rocks, even though she'd been assured there was no danger. How could anyone be certain there wasn't something lurking underneath the surface? Some off-course great white shark. Or Vee.

Will gripped her hand tighter and led her back to his car.

"Why didn't you tell me it was your first time?" he asked.

"What could I have said?" *Have you got one in a smaller size?*

"Told me to be careful."

"I didn't want you to be careful."

Will pushed her up against the car and pulled her hand up between them, squeezing her fingers. "I wasn't lying about liking tall women, Addie."

She pressed her lips together.

"It's true Vee was important to me once. She isn't part of my life anymore but she's having difficulty accepting that. She's not...stable. I had no idea she even knew I was in

Leeds, let alone where I lived. I wasn't expecting her. I don't want her here. I don't want her anywhere."

Hope blossomed inside Addie, like one of those paper flowers that spring open in water – growing, growing, growing.

"Vee was violent toward another woman I dated. She threatened her with a knife."

A few petals fell off the disintegrating blossom.

"Ed was trying to protect you, but that was my job. I was just so shocked that she'd turned up. Shocked too that it was your first time, that you hadn't told me." He kissed her fingers. "I was an idiot and I froze."

"Has she gone back to London?"

"I hope so."

"Are you really sorry, Will?"

"Yes." He stared into her eyes. "Let me show you how much."

Will pulled into the car park of a Marriott Hotel.

"Did you book a room?" Addie whispered, her eyes opening wide.

"Actually, I brought you here for lunch."

He glanced at her and saw the flush rise up her neck and flood her face.

"Addie, I did bring you for lunch, but maybe we could have it on our own. I didn't book a room. I wasn't that presumptuous."

She hesitated.

"Shall I get us a room?" he asked.

Will knew he shouldn't push her, much as he desperately wanted to get her somewhere private and lick her all over – more than once. Maybe he should tell her that, but as he opened his mouth, she nodded. "Yes, get us a room."

He wasn't sure what he'd have done if the hotel had been full. Yes he did. He'd have kept looking until he found one that wasn't, but not go back to Alwoodley, just in case Vee was still there.

The moment they were in the hotel room with the door closed, Will spun Addie around, pressed her against the wall and wrapped her in his arms. He landed feathery kisses all over her face as she clutched his shoulders. His heart was pumping furiously, and appeared to be sending all his blood on a one-way voyage to his groin. The bulge in his pants grew larger by the second. Will's brain set off on a journey of its own, remembering those few moments when he'd had her lying naked next to him and how it had been so good and then so terrible. This was another chance and he wasn't going to ruin it by going too fast. He pressed his forehead against hers.

"Are you very hungry? Do you need to eat now?" he whispered.

"Yes. No."

Thank God. He thought. Will peeled off her sweater to reveal a short-sleeved, V-necked purple top. He kissed his way down her neck into the hollow of her shoulder, running his teeth along her collarbone, reveling in her shudders of pleasure and the breathy sighs whispering from her lips. He made love with his mouth, flicking his tongue along her arms, pausing in the bend of her elbow because that made her moan louder, then on to her fingers, sucking each one into his mouth before he set off up the other arm, back to her lips. He savored every inch of her, adoring her. His cock throbbed, pressing against his zipper, struggling to find room to grow.

Will bent his head to her ear. "Oh God, Addie. Have you any idea how much I want you? You're driving me insane. I want to kiss you all over, lick you all over, taste your skin, tease your nipples, suck your clit. I want you naked in my arms, groaning in my ear. I want those gorgeous legs wrapped tight round my hips. I want to put my fingers inside you, then my tongue inside you and after I've made you come a million times, I'll put my cock inside you and fuck you all the way to heaven."

At those words she went off like a rocket. He stroked her face as she shook and sighed, and Will thought he could have come as easily himself, just by looking at her. When her eyes opened, he watched as the color changed, going darker yet brighter.

Addie took a shaky breath. "You're going to have to stop talking to me. Not another word. Not even hello or goodbye."

He laughed. "There's nothing I want to stop doing to you."

As Will moved back to pull off his sweater, she leaned against the wall. But the moment he sat on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes and socks, Addie stepped forward and dropped to her knees.

"Let me." She unfastened the laces and eased off his shoes. "Umm, black and brown socks. Did you get dressed in the dark?"

"What?" Will looked down and then smiled. "Funny girl."

Addie peeled off the first sock and when she ran her fingers along his toes, a frisson of excitement skittered up his spine.

"You've got hairy feet. Are you a Shire man, Master Will?"

"Maybe you should stop the wisecracks before you get any further up my leg."

He knew she was nervous and the humor her way of coping, as was the starting with his toes, but she could start any place she liked so long as she didn't stop. Addie pulled off the other sock and tossed it over her shoulder. When she began to massage his feet, Will fell back with a groan. The sensation of her fingers pressing into his soles, her thumbs digging in below his ankles drove almost every thought from his head.

When Addie's lips touched his skin, his heart began to slam around his body as if caught in a pinball machine, ping-ponging between his throat and his groin, gathering points, ratcheting up his desire. There appeared to be a pyramid in the process of being erected inside his pants as his cock became more determined to stretch out. What Will thought was full hardness had found another point on the diamond scale. He ached with the need to come, ached with the desire not to come yet. Her hand slid up the inside of his

trouser leg and his calf muscles tightened. Addie pulled the hairs on his shins through her fingers.

"Like to check if I'm hairy all over?" Will asked.

"I already know you're not. The mystery has gone. Such a pity."

Addie removed her own shoes and socks and crawled onto the bed, her knees either side of his hips. She unbuttoned his shirt from the top. Will suspected that if he touched her, he'd lose control in seconds, so he kept still and pressed his fingers into the bedcover. Addie ran her hands over his shoulders and down his arms, and he let her maneuver him so she could peel off his shirt. Will watched her as intently as she watched him, her mixed-up eyes drinking in his body, his lustful eyes already drunk on hers.

"Like what you see?" He was ashamed he needed to ask.

"I can understand why you need to go to the gym." She pinched flesh at his waist.

"Ouch. You are on such dangerous ground," he growled.

Addie laughed. "You're toned to perfection. You look like a model. Well, apart from a little —"

Will tensed, then caught the smile on her lips.

"You monster," he said.

Her fingers explored, constantly shifting between stroking, squeezing, caressing, but always teasing. Will groaned every time her hand accidentally-on-purpose brushed his groin. Agony and ecstasy. His balls were screaming abuse at him while his cock had stopped speaking altogether. Will was torn between wanting this to go on forever or ripping his pants off, her pants off and shoving himself inside her. Only he couldn't do that. This time everything had to be for her. There was so much he wanted to do to her, so much he wanted to show her but Addie had to set the pace. When she dropped her head to his chest and licked his nipple, his balls tightened to the point of pain and Will gasped her name. "Addie."

"Do you like that?" Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him and he almost came undone.

"Nothing you can do that I won't like," he mumbled.

She pulled at his nipple with her teeth and slid her hand over the bulge in his pants.

"Oh fuck," Will whispered, and clutched harder at the bedcover.

"You'll tell me, won't you, if I do something wrong."

The way she chewed her lip told him there was something he wasn't getting here but his befuddled brain struggled to grasp what it could be.

"You can do anything you like to me," he blurted, because in a few minutes, he intended to do what he liked to her.

"I haven't done any of this before."

Shit. Will tried to swallow the lump in his throat. *That* was what he'd missed. Not just a virgin but a *virgin*.

"I've never been out on a date. The only guy to kiss me before you was a drunk Australian. He threw up afterwards. I hope it was the alcohol, not me. I've never touched a man's chest, never touched a man—here."

Her hand stroked the length of his cock, still trying to escape its confines. Will had to fight not to whimper. He could guess how much it had cost her to tell him this.

"I think I'm the luckiest guy in the world," he said. He pulled her up the bed so she lay next to him and they rested face-to-face. "There's no right and wrong way with this. Everyone likes something different. Some people are too shy to ask for what they want, others direct their partner like they're conducting an orchestra." Like Vee, he thought and instantly banished her from his head. "It's like the first time for me too. We're learning together. We can teach each other. Please forgive the horrible mess I made last time. *This is our moment.*"

Her lips quivered and Will lifted a hand to her cheek and kissed her. Addie opened to him like a flower and Will slipped his tongue inside her mouth. He traced the curving line of her teeth, the arch of her hard upper palate, the fleshy pads of her cheeks. Her tongue tangled with his, played, teased, tickled. Addie's hand settled on his face and Will pushed and withdrew his tongue as if he were fucking her. Their hips echoed the movement and they rocked together, kissing and kissing until neither of them could breathe and they fell apart with choked laughs.

"You kiss...like..." Addie gasped.

"Like...what?"

"You want...to eat me."

He smiled and slipped down the bed to place soft kisses on her breasts, sucking her nipples through her top until Addie writhed beneath him and he couldn't keep her still. Whisking the T-shirt over her head, Will sighed when he saw the simple cotton bra. He wanted to buy her red lace underwear, wanted to fuck her while she wore it. He licked along the edge of her bra, pulling at her nipples one after the other with his teeth until they were as hard and firm as beads. Will trailed his hand down her body, traced a circle around her navel with a fingertip and sighed when her skin trembled. His mouth followed his hand, and when he put his lips on the silver screw and sucked, Addie squealed.

"Will, I can't stand it."

"I've only just started."

He unfastened the button of her jeans and eased down the zipper. His cock was never going to forgive him but Will wanted to play like this for hours. *Okay, minutes.* He buried his face in the open vee of the denim and breathed into her cotton panties. He could scent her arousal, the musky sweetness making his head spin. Addie fluttered beneath him like a bird, her fingers in and out of his hair, pulling and pushing at his shoulders, her legs jerking, hips bucking. Will laughed into her groin and tugged the

jeans down her hips, struggling to get them off without moving his face. In the end, he gave up and shifted to one side so he could whisk them from her legs to reveal simple gray panties that didn't match her bra. No artifice with Addie.

Will ran his thumb along the line of her underwear, sending her muscles into a frenzied tango under his fingers.

Addie let out a breathy gasp. "If I'd known you were going to be stalking me, I'd have worn something more interesting."

Will smiled. "The only thing that's important to me about your underwear is that you're wearing it and pretty soon you won't be."

Her fingers reached for the button on his pants and Will watched her tongue snake over kiss-swollen lips. He lifted his backside so she could pull his pants off and raised his eyebrows when she tugged his boxers down at the same time.

"Sorry," he said. "But I have to register a complaint. I didn't have that scheduled for another ten minutes."

"Can't wait," Addie whispered, her breathing reduced to short, noisy gulps.

Will ran his hand down Addie's back as she leaned over him. The clasp of her bra sprang open and the bra dropped down her arms.

She laughed. "How did you do that?"

Will tugged the bra free and threw it across the room. "Years of practice."

Addie frowned. "You say that like it's a good thing."

Will lifted his hands and stroked her breasts. His balls gave their countdown warning and tingled as they drew up to the root of his cock. "Don't move. I'm close to embarrassing myself. I need a moment."

Addie looked at his cock. Will felt pre-cum pearl at the tip.

"Not sure it's even safe to look at me," he said with a choked laugh.

He wasn't sure it was safe to keep playing with her breasts like this as she hovered over him but Will wasn't about to give up that pleasure.

He needed a few seconds to get back under control.

"I'm going to tell you a secret. One you have to guard with your life unless you need something big from my brother. I used to make Ed wear Mum's underwear so I could perfect my bra-removing technique. One day Mum caught him prancing about in one of her La Perla demi-cups. She told him he had good taste, but to pick one of the cheaper ones if he wanted to wear her stuff. God, he nearly killed me."

"How old was he?"

"Twenty-seven."

Addie laughed. "Fibber."

Will stared at her. "Your smile. Your face. You're so pretty."

"Right."

He moved his hands from her breasts to feather his fingers over her cheeks and down to her lips. "You're acting like no one's ever said that before."

Addie hesitated and then said, "They haven't."

Oh Christ. "Not even your mum and dad?"

"I never let them see me naked."

"Addie! Don't joke. You *are* pretty."

She gave a tentative smile.

Will felt a flash of anger she'd been deprived of such a simple kindness by two people who should know better.

"You have a cute nose, amazing eyes, very kissable lips and a beautiful body. Those legs make my mouth water."

He slid down the bed on his back and lifted his head to take her nipple in his mouth. As he sucked, he pushed a hand inside her panties. Will's heart pounded as his fingers sank through soft curls to reach wet folds beyond. *Oh Christ, she's soaking – dripping.* He explored the velvety softness of her pussy, the hills and valleys, and lightly touched the hard nub of her clit before removing his hand. Addie was breathing in noisy gulps, her body slumped over his. He had to lift her so he could take a breath. He'd never been with anyone so responsive. Will felt like he could touch her anywhere and make her come. He rolled her onto her back and she looked at him and blinked.

"I can't see straight," she said.

"I haven't made you see stars yet?"

"N-no."

"Hold tight."

She groaned and reached back to grab the bed head. Will smiled and then peeled her panties down her hips, tugging them over her legs and her feet before he flung them across the room.

"What's with the underwear slinging?" she asked.

"I don't want to make it easy for you to get dressed."

Will lay on his side and ran one finger all the way from her forehead, over her nose, lips and chin, down her neck, a detour to each nipple, then over her belly, through her curls and between her legs. He rubbed the pad of his finger back and forth over her delicate folds, and then began to slip in and out slowly, building up the rhythm, edging deeper and deeper until she was gasping and he wanted to gasp too. His thumb settled over her clit and strummed gently as he added another finger to the one in her pussy.

"Oh God," Addie whispered. "Will, please."

He pushed deeper, her cream coating his hand, and circled his thumb harder on her clit. Addie lurched beneath him.

"Yes," she gasped.

Her muscles clenched around his fingers and Will felt the climax roll through her. He ached with the pleasure of being able to do that to her, ached with the need to do more. Will pulled her into his arms as she came back down and held her as her breathing eased.

“Wow, that was so good,” she said. “We can go and eat now.”

Chapter Eighteen

Addie wondered if her heart could stand the strain. It beat so hard and so loud she was sure it was about to break her ribs.

"You really want to eat?" Will asked.

"I'm starving." She smiled when she saw the look in his eyes.

"There's some unfinished business to take care of," Will said.

"I don't think I can come again."

He growled and rolled so she lay under him. "Oh yes you can, but I think I've put my cock through enough torture."

"All right. Tell me what to do," she whispered.

"Let me get a condom."

"I think you better put it on."

By the time he turned back to the bed, Addie had stripped off the cover and was lying on the crisp white sheet. She'd thought she might be shy, but the way Will looked at her, the way Will looked – stopped her feeling awkward or embarrassed. It felt like she'd been waiting for this all her life, for someone to like her, to want her. There was no doubt that Will wanted her. His cock looked huge, the swollen veins winding down its length, his balls drawn up tight beneath. She watched him put on the condom, one hand pinching the tip, the other rolling it down, and Addie wished he didn't have to wear it so she could feel him skin to skin.

Will lay on his side next to her.

"Okay, gorgeous?" he asked.

She nodded.

He rolled onto his back. "You go on top, Addie. Then you're the one in control. You can take it as fast or as slow as you like – within reason."

Addie took his cock in her hand and squeezed gently. Will hissed and yanked down on his balls.

"Playing with fire, Addie."

Her body was already in flames. Treasuring the heat and strength of him, she straddled Will and guided his shaft between the damp folds of her pussy. His hands settled on her hips and Addie let him slide a little way inside, her hand still wrapped around the base of his cock. She felt the beat of his heart in her palm and lowered herself a little more.

"Oh Christ," Will gasped.

Addie knew he'd fit but even so she hesitated, her knees shaking.

“You can move your hand off my cock now, Addie. I think it knows where to go.”

She sank down and down and felt Will tremble beneath her. As her hands slid to his chest, Will’s thumbs grazed the angular bones of her hips. Addie dropped until she lay on Will’s chest.

“That feels so good,” he whispered. “Warm and wet and tight. Oh God, don’t move for a minute.”

Addie tightened her muscles around his shaft.

“Oh fuck,” Will gasped. “Move.”

She pushed herself upright. “That wasn’t a minute.”

Her senses were awash. Aware of her own wetness, her own need, she wanted to make Will happy, wanted him to feel as excited as her. Addie’s head whirled as Will pulled her against him, his face tense with concentration. Addie pushed herself onto Will as he thrust against her. Addie could feel him all over her body. Bursts of pleasure exploding inside her. He was hard and hot and smooth and Addie needed more. She moved faster, sank down harder and her chest tightened and relaxed, then her legs and arms joined in, her spine, her belly. The sensations built like a tower of blocks, higher and higher, coming so fast one on the other the structure began to topple. Acute pleasure surged through her body.

And through it all she knew Will was with her. His gaze never moved from her face. Waiting for her, she thought. He’s the one, she thought.

“Will.”

One last thrust and he tipped her straight over the edge.

Her climax overwhelmed her, every molecule in her body in freefall to bliss. Addie clutched at his shoulders, knowing as she fell that Will tumbled with her. Bright sparks danced in her vision as Will pulled her into his arms.

The way he held her and kept holding her made Addie’s heart want to jump from her body into his. Will stroked her back as their breathing calmed and their pulse rate steadied.

“Can we do it again?” Addie whispered.

Will laughed and she felt his cock jerk inside her. “Soon. I need to get rid of the condom.”

Addie lifted herself off him and lay back as Will rolled over to sit up. “How soon?” she asked.

His shoulders shook and he turned to smile at her. “Oh God, I’ve created a sex-fiend. How about we have a bath, order something to eat and then maybe, if I ask my cock really nicely, he might deign to put in a repeat performance.”

“We can stay all night, can’t we?”

“I’m going to be disappointed if we don’t.”

Will took her hand and tugged her to the bathroom. He started the water running in the tub and tipped in all three bottles of bath gel. Addie was mesmerized by his backside. Tight, firm, pert, no dimples, it was simply beautiful. What would he do if she kissed it? Will bent over the tub agitating the water to make it froth and Addie slipped behind him and pressed her lips at the bottom of his spine. His low groan encouraged her to continue. Addie slid her hands up his thighs and landed feathery kisses all over his butt. His muscles clenched under her mouth and she nipped him. Not easy when there was no spare skin.

A moment later she was under the foam. In one swift turn and scoop, Will had lifted her into the tub. Addie came up spluttering as Will climbed in. They were all arms and legs, water and suds sloshing everywhere as they settled down with Will on his back and Addie lying facedown on top of him.

There was nowhere near enough room but it was somehow more fun because of that.

“Comfy?” Will asked.

Will’s cock had recovered and was wedged between them. Addie’s legs were crunched up and her knees killing her. “I can’t think when I’ve ever been more comfortable.”

He laughed and lifted her a little higher so her head was level with his. Will blew foam off her chin and kissed her. Addie thought this must be what it was like to be struck by lightning. Instant sizzle, limbs atremble, heart racing. How much she’d missed. All those teenage years when she could have experienced this but no one had ever wanted her. And yet in a way she wasn’t sorry because it made what she felt now with Will, even more special.

His hands swept up and down her back, teasing the crease of her bottom. Addie rubbed herself against him, desperate to have him back inside her.

“Addie, take it easy. I don’t have a condom.”

She didn’t care. Well she did, but at the same time, she didn’t. Overwhelmed by lust, sensible thought had gone on vacation.

“Hold still,” Will whispered.

He sank deeper into the foam and lifted her over him so her breast pressed against his mouth. Addie groaned as he sucked, groaned louder as she felt his fingers slide over her anus and into her pussy. One finger diving into her while another teased her clit. Within moments Addie was gulping, muscles reawakened, tremors gathering strength. How come this felt so much better when a guy did it? *Harder* she thought, and Will rubbed harder. *Softer* she thought and his touch eased off.

“How did – ?”

The sentence vanished as she came, crying and gasping with delight.

No sooner had her breathing eased than Will shifted her and sent a cascade of water onto the floor. He knelt in the tub at Addie’s feet. She sat out of the water on the short

back edge of the bath with her bottom resting on the rim and her shoulders pressed against the tiled wall. Addie brushed a slab of foam from his cheek and stared into his eyes. They looked darker than she'd ever seen them. Will put her hands on his shoulders. "Hold tight." Then he spread her legs and lifted them onto the sides of the tub.

When he kissed his way down her stomach and buried his face between her legs, Addie stopped breathing. *Oh God. Is he going to – yes, he is.* His tongue swept over her swollen folds. Addie thought it was a physical impossibility to keep coming and coming but the telltale tickle of muscles coming to life told her she was wrong. Her hands moved from his shoulders to his head and she threaded her fingers in his wet hair. Watching him do this turned her on like a light bulb, the sensation lighting her up like a starburst.

Tongue, teeth, nose, chin, lips—Will licked, fluttered, lapped, nipped at her until Addie trembled so hard she thought she'd slide into the bath. The feel of him just breathing on her there drew breathy cries from her throat. He wrapped one hand around her hip and the other joined his tongue. When he sucked her clit, Addie's head slammed back against the tiles. At the same time she pushed her pelvis toward him.

Will thrust two fingers gently inside her while he massaged her clit with his tongue. The rhythmic stimulation both calmed and excited. Addie's muscles tensed and relaxed.

"Oh God, could you just...keep doing that until I pass out."

She felt Will laugh, then his fingers tilted up inside her and Addie's eyes sprang open. She needed to wee. Now. *Shit.*

"Will." *Oh God, how can I tell him that?*

Addie wasn't sure he'd have heard anyway. His mouth kept working, his fingers massaging some place inside her that— *Oh, don't need to wee anymore.*

"If you stop, I'll kill you," Addie muttered.

This was something she'd never felt before, as though she was coming and coming and it wasn't going to stop as if she rode on a wave that never broke. Her muscles contracted then relaxed and each time the sensation began again, another set of muscles joined it. Addie could hear weird noises echoing around her. It couldn't be Will, his mouth was otherwise occupied. It must be her.

The waves grew larger and larger, her muscles tightening almost to the point of pain and Addie headed for what she knew was going to be the biggest orgasm she'd ever had. She stopped breathing as her whole body went taut.

Once, twice, three times. Oh can't count.

Stars? Addie saw constellations. She thought her head must have exploded because the rest of her body had fallen to pieces.

"Addie."

Oh God, could that happen again? Please? Her head was spinning.

"Addie!"

She didn't want to be greedy, but would Will object to being locked in her bedroom forever? Why couldn't she see properly?

"Addie. Breathe!"

Plunged under the water and Addie came up coughing, Will's anxious eyes looking down at her.

"Are you okay?"

"Wha...di...ho."

"Try again."

She nodded and tried to scoot back onto the edge of the tub. Will dragged her back with a laugh. "Not that. I meant try to talk again."

"I'm fine," she said.

Will rubbed his scalp. "I'm not. I'm going to bald if we can't figure out somewhere else for you to put your hands."

"Sorry."

"I'm teasing." He wrapped his arms and legs around her. "You screamed. I've never made anyone scream before. Well, only when I took the snake I'd found into the kitchen to show my mother. Though you screamed louder."

"Oh God."

"I think I found your G-spot."

"My Will spot. I'm really hungry now."

He laughed.

"But what—" Addie looked at his still erect cock.

"Let's eat first. Unlike women, men have a limited number of times they can come in one night. We'll get dressed and go down to the restaurant. We both need a rest."

After they'd dried each other, Addie used the towels to mop up the puddles from the bathroom floor. Her thighs ached, her arms ached. In fact, there wasn't much that didn't ache. She hadn't realized sex was so exhausting, nor so much fun. She watched as Will put on his boxers. Her eyes wandered over his long lean body. His hair was damp. His skin glowed. How could she be so lucky?

"Addie?"

"Huh?" Her head shot up.

Will smiled. "Aren't you going to get dressed?"

"Will you stay in the bathroom until I'm ready? I've got a surprise."

But the moment she emptied the carrier bags on the bed, she wasn't sure if she was brave enough. These were clothes she'd intended to keep in her room, clothes to practice being seductive, clothes to make *her* the one who was wanted. Did she even need them now?

When Will came out of the bathroom, he groaned.

“God, Addie, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

She teetered in red high heels that made her legs look as though they went on forever. A red tube dress clung to her body, only it didn't cling to much of it. Will didn't think there was anything underneath.

“Too much?” she asked, anxiety etched on her face.

“Yes, I'd like to rip it off right now.”

She giggled.

Will sighed. “It's no good. We can't go downstairs. I'll be arrested. Look at my boxers. That's not going to go away. We'll eat in here.”

Just as Will finished relaying the order, his mobile rang. He put the hotel phone down and glanced at the display on his mobile. His heart sank. Why hadn't he switched the thing off? He'd meant to and been distracted.

“It's okay, answer it.” Addie smiled at him.

It wasn't okay and he didn't want to answer it. Will made a snap decision. If he switched it off without speaking, then Addie would guess who it was. If he answered, he might be able to pretend it was Ed.

“Hi.” Will tried to keep his voice light and his face neutral.

Vee was crying. “Will, you have to come.”

“Why?”

“I need you.”

“Where are you?” Though he knew.

“At the house.”

“What's the matter?” he asked.

He looked up and saw Addie walk into the bathroom, shoulders down. She knew.

“What is it?” he asked, his eyes on the bathroom door.

“Will, I've done something stupid. I've taken tablets and I'm scared.”

His heart started to pound. “What have you taken?”

“I don't know. Some pills. Come back. Please.”

Fuck. Fuck. “Ring for an ambulance.” Will gathered his clothes.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Vee, if you've taken pills, ring for an ambulance.”

“What's the point? You don't care whether I'm alive or not. You don't want me anymore. Just forget it, Will. Forget I rang.”

The line went dead and Will groaned.

Addie sat on the edge of the tub, her heart being firmly squeezed on a juicer. The door opened and Will stood there, pale-faced and dressed.

"She didn't go back to London, then?" Addie asked, hoping she was wrong.

"No, I thought—"

"It's okay." Addie tried to look as though she meant it. "Go, it's all right."

"It's not all right," he muttered, "but I do have to go. It's an emergency."

Will moved toward Addie as though he was going to kiss her and she froze.

"I didn't get the chance to tell you everything," he said. "It's over between Vee and me, but she doesn't have anyone else to help her. The divorce didn't go through. I'm sorry, Addie."

His wife? Addie felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach, but she stood up straight, raised her head and looked right at him. "Bye, Will."

The moment the door closed, she went to stand in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom. What had she been thinking? Addie wanted to look sexy and she looked like a tart. He was married and she was a tart. Addie took off the shoes, dragged off the dress, screwed it into a ball and threw it down.

* * * * *

Will rushed back to Alwoodley, repeatedly calling Vee on his mobile. She didn't answer. He wasn't sure whether to ring the emergency services, hesitation borne of the possibility that Vee was fine and doing this to test him. A tiny part of him hoped he'd be too late and even as he thought that, he was disgusted with himself and pressed his foot harder on the accelerator.

By the time he pulled onto the drive, Will was wet through with sweat. He ran into the house, calling her name, and found her throwing up in the bathroom. She looked terrible, her skin waxen, her hair lank and stringy over her face.

"What have you taken?"

"It doesn't matter. It's gone now." Vee heaved again, leaving a thin trail of vomit hanging from her mouth.

Will tried to be mad with her, but he felt sorry for her. He dropped down at her side and rubbed her back. How had it all come to this? They'd met at a party and Will hadn't been able to believe a gorgeous French woman wanted to spend the evening talking to him. They seemed to have so much in common, and by the time Will found out she changed her interests like a child playing with toys, it didn't matter because he was hooked. Vee's all-encompassing need for him flattered when it should have alarmed. But the first few years were good ones. Will thought she'd been faithful then.

"Vee, you need to go to hospital."

"I don't want to. You can look after me." She flushed the toilet.

Will recoiled. Was this a trick? "You should see a doctor. You might need your stomach pumped." He bit back the word "again".

"I think I've managed that on my own."

She pulled herself up and bent over the wash basin, splashing cold water on her face. Will held out a towel.

"You don't care about me," Vee said, her voice flat.

Will gritted his teeth. Everything he'd ever done was because he cared about her. Even the divorce. He only wanted her to be happy. "You know that's not true. I'm here, aren't I?"

"But you don't love me anymore." She burst into tears. "Nobody loves me."

It was like listening to a defective CD.

"Vee, that's not true."

"My parents don't care about me and neither do you."

"Of course I care about you." Though he wasn't sure her parents did, which made his contribution to Vee's well-being even more important.

"Don't leave me," she wailed.

"No, I won't leave you."

She moved toward him and Will put his arms around her, letting her sob into his chest. He wondered if Addie was crying too. He should have explained, said more than that crap about the divorce not coming though. He hadn't wanted to tell her he was still married. Whilst the mess he was in was mostly Vee's making, it was not all her fault. He'd let things slide into this and now he had to sort it out.

Once he got Vee into the shower, Will went downstairs. Since she'd asked for something to eat, he guessed she felt better. He ordered a Chinese takeout. Then he went into the garage so she wouldn't hear and rang the Marriott. There was no reply from Addie's room. They said she hadn't checked out, but that didn't mean she was still there. How had she got home? God, he hadn't thought.

Should he have handled this differently? He didn't want Addie to think he had this albatross of a wife hanging round his neck, even if it was true. He should have left Addie alone. In a few weeks time, he'd be going back to London and she'd be up here. She deserved better than that. He thought about her face when she'd stood in front of him in that tight red dress and those shoes. She'd wanted to look sexy and she did. And he'd left her. Will groaned.

Will watched Vee eat, but he didn't touch the food he'd ordered for himself.

"Try some of my duck," she said.

He couldn't bring himself to talk to her because he was seething with fury. She was behaving as though nothing was the matter. An attempted suicide and now she tucked

into a Chinese takeaway? Vee stuck a fork into his noodles and speared one of the few king prawns. Will bristled.

"You remember the Chinese meal we had in La Rochelle, when you were certain we were eating cat?" Vee smiled.

When Will didn't say anything, Vee started to sniff.

"I'm sorry if I ruined your evening. Were you with someone? I'm sorry, Will. I was frightened. I didn't know who else to call."

"You were supposed to be moving out."

She put down her fork and began to cry. "I know you don't want me here, but I think what we have is worth fighting for."

He knew then that this was a setup. Inconvenience aside, he'd change the number of his mobile.

"Did you really take a load of tablets?"

Vee stiffened. "You think I'm lying?"

Yeah, he did, but he was sure she wouldn't admit it. She knew what she was doing, exactly how to play him. Will reckoned she'd taken enough to make herself sick, but not enough to do any real damage except to him.

"I changed my mind," she said. "I didn't want to die."

Will looked at her as she picked her way through his noodles. Tears over, appetite back. She was beautiful, but the fun and adventure he'd once felt from being with her had disappeared. Life with Vee was dull, and if it was exciting, it was for the wrong reason, like tonight.

"What went wrong, Will?" She looked up at him with her huge eyes and he felt nothing but sadness.

"You cheated on me."

"Jake was a mistake," Vee said in a little voice.

"How do you figure that out? A mistake because I walked in on you? A mistake because he was no good in bed? A mistake because he was only interested in a quick fuck and you wanted more?"

"You didn't believe me about Ed and it made me want to hurt you. Only it was a mistake because I realized how much I loved you."

Will pushed his plate away. "I don't want you anymore, Vee. You shouldn't have told the *notaire* we'd changed our minds. I haven't."

She stopped eating. "Please let's try again." Her lip quivered.

"Vee, it's too late. I haven't the energy to rekindle a fire that hasn't just gone out, but been obliterated by a deluge of water."

"So, there is someone else."

It didn't escape his attention that the pathetic note in her voice had vanished.

"Yes." Will hoped that was true.

Chapter Nineteen

Addie walked into Magelan's on Monday morning with a smile in place, but as she passed Julie, the courage she'd conjured up while walking through the parking lot evaporated from the tips of her fingers. She detoured via the visitor's toilets to throw up. When she came out of the cubicle, Daisy stood by the wash basins.

"I hope you're not pregnant," she said.

"Nervous stomach."

"What are you nervous about? Being pregnant?"

"Very funny, Daisy."

Addie had thought about getting Lisa to ring and say she was ill, but if she didn't face Will that day, then she'd have to face him the next.

"Addie, sorry about that press release. I know I should have said it was me."

"Yeah, you should, Daisy. I got into a lot of trouble."

"I wouldn't have let them sack you. I was going to tell Ed it was me when we went out on our date, but the moment was never right."

"Did you have a good time?"

Daisy blushed. "Really good. He's a great dancer and he's so funny, but he's not interested in a relationship. He just wanted company. Anyway, he'll be gone in a few weeks."

Me too, Addie thought.

When she reached her desk, it was piled with files and correspondence. Plenty to keep her busy.

"Morning, Addie," Joe called across the partition.

"Morning, Joe. Anything exciting happen in my absence? Pay rise of astronomic proportions, world hunger solved, Genghis left us to strike terror into the heart of the government?"

He laughed. "The big guns have already introduced changes. The sales team are off on a corporate kissing session next week. I expect that includes you."

Since Addie wasn't going to be working for Magelan's after Christmas, she doubted it.

Will and Ed had been busy. The corporate hospitality side of Booth's was being given to London. The accompanied coach journeys were to end because it wasn't cost-effective to have essential staff members away from the office eating fish and chips and flying kites. Well, it hadn't quite said that. The invoicing to London. The foreign paperwork to London. Addie wondered what would be left.

She was on the list to attend the course in Shropshire, along with Genghis, Graham, Charlotte and Beth. A coach would collect them from the office on Sunday afternoon. They'd stay at the Richmond Manor Hotel with its award-winning wellness spa, championship golf course and indoor and outdoor heated pools. Back to Leeds on Wednesday morning. They were promised a life-changing experience to transform them into highly energized sales facilitators who wouldn't take no for an answer. Well, Addie was saying no. She wasn't going.

Fifteen new messages in her inbox, several from Will that Addie had clicked on with a nervous finger. None were personal.

"No more wagging off out of the office for you, then?" Graham called.

"Does that mean you'll actually be here every day until 5:30, Graham?"

He glared at her. If Addie had been intending to stay on, losing the coach trips would have been disappointing, but she only had the Lincoln visit booked before Christmas.

Charlotte perched her pert bottom on the edge of Addie's desk. "I need your money for the Christmas party."

"Not sure I can go anymore."

"You still have to pay. We got the special deal because of the numbers that said they'd go, so it's not fair if you drop out."

Addie thought how nice if Charlotte had said, "You must come, Addie, it wouldn't be the same without you." Although thinking about it, if she had, Addie would have dropped dead from shock. She wrote out a check.

"I managed to get Will and Ed to come," Charlotte said, whisking the slip away.

That settled it, Addie wouldn't be going.

As soon as Addie saw Will, she felt as though he'd thrown out a line and she'd swallowed the hook. She turned away, but her eyes always wandered back in his direction. She watched him walking, talking, working. But whenever he came to her end of the office, Addie fled to the Ladies'.

"Again?" Graham asked.

"Bladder infection," Addie whispered.

When the coast was clear, she slunk back to her desk and the phone rang. Some sixth sense told her it was Will.

"When everyone goes to lunch, come to my office, please. We need to talk."

Addie put down the receiver without speaking. Everyone knew what "We need to talk" meant. It was never "we need to talk about where we're going on holiday" or "we need to talk about moving in together". He wanted to tell her it was over. Of course it was. What was there to talk about? Addie wished she had enough money to book a cheap flight, walk out and not look back. She wished she was brave and adventurous, but she was a coward.

When she stepped into Will's office, all she saw in his face was guilt. There was no kindness, no desire, just regret.

"Close the door, Addie."

Even his voice sounded sad. She pushed the door shut and turned round.

"I owe you an apology," Will said. He came from behind the desk and stepped toward her.

"No, it's fine." *Yes, you bloody well do*, Addie's heart screamed.

"I signed the divorce papers months ago. I thought that was the end of it."

Addie stood motionless. Did he think that made a difference? He ran when Vee whistled.

"It appears...technically...we're still married. I've told her it's over, but she's having difficulty letting go. Vee relies on me too much. She doesn't get on with her parents and I don't want—"

"It's all right." Addie couldn't listen to this. Nothing about her, all him and Vee. She was expecting him to go on to say he hoped Addie would one day find the right guy, get married and have beautiful babies, two dogs and a goldfish. "We both got carried away. Forget it." She forced herself to smile.

"Really?" Will asked.

She saw the confusion on his face and was glad.

"Yes," Addie lied. *The bastard, how can he believe me?* "I know it's awkward. I'll do my best to keep out of your way before..." Her voice began to crack and she launched into a coughing fit to disguise the sound. "Before I start my new job."

"You've got another job?"

"Yes. I'm going to New Zealand to crew on a yacht. I'd planned to go in February, but I thought I'd have a look round Australia first. Graham's made it sound so appealing." *Not. Flies, flies and more flies* from what she could make out, not to mention the snakes and the spiders. "Is there anything else because I'm busy?"

She scuttled out of his office before he could answer and collided with Ed.

"Sorry," she muttered and kept her head down so he couldn't see the tears in her eyes. Another trip to the Ladies'.

Ed watched Addie's back and wondered what Will had done now. Nothing good. Ed had spent the weekend in London because the idea of spending time in Vee's company appealed about as much as chewing maggots. He'd hoped by the time he arrived back, Vee would have gone, but instead he'd found her curled on the couch with her feet on *his* coffee table, eating *his* salt and vinegar crisps, glued to some god-awful reality TV program with z-list celebrities. Will had been mating with his laptop in the dining room. Ed went straight to bed. All was not rosy in the Garden of Leeds, but he wondered if it was worth introducing a snake of his own.

He popped his head into Will's office. "Want to come to the pub?"

"No. How did you get on this morning at Enerchex?"

Ed went in and closed the door.

"Fine. It's all straightforward, unlike your personal life. Vee doesn't appear to have evaporated over the weekend. Is it too much to hope she'll have gone by the time I get back tonight?"

Will sighed and looked up from his computer. "I was going to get rid of her. I intended to get rid of her, but on Saturday night, while I was with Addie, Vee took a load of pills."

Ed sat down. "Christ, not again."

"She threw them up."

Ed saw the dark circles under Will's eyes.

"Fuck it, Will, lose her. She's destroying you."

"How can I now? You know what she's like."

"Yeah, I do. That's why you need to send her back to London."

Will pushed his fingers through his hair. "She won't give up this temporary job. The best I'm going to manage is finding her somewhere else to live."

"Then do that. How are you going to see Addie if Vee's hanging around?"

"I won't...be seeing Addie." Will's voice was flat.

"Why?"

"Ed, leave it. I fucked up. It's over. It hardly started."

Ed didn't agree with him. Addie was exactly what Will needed, only there was something that didn't sit right about that.

"I like Addie," Ed said. "She's funny. She's a great cook."

"Shut up, Ed."

"Don't you think her eyes are incredible?"

Ed saw his brother's nostrils flare.

"If you're not interested, I am. I take it you've no problem with that?"

Will slammed his drawer shut with such force his phone bounced off the desk. Ed smiled as he walked out. He went straight to Addie and pulled over a chair. Everyone had gone for lunch.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Busy."

She attacked her keyboard like a rabid chicken. Ed had a feeling she was hitting random keys.

"Busy tonight?"

"Yes. Lap dancing."

"Can I come?"

"No."

"How about tomorrow night?"

"Pole dancing."

"Wednesday?" Ed tried.

"Finn dancing."

"You know I could get the wrong idea here. I like you. Don't you like me?"

Addie typed faster. "Did you like Daisy? And Charlotte? What about Beth? Have you asked her out yet? Are you working your way through the whole office? Am I last on the list? Do you think I'll be hurt if you don't include me?"

To Ed's horror, he saw tears falling down Addie's cheeks. She brushed them away with the back of her hand.

"Sorry," she muttered, "but you look like a velociraptor, rather like your brother."

She fled to the Ladies'.

Ed sighed. This was going to take some thought.

Chapter Twenty

When Addie got to work the next morning, she found Ed at her desk.

“Good morning. Say hello to your shadow,” he said and rolled a chair in her direction.

Addie sat down, but as she reached for her phone, he hooked her chair with his foot and pulled her round to face him. “Hey, be nice, we’re going to be spending time together.”

“I’m leaving at Christmas,” Addie said.

“I’m not sitting with you that long.”

She refused to smile.

“Not that I wouldn’t want to,” he added. “Anyway, didn’t Will rip up your resignation?”

Addie tensed her shoulders. “He’d better not have.”

Ed softened his voice. “You don’t need to leave. We’ll be gone in a couple of weeks. You’ll never see us again.”

“Why should I quit because of you? I’m going to New Zealand to crew on a yacht.”

Ed’s eyes opened wide. Addie was beginning to believe it herself now. If Ed hadn’t been there, she’d Google to see what she could find, ignoring the fact that she couldn’t afford the airfare to New Zealand, had never been on a yacht and would probably be as much use as a flat battery.

Before Ed could say anything else to piss her off, Addie reached for her phone and the Lincoln file.

“Hello, Mr. Prentiss?...Good morning. This is Addie Winter from Magelan’s...Yes, formerly Booth’s...yes.” She glanced at Ed. “It is a shame the way smaller independent companies are consumed by the large ones. Now, I’m ringing in connection with your trip to Lincoln tomorrow...No, no. It’s fine...No, Mr. Prentiss, it’s not being cancelled... Yes, I know you’re looking forward to it. The coach will be there at eight. It’s just that I won’t be accompanying you.”

Addie paused while he raged. She held the phone a little way away from her ear.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Prentiss. I know the price included a guide, but it’s no longer company policy for our tours to take a member of staff in addition to the driver...yes, of course you can speak to a manager. I’ll hand you to Mr. Mansell.” She gave the phone to Ed.

Several minutes later, he put it down again.

“You’ll be going to Lincoln tomorrow,” he said.

"It's no longer part of my job." Addie handed him Will's memo.

"Change of plan." Ed ripped the sheet of paper in half.

"Addie, I need a hand," came a plaintive voice.

Addie looked up to see Charlotte the Harlot waving her arms by the photocopier. Addie got up and Ed followed. She stared at him. "I'll only be a minute."

He smiled. "We'll get a cup of coffee on the way back."

Charlotte draped herself over the machine as Ed and Addie approached.

"The copier resisting your charms again?" Addie asked.

Charlotte nodded and fluttered her eyelashes at Ed.

Addie banged the metal casing hard on the left side, kned a point on the lower right and pressed the copier on the upper left at the same time. The machine purred and disgorged a copy.

"Wow, impressive." Ed raised his eyebrows. "A woman with the magic touch."

"Would you like a coffee, Ed?" Charlotte asked.

"You're an angel. Get Addie one too, would you?"

As the Harlot walked past with a fixed smile on her face, Addie sighed. "I'm not going to be able to drink it. She has a store of cyanide for rivals."

"Are you a rival?"

Addie blushed. "You made her think I was." She hurried back to her desk, grabbed the phone again and pressed in a number she knew by heart.

"Mrs. Wilberforce? It's Addie Winter from Magelan's. Sorry I didn't get back to you yesterday. I rang several times, but didn't manage to catch you in... Oh, were you? I'm sorry to hear that." Addie winced. She didn't need those sort of medical details. "Yes, that's why I'm ringing." Addie glanced at Ed, who stared at her intently. "I'm sorry you feel we spoilt your trip... I can assure you we were discussing important company business."

She tried hard not to blush again, but could feel the heat creeping onto her face. "No, I'm sorry, Mrs. Wilberforce, I don't feel a refund is in order. We can't leave coaches unlocked in case people wish to return early. You'd have been very upset if your belongings had been stolen." Her shoulders slumped. "Yes, of course you can speak to someone more senior than me." Addie saw Ed glaring. "Offer her a half-price seat on the trip to Lincoln tomorrow," she whispered.

When Ed banged the phone down, he kept his hand on the receiver. "No more of those, please."

Charlotte put two coffees on the desk.

"You're a lifesaver." Ed smiled at her.

As Charlotte walked away, she wiggled her bottom. Addie couldn't believe it, but when she looked at Ed, he was looking at her and not Charlotte. He rolled his chair a little nearer.

"So, what's your favorite food?" Ed asked.

"And this is relevant, how?"

"Humor me."

"Bread."

"I was thinking in terms of Chinese, Thai, Italian..."

"Patagonian."

He laughed. "Most annoying habit?"

"Saying sorry." *Damn, that slipped out.*

"Maybe it's better than not saying sorry at all." He paused. "What were you and Will doing on the coach?"

Addie's stomach flipped. "Talking."

"He's an idiot," Ed said.

"A married idiot," Addie whispered.

"I bet he didn't tell you everything."

"I don't want to know." *Yes, she did.*

"Vee tried to kill herself on Saturday night. Overdose. She's done it before."

Addie gasped. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, but Will's not."

He bent his head to her ear. "I can't prove it, but it's likely Vee did nothing more than drink a glass of salt water. She's a fucking vampire and she'll suck on Will until there's nothing left. He needs help to get away from her. I need help to get away from her. Give Will another chance, please. He's been a wreck for the last couple of years. He doesn't know what he's doing anymore, not with women."

"Why would she try to kill herself?" Addie asked.

"She doesn't want him to leave her."

"How can I compete with that?"

"If you care about Will, you'll try."

Addie sighed. "What do you want me to do, Ed? Hang around fluttering my eyelashes, wiggling my backside like the Harlot? He has to sort himself out. I can't do that for him."

"I just want you to give him a chance, Addie. Please."

"I did, but I can't save him. He has to save himself."

Ed watched Addie and wondered if he wanted her to give Will another chance. He'd thought he did but now he wasn't so sure.

She was a gem on the phone as a telemarketer, making notes against the person's name, finding a variety of topics to talk about and by the end of the call was usually on first name terms. Almost everyone asked for a brochure. Ed began to think it would be

rather pleasant to go on a coach trip to Skegness, and drop in for a game of Bingo before trying that cozy little pub just off the... What the hell was he thinking?

"Brilliant sales pitch," he said.

"We have one seat left on our trip to Prague next February. We have five hen parties signed up. Would you like to give me your credit card number?"

"Put me down for a seat," Ed said.

"Sold. Perhaps I should have told you their average age is sixty-two."

He groaned. "So what do you do with your list now?"

"Pass it to Graham. Once the brochures have been sent out, he follows up."

"And gets the credit?"

Addie shrugged. "This is teamwork. We all get the credit." She smiled. "Though some get more credit than others."

"Addie." The Harlot shimmied over, a string of fluffy white tinsel wrapped around her neck like a feather boa. "Delia said we can do the Christmas decorations this lunchtime. You can reach higher than the rest of us."

"Been reading my CV?" Addie said.

"Do you want me to help?" Ed asked.

"Ooh, no, you're far too...too..." Charlotte stumbled to a halt.

"Busy," Will snapped, coming up behind her.

"We only do it in the lunch hour," Charlotte said.

"So long as everyone doesn't decide now Christmas has arrived, they can halve the amount of work they're supposed to be doing." Will's glare sent the Harlot into a fast retreat. "Ed, a word."

* * * * *

At midday, the guys from the garage dragged in three large boxes of Christmas decorations. When Will and Ed went off in Will's car, Delia and Graham nipped out to buy a real tree for the reception. Since they said they'd be gone an hour and the store was only a mile away, Addie guessed they'd be making a detour. Beth put a Christmas CD in her computer and cranked up the volume so they wouldn't hear the phones. It was Christmas.

This time last year Addie had been working in one of the travel agencies and the shop's token acknowledgement of the approaching festive season had been a two-foot, talking Santa that burst into life when anyone walked by. But the batteries were on the blink, and the drunken, almost sleazy nature of the exhortation to have a merry Christmas made Addie shudder every time she heard it.

Addie looked round at the chaos. Beth and Daisy were dancing. Joe had lined up mince pies on his desk in some sort of taste challenge and there were fairy lights all

over the floor. The head office clearly did Christmas in a spiritual, understated way. Daisy danced over to Addie with a Santa hat.

"It's compulsory," Daisy said.

Addie grabbed a set of antlers. "I'll be Rudolph."

Everyone was roped in to decorate. Bottles of wine emerged from bottom drawers. Garlands were fastened across the room, tinsel of every color and variety wrapped round each computer, polystyrene snowmen placed on every work surface and sprigs of plastic mistletoe strategically positioned at crossing points. The biggest clump hung in a space between Charlotte and Beth, giving them an equal opportunity to pounce.

Addie had never seen so many fairy lights in one room. The National Grid had probably hiccupped when Beth switched them on. They ran around the windows, partitions, doors and along skirting boards. Anything that didn't move had been adorned, even the wastepaper baskets. In the space of forty minutes the office had been transformed into a tacky Santa's grotto.

Genghis and Graham came back with the real tree and Addie was ordered to reception to decorate it.

"Only silver and blue. Start at the top. Don't put a silver bauble next to a blue one. Space them evenly. Don't break them." Genghis snapped orders like a whip.

Even after Addie had put the decorations on, Genghis wanted several repositioned and although Addie had been horrified at the gaudy excesses of the main room, she was equally depressed by the lack of heart in Genghis' artistic creation. Graham appeared clutching four glasses of wine and plonked them on the reception desk.

"That looks great, Delia," he said. "You're so talented."

"With a sucking ability like that, you should look for a job with Dyson," Addie muttered.

"Lights on, Addie," Genghis said.

Addie crawled round the back, trying not to entangle her antlers and flicked the switch.

Genghis swore. "Damn. One set's not working."

There were three plugs in a gang socket and after a couple of moments, Addie managed to identify the broken set. When she got up Genghis and Graham had drunk their wine, Julie was sipping a glass and the other had disappeared. Had she imagined the fourth?

"Sort it out, Addie," Genghis said. "Take that set off and find another one."

Addie looked at the tree. All the baubles had been hung after the lights, so taking a set off would be awkward. She retreated to the back to unravel the cord from the bottom and a man-eating spider dropped onto her hand. Addie screamed and sprang up into the tree, spearing it with her antlers. As the tree began to topple, she tried to catch it, but found herself falling with it. A torrent of water from the tree-holder cascaded everywhere.

“Shit,” someone yelled.

As Addie and the tree crashed to the floor, she found her face inches from Will’s. He lay on his back with the tree in his arms and Addie on top of the tree, baubles bouncing all around them. There was a prickly fir branch between them, so it appeared as if he’d grown a luxurious green moustache. She had an urge to giggle.

“What the hell are you doing?” Will shouted.

The urge disappeared. “I’m sorry.”

Ed helped her up and adjusted her antlers. He was laughing. Will threw the tree aside and got to his feet, wet through, his suit covered in pine needles.

“I’ll pay to have it cleaned,” Addie said. “I’m sorry, but there was this huge spider and I’m fright...”

Her voice trailed off as she took in his clenched jaw.

“You’re such a complete klutz.”

“I said I was sorry.” Addie stood her ground. “Just because you can’t sort your life out, there’s no need to take it out on me.”

The moment that left her mouth, she wanted it back. Will stared at her for a long moment, then stormed off.

Chapter Twenty-One

Out of the corner of her eye, Addie saw Ed heading in her direction.

"Still here, Miss Grinch?" he asked. "You didn't fancy wrecking Satan's grotto as well?" He gestured to the winter wonderland around them.

"What and piss off everyone else?"

"You don't piss me off. Want to come and find a place that sells Patagonian food?" He sat on Graham's chair and rolled it over.

"No, thanks," Addie murmured.

"Don't like no. Much prefer its twin. Come on, say yes."

"I'm supposed to be catching up on the work I should have done while I was putting that tree back together."

"I won't tell." Ed swung her chair round. "You've done enough work. Talk to me."

She sighed. "What about?"

"Do you like kids?"

"Only with tomato ketchup."

Ed smiled. "I'd like my own football team."

"Not if you had to give birth to them." She began to tidy her desk. "The last time I had to baby-sit, my seven-year-old niece put her goldfish down the loo so he could go for a swim. Then her brother decided to take a leak in the fridge, in case the fish was still in the U-bend."

Ed laughed. "I suppose you were you a perfect child?"

"God no, I was awful. My parents had their hands full with three boys and I did everything I could to get their attention. I gave up doing as I was told and turned to the dark side. My mother has a long list of things I did to annoy her, including giving the guinea pig Ex-Lax. My most creative crime was shaving our long-suffering cat and spraying it with black dots because I wanted a Dalmatian puppy."

"Did it work?"

"No, Hector still wouldn't fetch the ball."

"I meant did you get more attention?"

Addie smiled and shook her head. "I thought it was because I was a girl, so I tried to be more like my brothers. I climbed trees, made dens and stayed out when it got dark. I stole their beer and got drunk, I smoked their cigarettes and made myself sick. My brothers just about tolerated me, so long as I stayed a hundred meters away."

"Sounds a bit like me and Will. He was the responsible, bossy older brother and I was always in trouble. Will looked out for me, though. He ended up taking the blame when he shouldn't have, particularly when I pushed our parents too far. One time, I backed the car out of the garage straight over Dad's golf clubs. I spent the day crying because I knew I'd have to pay for them and miss the school ski trip and then Will told Dad he'd done it. He still does that sometimes, assumes responsibility when he doesn't need to."

Addie got the message. But while Vee was his wife, she was Will's responsibility.

"My brothers never took the fall for me. They always tried to make sure I got the blame. Mind you, it was nearly always my fault."

"You look so sweet, I can't believe it."

"Nope, I'm wild and bad." She didn't want to be sweet. She was fed up of saying sorry, fed up of being picked on. "Last year I got a piercing," she blurted out, then realized how pathetic it sounded. It had been a miracle she'd gone through with it.

Ed raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you little devil. What have you got pierced?"

He rolled his chair nearer. Addie's hand settled over her stomach and she looked at him. His eyes glittered with amusement.

"Show me. A wild, bad woman would show me."

Addie pulled up the bottom of her shirt. Ed's hand moved toward the silver bar at her navel, his fingers feathered her stomach and her muscles twitched. He pulled back at the same time as Addie yanked down her top. Will stood feet away, staring at them. He opened his mouth, shut it, then turned and walked off.

"Oh, fuck it." Ed clenched his fists. "Stay there while I talk to him."

Addie didn't want to stay near either of them. Why had she said all that to Ed? Was it part of his seduction technique, being easy to talk to?

"It's not what you think," Ed explained in Will's office.

"What do I think? Why should I care?" Will's eyes were blank.

"We were just chatting."

"With your hands on her stomach?"

Ed flinched. "I wasn't touching her like that."

"I didn't think she was your type."

"She's not." Although he didn't think that was true.

"You mean she hasn't said yes yet? Face it, Ed, you might say you go for designer babes with names like India, Africa and Asia, but since we've been in Leeds you've been happy to fuck Yorkshire chicks who like your accent."

Ed snapped straight into defense mode. "No, I—"

"Does it ever occur to you not to sleep with every woman you talk to?"

Ed clenched his jaw. "I don't."

"Leave Addie alone," Will said.

"I'm being friendly."

Will stepped right up to him. "Don't be."

"Maybe you should leave her alone. She won't get on with her life while you keep picking her up and dropping her."

"You mean she won't sleep with you?" Will retorted.

"You don't want her, but you don't want anyone else to have her?" Ed shook his head. "How is that fair?"

"You're not just anyone, are you, Ed? You've slept with more women than I've even met. Leave Addie alone. She'll get hurt."

Ed struggled to rein in his anger. "Why would you think I'd hurt her?"

"Look at your history. Fine when it's a one-night stand, but anything more and there's trouble. Do I need to go through the names? Susie? Ariel?"

They hurt me, Ed wanted to shout.

"You've already been through everything in this office in a short skirt."

"Perhaps I'm ready for a more meaningful relationship."

Will laughed. "Like you're ready to sell your Star Wars collection on eBay?"

"You're a hypocrite," Ed said. "You've already hurt her, so don't fucking well tell me what to do. I'm not the one with a walking nightmare of a wife hanging onto my dick."

Addie decided not to wait, but slip away while they were arguing. At least she was going to Lincoln tomorrow and wouldn't have to see either of them until Monday. No, later than that, it would be the following Monday because the training event she was not going to attend was next week, and the following week would be her last. She slipped on her coat and fastened the buttons.

"Addie, a word," Will shouted as she crept out.

Bloody hell, Addie thought. He must be able to see through walls. Ed stormed past her in the other direction, grim-faced. He slammed the door so hard Delia's fish started to zoom in rapid circles round their tank.

When Addie poked her head into Will's office, he was pacing around like a pissed-off tiger, but when he turned and saw her, he froze.

"Are you really going sailing in New Zealand?"

"Why?"

He took two steps toward her. "Because it's the other side of the world, it's dangerous and I don't want you to go."

Addie's heart swelled like a sponge. Her willpower had turned tail and bolted the moment she walked into his office. Will pushed the door closed behind her.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I keep fucking this up," he whispered.

He reached out to touch her cheek with his fingers.

"Don't." Addie turned away. She couldn't keep doing this. It hurt too much.

"You don't mean that. You feel the same way as me, I know you do."

Will pushed aside the collar of her coat and ran his thumb inside the neck of her shirt. Heat flooded her body. *You're married*, she wanted to scream, but the words wouldn't come out of her mouth. His fingers unfastened her coat.

"I can't bear not to touch you. I've spent every moment since I last touched you, thinking about touching you again."

He flicked off the light switch behind her head and dragged her further into the room. The coat fell from her shoulders as he pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry I had to leave you on Saturday. I called. I drove back to the Marriott on Sunday morning, and you'd gone. I made them refund your credit card for the meal."

She could have kissed him for that alone. His hands dropped to her waist, his fingers slipping over her bare skin. Will touched the metal at her navel.

"I wanted to kill Ed," he whispered.

He lifted her arm, kissed her wrist, then her neck, her mouth.

He wanted her. She wanted him. Yet Addie kept wondering what he'd do if the phone rang again and Vee said she needed him. Then the feeling of his mouth on her neck filled her head, and for a moment she stopped thinking.

"Don't go to New Zealand."

Perversely she wanted to tell him she *was* going to New Zealand, but his lips found hers and she couldn't speak. His tongue surged into her mouth. He kissed her so deeply, the words slipped away around her. She knew she ought to walk away, that the chances were he'd let her down again. She couldn't. She wouldn't.

Will rested his head against hers, whispered in her ear. "I want to kiss you all the time. I want to kiss you when you're careering round the office banging into everything. I want to kiss you when you're bullying the photocopier. I wanted to kiss you when you knocked over the Christmas tree."

"I thought you were angry."

"Only with myself. I knew it wasn't your fault. None of this is your fault. We have a chance for something here, Addie. I don't want to let you go."

He was the first man, the only man, to want her. She knew this was too quick, that there were still questions unanswered but she couldn't think straight. Even as she told herself not to, she reached for the knot in his tie and undid it. Her fingers unfastened the buttons on his shirt, pulling the ends out of his trousers. Addie felt compelled to touch him. She put her hands on him and ran her palms over his chest to his stomach. His skin rippled under her fingers.

Will pressed his forehead against hers. His fingers fumbled with the buttons on her blouse as he backed her against the wall. Their lips fused and Addie could feel him

hard against her as he rolled his hips into hers. She gasped as his mouth moved down her neck. His hands slid over her breasts, tugging them out of her bra. Will groaned as she struggled with the button and then the zip on his fly and finally spread open the edges of his trousers.

“God, Addie, you’re driving me wild.”

Taking her hand, he pulled her to his desk, turning her so she was pressed against the wood. His hands slid up her thighs, pushed her skirt to her waist, then lifted her so she perched on the edge of the desk. Will reached and shoved everything onto the floor before he lowered Addie back.

They both blinked hard when the light went on. Ed switched it off again.

“Did you want something?” Will tried to shield Addie’s half-naked body.

“I’ve left my car keys on the desk.”

“I’ll bring them out.”

“Right.” The door closed.

“Did he know what we were doing?” Addie whispered.

“If he didn’t, all those sex ed. lessons at school were wasted.”

Will pulled away from her. He groaned when Addie sat up and pulled her bra and blouse back into place. He looked around for Ed’s keys and found them on the floor.

“Don’t move.”

He zipped up his trousers and went out of the office.

“Don’t forget you’re supposed to be doing something tonight,” Addie heard Ed say. “A removal job.”

Addie wondered what Ed meant. Moving furniture? When Will came back in, she had her blouse fastened and was pulling on her coat. He sighed and finished putting the buttons in their holes.

“This is not the right place,” he said.

Maybe not the right time, Addie thought.

Will took her hand, lifted it to his mouth and kissed her fingers. “Can we fly your kite in Lincoln tomorrow?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Addie got home, Lisa was out. The telephone beeped to say there was a message and as she picked it up, it rang.

"Hi, Trouble, this is your favorite brother speaking."

It was Finn. "Hello, Hugh."

"Very funny. Forgotten you're supposed to be here in ten minutes?"

Addie cringed. "Oh shit. I'm on my way. I had to work late."

"I'll tell Mum."

"Thanks, Finn. Shall I bring popcorn?"

He chuckled. "You do know you're going to hell?"

This was one visit to her mother's Addie couldn't wriggle out of. It was a good thing Finn had called to remind her. It was the first anniversary of their father's death. Addie felt guilty she'd forgotten. Her dad had been strict with her, more so than with her brothers. It made her feel that he didn't love her. He always backed his wife, no matter what. Always two against one.

Their mother wanted all four of them there this evening so they could watch the video of the scattering of the ashes. The first time any of them had seen it. Addie was looking forward to this about as much as she'd enjoy poking out her eyes with a fork.

* * * * *

Her mother tapped her watch as Addie stepped forward and tried to give her a kiss. Joan shrugged her off as if she were a piece of rancid meat.

"Sorry. I got held up at work."

She took off her coat and hung it in the hall. Her brothers were already in the living room. Finn coughed when Addie walked in. When she glanced at him, he did something weird with his eyes.

"What did you say you were doing at work?" David asked and laughed.

"What's so funny?" Addie asked.

Her mother stepped forward and tugged at her blouse. Addie looked down, realized the buttons were done up wrong and felt her face flush. Will's fault. He'd fastened them.

"I splashed water on it and took it off to dry with the hand drier. I must have missed a button." Addie wondered why she had to explain at all.

"You're a complete disgrace," her mother said. "I take it you've already eaten."

"Yes." Addie's stomach rumbled.

"Good. Start the video, David."

Addie squeezed in next to Finn, who to her astonishment put his arm around her and gave her a hug. She snuggled up against him.

"God, Addie. What the hell were you doing with the camcorder? It's like being on a fairground ride. If we watch this we'll all want to throw up." David whizzed forward.

They'd taken it in turns to do the filming. Addie went first, showing the surrounding area, but she'd moved the camera as though she'd been taking photographs and made it appear as if they were on a rocky sea.

"Look there's the stream that you used to play in when you were boys," Joan said. "Hours you used to spend, trying to dam it with stones and twigs."

"It worked better when we made Addie lie in it," Hugh said and they all laughed, even Addie.

She watched as the camera panned round the Millennium Wood, a conservation site outside Sheffield, where they'd once lived and where her father wanted his ashes scattered. His remains had been placed at the foot of five trees. One for each member of the family he'd left behind. Addie wondered if her tree was still alive.

They went quiet when the camera caught them taking turns to hold the red urn. Her mum began to cry and David reached for her hand. Addie watched as they each said a few words about their dad before tipping the gravelly remains into the hole where their tree was part-planted. Finn talked of how his father had helped him learn to drive a car. Hugh recalled their best round of golf. David picked trials bike riding. He'd won competitions when he was younger.

Addie's heart was sinking fast because she knew what was coming. She'd intended to speak about her father's Sunday breakfast with fried mushrooms, her absolute favorite, but as her brothers had spoken, she'd realized it wasn't special to her because he cooked the same for all of them. When the urn was in her hands, she'd just gulped, "Bye, Dad."

That was bad enough, but she hadn't realized what she'd done next. In upending the gray remains, ash swirled back at her. Addie watched herself pulling a disgusted face and rubbing her dusty hands on her coat. Fuckwit David had zoomed in on her as she brushed her father away. A few moments later the screen went blank. Complete silence, except for her mother, crying.

Finn squeezed Addie's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mum," Addie said. "I didn't—"

"I'd like you to go home now, Adelina."

Addie said nothing. She cast a despairing look at Finn and got up.

"I'll take you," David said.

"No, you won't. I want you here," his mother said through her sniffles.

"I'll take Addie home," Finn said.

"I want you here, too."

"I'll come back, but I'm taking Addie home," Finn repeated.

Addie bit the inside of her mouth to stop herself crying. She walked into the hall, picked up her coat – the same bloody one she'd worn at the scattering of the ashes, and put it on.

"Are you all right?" Finn asked once they were in the car.

"I didn't know I'd done that," she said.

"One day we'll laugh about it, but it's a bit raw at the moment."

"I ruin everything."

"No, you don't," Finn said. "You might be a pain in the neck at times, but you're our pain in the neck. You're not a bad sister."

"Just a bad daughter."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Why is that, do you think?" Addie asked, trying to sound curious rather than desperate.

"I don't know, Addie."

"Have I done something bad? You'd tell me, wouldn't you, if there was something I'd done? Because I could try and put it right."

"I don't think you've done anything. Maybe Mum doesn't like girls. Maybe you remind her of herself. Maybe she wants you to be what she couldn't be."

"I wondered," Addie paused. "I wondered if maybe, I wasn't Dad's."

Finn glanced across at her. Addie knew she hadn't surprised him.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"If you ask her, she'll never speak to you again."

"How tempting."

Finn laughed. "We're having Christmas dinner at our house this year. Hugh and his lot are coming over. David's on duty so he'll be over later. We're expecting you too. Are you going to be at Mum's Christmas Eve?"

"I'm going away," Addie blurted. "I've had an invite to stay with some university friends in the Lake District."

"We'll miss you. Who's going to do the washing up?"

"David. It's his turn."

* * * * *

Ed was in a furious temper by the time he got back to the house and he wasn't sure why. He also wasn't sure why he'd interrupted Will doing what Ed had spent all day hoping he'd do, although he'd been thinking more in terms of talking to Addie than fucking her on his desk. Maybe that was it. He thought he wanted Will and Addie

together because that would be the end of Vee. Only now, Ed didn't think that was what he wanted at all.

He slammed the door and Vee came out of the kitchen. She took one look at him and went back the way she'd come. Ed couldn't help himself. He strode after her.

"Been busy cooking a delicious meal for Will to come home to?"

Nothing was cooking. Vee sat back at the table with a glass of red wine, reading a glossy magazine.

"Fuck off, Ed. I've been working as well."

"Get packed. Will's booked you into a hotel. You're out of here tonight."

"We'll see."

Ed stamped out. He picked up his car keys and left the house. He'd come back when she'd gone.

* * * * *

When Will returned he found Vee lying on the couch, watching TV.

"Vee, I need to talk to you."

He wasn't going to mess around. As soon as she'd packed, he'd drive her to the hotel and then he was going to Addie's.

"I need to talk to you too." She switched off the TV.

Will was immediately on edge. She'd turned off the shopping channel.

Vee stood up. "*Je suis enceinte.*"

He stared at her. Why was she speaking French? Telling him she was old? Ancient? *Enceinte. Oh, God.* His knees shook.

"Pregnant, Will. I'm pregnant. We're having a baby."

She smiled and the bottom dropped out of his world.

"Say something," Vee said.

He wanted to say, how the fuck did she know it was his? "Are you sure?" came out of his mouth.

"Yes."

"How far...?" God, he could barely get the words out.

"Only a few weeks. We can't tell anyone yet in case I lose it."

Please, God, yes, and I'll never have to tell anyone. Then he was disgusted with himself. He wanted to ask how, but it was such a cliché, only how the fuck *had* it happened? She was supposed to be on the Pill, but he always used condoms. Had she deliberately trapped him? Stuck a pin through the packet? Was it his?

"Is it mine?"

"Yes, it's yours," Vee said in a quiet voice, a hurt expression on her face.

"How do you know?"

"Elinor's party. I forgot to take the Pill and I took it later."

"I used a condom," Will muttered. "I always use a condom."

"We fooled around that night. Don't you remember?"

What had they done? What had *he* done? *Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"It only takes one sperm, Will. I know it's yours. Aren't you happy? We always wanted a baby."

No, we didn't, he wanted to yell, but she looked so vulnerable, he felt like a complete shit.

"Hug me, Will." She held out her arms and he couldn't bring himself to touch her. "I'll still leave if you want. I'll go and pack. I realize this is a shock. It was to me too. Just give me fifteen minutes to get my stuff together."

"Don't. Stay here. I'm going out. I need to think." He grabbed his keys. If he stayed, he'd say something he'd regret. At that moment, all he could think was that he'd like to see her body mangled in the washing machine.

Will couldn't get his head around the idea of Vee having a baby, the idea that he was going to be a father. He felt cheated because it hadn't been something he'd wanted and cheated because it had happened too easily, by accident like that first time. He'd always thought having a child would be something over which he and the woman he loved would make a conscious decision. Will had fantasized about having to go at it for months with her running into his office with a thermometer, yelling they had to do it *now*. He'd lock the door and oblige. Only that dream had faded as his love for Vee had faded. Will didn't want a family with her anymore. *Shit.*

He called Ed's mobile. "Where are you?"

"The Three Horseshoes in Headingley."

"Stay there."

Will spotted Ed at the bar. From the look on Ed's face he didn't expect good news.

"Let me guess," Ed said. "She isn't moving out. Well, I'm not staying. I am seriously pissed off, Will, and I can't even get drunk because I'm driving."

Will came straight out with it. "Vee's pregnant."

Ed banged his glass down so hard on the bar, the liquid sloshed over his hand.

"Fucking hell! Are you sure?"

"She says she is," Will muttered.

"And you believe her?"

"What am I supposed to do? Get her to take the pregnancy test in front of me?"

"Yes," Ed said.

Will ran his fingers through his hair. "I think she's telling the truth."

"How could you let this happen?"

"I didn't do it on purpose."

Will had thought about the night of Elinor's party as he'd driven over. He'd been at the bottom of the garden, having a quiet drunken moment and Vee had snuck up, unzipped him and sat on his lap. He'd used a condom, but not to start with. He sighed. He'd got what he deserved.

"Are you sure it's yours?"

"To be honest, no, but it could be and Vee's convinced it is. I can't make her move out now. She offered to. I said no."

Ed groaned. "What are you going to do?"

"Get drunk. Then you can drive me back. I'll pick the car up in the morning."

"What are you going to say to Addie?"

Will dropped his eyes. "I don't know."

Chapter Twenty-Three

When the coach arrived at the pick-up point Addie looked for Will, but only Fred was on board. She bit back her disappointment.

"Morning, gorgeous," Fred greeted her.

"Morning, handsome."

"Didn't expect to see you. Did they change their minds?"

"Capitulated under the threat of a rebellion by the Furry Friends," Addie said. "My last trip."

"I suppose I'll have to keep order then. I hope they let me have that cattle prod."

Addie laughed. "No management with us today?"

"No, they were in the office when I left. Saw their cars."

Oh, Addie thought. So that was that. She wondered why Will hadn't come. Why had he changed his mind? She moved aside as the passengers surged toward the coach. A familiar figure led the charge.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wilberforce. Are you looking forward to shopping at Meadowhall?" Addie asked.

"You're not going to catch me out. We're going to Lincoln."

Even her attempts at humor were going to fall flat today, Addie thought, and then the day took a nosedive onto concrete.

"Hello, Mum. I didn't know you were in the Furry Friends Protection League."

"Just joined with Bertha."

"Good morning, Mrs. Cottingley." Addie recognized her mother's neighbor.

At least her mother would have someone to sit with and wouldn't plonk herself next to Addie. Still, after what happened last night, maybe her mother didn't want to be anywhere near her.

Addie knew fewer people out of this group. They were a bit more intense than the MADS, but with the huge advantage that they weren't going to run through every West End musical. After Addie had counted heads twice, she told Fred he could close the doors. She turned in her seat to face the passengers.

"Right," she called as the coach started up, "I'd like to welcome—" Addie found herself lurching as the vehicle came to a sudden stop.

"Looks like someone changed his mind," Fred said. "Sorry about that, folks."

He opened the door and Ed climbed on.

"Hi." He beamed at Addie.

"Apologies for the emergency stop, ladies and gentlemen," Addie said into her microphone. "We have a senior quality control inspector on board with us today, so if anyone has any complaints, no matter how small, how seemingly insignificant, please feel free to raise them with him and not me."

Ed sat next to her and rolled his eyes. Addie went through her spiel, raising several outbursts of laughter, though none, she noticed, from her mother. Should she say something about last night, apologize again? Maybe broadcast it to the coach? Addie slumped down and adjusted her seat belt.

"Will had something urgent to deal with, so I decided to have a day out instead," Ed said. "I hope you're not too disappointed."

"Of course not." Addie smiled.

"Liar."

"Ed, you're the only man on this coach who doesn't have a disturbing interest in small furry creatures. I'm delighted you're sitting next to me."

He laughed. The weird thing was that Addie did feel pleased to see Ed. Sometimes Will overwhelmed her, made her unable to think.

"You're not going to dock my wages if I spend some of the afternoon shopping for Christmas presents, are you?" Addie whispered.

His face lit up. "Course not. Hey, that's great. We can do it together. Save me a trip to London."

There was a harrumph from the seat behind. Addie glanced back. Mr. and Mrs. Gathercole.

"Bloody southerner." The voice of Brian Gathercole.

Addie grinned. "Have you ever been to Lincoln, Ed?"

"No. What's it like?"

"It's not London. No Harrods or Selfridges. But it's an interesting city. I—"

"Wouldn't have gone this way," Brian said in a loud voice.

Addie gritted her teeth. A hand came through the gap between the headrests and tapped Ed on the shoulder.

"I said, I wouldn't have gone this way," Brian repeated.

Ed turned. "It's up to the driver. I'm sure he's selected the most appropriate route."

Addie knew Ed was wasting his time. Brian launched into a monologue about the best way to Lincoln, punctuated with an announcement of the mileage readings from every sign they passed. By the time they pulled into the coach park, Ed looked ready to strangle him and Addie's stomach ached from trying not to laugh.

"God, you earn every penny," Ed whispered.

Addie was relieved the Gathercoles weren't in the group that wanted the tour. In the end, only ten passengers were prepared to divide their time between the Magna

Carta and shopping. The majority scuttled straight to the Christmas market. Among them, her mother, who disembarked without a word.

As Addie led her little group around the cathedral and then the castle. Ed kept asking questions. Addie had the distinct impression he was trying to catch her out. The only time Ed shut up was when they entered the darkened room in the castle, to look at the Magna Carta. At last, he seemed impressed.

When the cultural part of the day was over, they headed back to town.

"You are endlessly fascinating," Ed said. "How come you know so much?"

"I tried to memorize the guide book, but I hadn't counted on some clever dick quizzing me about Eleanor's viscera."

Ed laughed and then sighed. "I suppose you've been looking forward to shopping."

"What? You must be joking." Addie groaned as they weaved through the bustling crowds.

"You don't like shopping?" Ed turned to her in genuine shock.

"No."

"You do realize you're not normal."

Addie grimaced. "You're not the first to make that observation."

"Why don't you like it?"

"Lack of money doesn't help, but it's not just that. I'm hopeless at making decisions, having to choose. The more there is to look at, the less inclined I am to look."

Ed pulled Addie to one side to let two young women pass. They had several Christmas carrier bags looped over their arms and matching felt antlers on their heads.

"Christ, Prancer and Dancer with bare legs and it's bloody freezing!"

Ed was fun. They wandered round the market munching gingerbread biscuits cut in the shape of reindeer with Ed giving a running commentary as he bit off each limb. "Only one leg left...hop-along reindeer...nose gone...I don't fancy the tail...eat that bit for me." He pushed it into Addie's mouth.

His good humor rubbed off and Addie relaxed.

"Do you want to have a proper lunch or would you rather slip one of those spicy sausages between your lips?" Ed asked.

"Ed!" Her mouth opened wide in mock-horror.

He looked affronted. "It was a perfectly innocent question."

"The sausage looks delicious." Addie grinned.

Ed bought two.

"Tasty," Addie said. "Don't tell me what's in it and I might have another."

She caught the look in Ed's eyes and for a moment saw something that confused her. When she sucked mustard off her finger, he let out a little moan. To her complete

astonishment, Addie realized she was turning him on. She was part horrified and part thrilled. She knew she should stop, but the immature devil inside her made her do it again, only more slowly, taking her time over each finger and Ed spilt his drink.

"You're a very bad girl."

A shiver of pleasure rushed through her.

"But then I knew that, the moment you picked Will up in the gym. In any case, I'm a bad boy and there's nothing I like better than bad girls."

Addie's internal organs rearranged themselves in a higgledy-piggledy mess.

"I'm not bad," she muttered.

"I think you are."

Addie wanted to be bad. She longed to be bad.

"I think you'd better come clean and admit it. Be honest with yourself," Ed said, a little too loudly. "Don't hide your real feelings."

"Ed, shush."

"Proclaim it to the world." Ed flung his hand in the air. "Shout it out. Shout, hallelujah, I'm bad."

Addie tried to look cross. "My brothers don't like people annoying me."

"Good job they're not here then." He winked.

Addie frowned. "You know, Ed, I don't think you're bad at all. I think you're pretending. I think you're really a nice guy."

Ed didn't think he was nice. He was a sex-fiend. When he saw Addie slip her fingers into her mouth and suck off the bright yellow mustard, he felt himself harden and he had to stop chewing. When she ran her tongue round her lips, the breath caught in his throat. This was not good. He'd come today to make Will jealous, not be jealous of Will.

He was glad his erection was hidden. He made himself look offended.

"A nice guy? This is my reputation you're talking about. You're looking at the person who made his sex ed. teacher faint."

Addie laughed.

"You're supposed to ask how," Ed pointed out.

"But I might faint."

"Very funny."

"Okay, what did you do?" Addie stopped walking.

Ed bent his head to her ear and she blushed.

"How old were you?"

"Nine."

"Ed, that's awful. How did you even know that word?"

"I told you I was bad." His head shot up. "Oh, look, are they juggling?"

He took her hand and tugged her over to watch a team toss fire sticks to each other. Ed was alert for her pulling away and felt a rush of pleasure when she didn't. Her fingers were cold and he pushed her hand into his coat pocket.

"I want to see if any of them catch the wrong end," he said.

"Ed!"

"What? That's why everyone else is watching."

He sighed in a melodramatic way at her frown of disapproval and after a few moments dragged her back into the heart of the market. Ed stopped at each stall to examine and pronounce on homemade cakes, silver jewelry and hand-knitted sweaters. He charmed the stall holders into giving them cake to try. He helped her choose presents—heavily grained wooden cufflinks boxes for her brothers and delicate necklaces for their wives and Lisa. Addie picked out drums for her nephews and recorders for her nieces.

"Do they live in detached houses?" Ed asked.

"Yes. I only want to torture their parents, not the neighbors. Anyway, I'm going away for Christmas so I won't be around to suffer the consequences."

"Shrewd move." He wondered where she was going.

Addie helped him choose a wooden salad bowl and serving spoons for his parents, bracelets in five different colors because she wouldn't say which she liked the best and a remote control car for his grandfather. Nothing for Will. He wasn't going to mention his brother.

"Who do you have left to buy for?" Ed asked.

"My mother, but she won't like whatever I choose."

Ed picked up a pink wrap. "Get her this then."

Addie twisted her mouth. "She'll hate it, but okay."

"Suspiciously easy. What sort of thing do your brothers usually buy you?"

"I always get the same. They join up with my mum and buy me a television license."

Ed looked at her in shock. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, and I haven't even got a TV. It's Lisa's. She knocks the amount off my rent."

"But you get something else?"

"Er, no. Well, chocolates from my aunt. Dark ones I don't like. Hugh eats those."

Addie handed the wrap to the stall holder and pulled her purse from her bag.

"Hi, there. Let me ask you something," Ed said, spotting one of the passengers off the coach. "Would you like to receive one of these as a present from your daughter?"

Addie spun round. "Ed, no."

"Addie reckons her mother will hate it. What do you think?"

"Why is she buying it if she thinks that?" the woman asked.

"She's someone very difficult to please, so nothing like you I'm sure." Ed flicked on his beam.

"I think she'd prefer the blue one," the woman said.

"Right, Addie, swap it for the blue one." Ed grabbed the other wrap.

"Ed, I'd like you to meet my mother, Joan Winter," Addie said.

Ed laughed and when he realized Addie wasn't joking, he didn't miss a blink. "Do you think you could buy Addie Sky Sports as well as the TV license? Oh no, you won't need to bother if—"

"Ed, no." Addie clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Adelina, what do you think you're doing? What a way to behave in public."

Ed fell about laughing as he tried to get rid of Addie's hand. Joan poked Addie hard in the ribs with her umbrella.

"What did you want to say?" Joan asked as Addie let go of Ed to clutch her side.

"Addie won't need a TV if she's off to New Zealand."

"New Zealand?" Her mother's eyes hardened. "You must come for lunch on Sunday and tell us all about it."

"I bet Addie would like one of the pink ones," he shouted over his shoulder as Addie dragged him away.

As they reached the edge of the market, Ed realized Addie was shaking.

"Oh God, what's the matter? What have I done?" he asked. When he lifted her face, he saw she was laughing. "What's so funny?"

"You are. But my mother is going to kill me."

"She did seem to take things a bit seriously."

"I'm going to have little black dots all over my ribs where she poked me with that umbrella."

"She doesn't know about New Zealand then?"

Addie sighed. "She didn't. You know the mere fact that you've been seen with me means you'll be in the Christmas letter, penciled in as my future husband."

"You said the H-word." Ed stepped back, making the sign of the cross with his fingers.

"My mother said the L-word. Lunch."

"I'll come. I like a nice roast."

"If it was that simple, I'd invite you, but it isn't, so I won't."

"Why?" Ed put his arm over Addie's shoulder as they walked, thrilled she didn't pull away.

"It's bad enough I always end up humiliated without letting someone else see it happen."

"Why?" Ed repeated.

"Because I'm a disappointment in so many ways, I've lost count."

"I hate to sound repetitive, but why?"

"Awful clothes. Wrong job. Bad attitude."

"Sounds like my mother."

"You always look smart," Addie said.

"You haven't seen my collection of rude t-shirts."

"Was 'Idaho No Udaho' one of yours by any chance?"

"Rumbled. Will borrowed it. So why didn't you ask me for a drink at the gym?" He really wanted to know why.

"You were fair-haired and you were smiling."

He frowned. "That's why women like me."

"Didn't Will tell you what I wanted?"

Ed shook his head.

"I needed someone tall, dark and handsome to pretend to be the man I'd been going out with for six months. That way my family would apologize for thinking he was either married with children or he didn't exist. And before you ask, no, he didn't exist."

Ed was bewildered. "Why was it so important your family thought you had a boyfriend?"

"Because...because I wanted to show them I could be happy," Addie whispered.

Ed stopped walking and stood in front of her. "And can you be happy?"

Addie shrugged. "I don't know."

"I wish you'd asked me." He gave her a little smile. "I'd have dyed my hair."

Addie stared at him. Time seemed to hang between them as she wondered what he was thinking. He'd pushed her toward Will, so what was happening now? She didn't know how long they stood there, but suddenly snow swirled around their heads and Addie turned her face to the sky and let the moment go. She felt a shift in the air as if a chance had been lost.

Ed brushed a flake from her nose. "You're cute."

"So are you."

He chuckled and they began walking again.

"Why does your mother think you're in the wrong job?" Addie asked.

"Because I went into business with Will instead of doing something for myself."

"What would you like to do?"

Ed pursed his lips. "I've always fancied crewing on a yacht."

Addie laughed. "How would your mother feel about that?"

"Not happy. She's desperate I settle down and get married in the local church, so she can do the flowers. Then I'm expected to have children. Not personally, I should add."

"Why haven't you settled down? Charlotte, Beth and Daisy have practically come to blows. You have women falling at your feet."

Ed looked down and then looked at her. "Not today."

Addie's face went hot.

"I get bored," he said, grabbing her hand and walking on. "I like variety."

Ed seemed the type who wanted an easy life. Short-term relationships were less trouble. Yet Addie sensed something hidden in what he was saying. Why did he always go for the same sort of woman if he ended up bored?

"Despite the clichés about men not understanding women, I think I do. I know exactly what they want," he said.

"You to sleep with them?"

He turned to look at her. "Maybe. Why should I say no? But I'm not..."

"Not what?"

Ed sighed. "Why am I telling you this?"

"Because you don't want to go out with me, so I'm easier to talk to. We're friends." Addie watched his face, but he didn't look at her.

"I don't have many friends," Ed said in a quiet voice. "Women throw themselves at me and men are jealous. If I talk to their wives or girlfriends they assume I'm trying to get them into bed. Consequently, men don't like me. The women I'd like to know don't show any interest in me because they think there's no point. The ones I go out with tend to be—of a type. I keep relationships short, otherwise I find I have a limpet attached to me and no matter how beautiful a limpet, it's not what I want. That wasn't a hint, Addie, so don't you dare try to let go of my hand. You're keeping my fingers warm."

"Maybe you just haven't met the right limpet."

"Maybe I never will." Ed squeezed her fingers.

"What's wrong with women?" Addie asked with a smile.

"You're rarely satisfied, always going on about something that in the grand scale of things doesn't matter one bit, like whether you should hang blue or red baubles on your Christmas tree. You don't want solutions, instead you want to discuss things. If you feel ill, you don't want me to say go to the doctor, just offer sympathy and make 'significant' gestures. Meaning flowers or chocolate or jewelry."

"Ah, but when a woman's ill, she really is ill, unlike a man who only has to catch a cold to think he has pneumonia."

"Not me," said Ed and then coughed. "Does that sound serious?"

Addie laughed.

"I have to remind myself never to make negative comments about a woman's body or clothes and if they criticize themselves, I must never agree. The words 'diet' and 'weight' are not in my vocabulary. The words 'bottom' and 'big' never appear in the same sentence."

"You're almost perfect."

Ed slipped his fingers around her wrist, stroking her skin with his thumb. "I am perfect. I'm brilliant in bed and hung like a cobra."

Addie smothered a smile. "I'll take your word for it."

"You don't need to."

Addie grinned openly now. "So which limpet should I ask to verify that?"

"Don't you want to find out for yourself?"

Addie blushed.

"I like you," he said. "I like making you blush."

"I like you too. I like stepping on your toes."

Ed did a quick side step as Addie's foot moved toward his. He didn't know when he'd last enjoyed himself so much. Addie was easy to talk to. She listened when he spoke and she was funny. He knew he'd let his guard down. When she'd made that comment about being friends and not wanting to go out with her, he had to bite his tongue. She was Will's, or as good as, so he had to leave her alone. But they'd spent the day flirting and maybe she'd got the hint that he was interested.

"So how do you feel about going to bed with me?" he asked.

Addie headed straight for the pavement. Ed caught her before she hit the ground and pulled her upright. Her mouth was inches from his. He cupped his hands over her cold, red cheeks. He'd meant to make her laugh, now he didn't want her to. Just one kiss, he told himself, but she pulled away.

"What did you trip on?" Ed glanced back.

"A crack. You're not supposed to step on the cracks. You get eaten by bears. You'll be the one they go for. You've not been paying attention to where you're going."

Yeah, he had. Down a dangerous path. He could tell Addie about the baby. He could just drop it out now and give himself a chance. If he did she wouldn't even think about Will again.

"I like you, Ed," Addie said. "Despite the fact that your brother promised to come today and has let me down, I've enjoyed myself."

"Will's a prat sometimes. I want to kick him. Maybe I should."

"Do the two of you argue much?"

"Only over the remote."

Never over women. Not until now, Ed thought.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Will sat in his car watching the coach disgorge its passengers. Once he'd realized Ed had fucked off to Lincoln, he'd been monumentally pissed off. The fact that Will had already decided not to go was beside the point. He didn't want his brother anywhere near Addie.

She and Ed were the last ones off. Cars pulled out while they stood talking. Addie had put her bags on the ground and was waving her arms around and laughing. The coach pulled away and Addie blew a kiss at the driver, but she and Ed still stood there, talking, smiling. Will got out of his Lexus and headed toward them. He knew Ed had seen him and he guessed that explained what happened next.

Ed grabbed Addie's head and pressed his lips hard against hers. He pulled back before she had a chance to react, to kiss him harder or slap his face. She was stunned.

"Thanks for a great day," he said. "I enjoyed being with you."

His tone made Addie think the kiss was just a tease. "I enjoyed the day too."

"Let's hope the customers did," Will snapped as he reached them.

When Addie saw the expression on Will's face, her smile blinked out like a dead bulb.

"No one complained," she said. "Not even Doreen Wilberforce, but don't hold your breath."

"Do you want to go and have something to eat?" Ed ignored Will.

"No, she doesn't," Will said. "I need to talk to her."

"You could let Addie answer."

Will sighed. "Ed, please."

Ed hovered for a moment and then gave in. "See you, Addie." He walked to his car.

Addie pushed her hands deeper into her pockets. She was cold. Maybe Will wanted to take her for a meal. Maybe he'd take her home. She smiled.

"I can't see you anymore." Will almost spat out the words.

For a moment Addie didn't understand what he'd said.

"W-what have I done?" she stuttered. "What's happened?"

"Nothing. You haven't done anything. It's me, not you."

"Oh." So it was her, not him.

"It's not as if it was going anywhere," he said more gently. "A few weeks and I'll be back in London. You'll be up here. I feel like I'm using you. I don't want to do that. I don't want to hurt you."

Too late. Yet she still wanted him. Addie knew she was supposed to look for commitment and loyalty. Her mother had hammered that message into her brain, but she didn't care. She'd spent too long not being touched, watching other people having happy lives while she stood on the sidelines. Will had shown her what she was missing and she didn't want to let it go. She'd settle for sex. She wanted him to touch her. If he touched her, he'd want her. She didn't believe he wouldn't want her.

"We—we could—we—" Addie could barely speak. She took a step toward him and when he moved back, she felt as though he'd stabbed her in the chest.

"You need someone who can offer you more than I can. You're sweet and kind and I've messed you around. You deserve better. I'm sorry, Addie."

How many times had she said "sorry" to try to make things right? It didn't help. It hurt. If Will looked at her, she told herself she'd believe him, but Addie didn't want him to look. Then his eyes met hers and held her gaze, and she broke into pieces, pain radiating from her heart to all parts of her body, spreading like a crack in the ice.

She knew what to do. Walk away. She picked up her bags, turned and her feet led her away from the one person in the world she'd thought had wanted her.

"How are you getting home? Do you want me to give you a lift?" he called.

She shook her head. No meaning yes, but he didn't understand. He'd never understood her. He hadn't listened. As Addie walked out of the car park, tears rolled down her cheeks. She clung to her plastic bags full of Christmas presents and tried to think about the happy day she'd had with Ed, but the memory had been poisoned. She didn't understand. One minute, Will couldn't keep his hands off her and the next he didn't want anything to do with her. A wind sprang up from nowhere and she was enveloped in a cloud of swirling dead leaves, a rotten snow globe.

When he said he wanted her, she'd believed him, but three times he'd pushed her away and she had to understand the message in that. He was attracted to her. He liked touching her, fucking her, but his conscience was troubling him because he wasn't like Ed. He didn't sleep around. Will had a wife and even if they were separated, he was still tied to her. Maybe if the divorce had gone through, things would have been different. Maybe. Addie wanted to forget she'd ever met him, yet knew if he'd asked her to go to London, she'd have crawled on glass to get there.

Addie walked and thought herself into acceptance, though not into understanding. She'd been naïve. Maybe Will had lied to her all along. She'd been one of the limpets Ed described, deliriously happy to be allowed to reattach herself and now she'd been thrown back in the sea. Cold emptiness swept in waves from her heart. No one loved her and no one would ever love her. Her Dad hadn't. Her Mum didn't. People liked her. Ed liked her. Will liked her. But she was unlovable. Addie thought her legs would give way, but they didn't. She carried on walking. Her heart kept beating.

* * * * *

David was cooking when Addie got back.

"Smells good," she said mechanically. Lisa had told her they always had to praise David when he cooked, in an attempt to get him to do it more often.

"Spag Bol. Want some?"

"No, thanks. Not hungry."

Addie watched David start to pour a glass of wine into the sauce, then stop and drink it.

"Don't hurt her, David," she said.

He stared at her. "Where did that come from?"

"Lisa's my friend. I don't want her to get hurt."

"I'm your brother. What if she hurts me?"

"You always told me you were indestructible."

"No, that was Superman."

"No wonder you broke your leg when you fell out of the tree house."

"As I remember, you pushed me," David huffed.

"Because you were trying to make me eat a worm."

He tipped the spaghetti into a colander. "Did Lisa tell you why she finished with me?"

"I think she thought you might have been about to drag her into a jeweler's."

David nodded. "So I should wait another couple of weeks?"

Addie smiled. "Do you really want to marry her?"

"Yeah." He grinned. "I really do."

Addie managed to get to her room before the tears came.

* * * * *

Will pulled up on the drive as Ed got out of his car.

"That was quick," Ed said. "So how did Addie take it?"

"What?"

"The possibility that you might be a daddy?"

"I didn't tell her. I didn't see the point. I just told her it was over."

Ed gaped at him. "Right. And then you left her there?"

"She didn't want a lift."

"Fuck it, Will," Ed raged. "Have you forgotten how to be a decent human being? You break her heart and leave her in the middle of bloody nowhere? What were you

thinking? Vee's a parasitic worm, eating away at you, changing you. How can you imagine you'd be better off with her?"

"I don't think that, but she's fucking pregnant." Will forced out the words between gritted teeth.

"Oh yeah, so she says. I wouldn't start choosing names."

"She's throwing up, Ed."

"How hard is it to stick your finger down your throat? She's had plenty of practice."

Will slammed into the house. He knew Ed was right. He'd upset Addie. He'd been afraid she'd been about to offer no-strings sex and wasn't sure he could say no.

In the living room, Vee lay on the couch watching TV.

"I missed you." She smiled at Will. "What shall we have to eat?"

"I don't care."

"I fancy Chinese. Will, I've been thinking. We'll have a party."

Will wasn't listening. He ought to ring Addie and see if she'd got home safely. He shouldn't have left her, but he'd been afraid if he had her in his car, he wouldn't have been able to control himself. He'd have told her the truth. That he wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anything.

"Oh, your mother called. I told her about the baby. She was thrilled."

"What?" Will's head shot round so fast his brain took a moment to catch up. "I thought we agreed we weren't going to say anything yet."

"I couldn't help it. I'm so excited."

She moved toward him and pulled his jacket from his shoulders.

"Vee, I—"

"Don't spoil it, Will. Let's just see what happens."

Ed stood at the door. "How many weeks did you say you were?"

"Seven."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"Not yet."

"Have you thought about the effect your overdose might have had on the baby?" Ed said.

Will stiffened. He hadn't thought of that. "I'll take you to a doctor tomorrow," Will told her.

Vee stepped back. "You don't believe me. You think I'm lying."

"Prove you're not," Ed said. "Do a pregnancy test in front of Will."

"All right. No problem."

"I'll go and buy one now," Ed said.

"I think it could wait until tomorrow," she snapped.

“Don’t fuck her tonight.” Ed smiled.

Vee threw a cushion at him. “I’ll buy a kit tomorrow and you’ll see.”

“You can’t do DNA tests until the baby’s born,” Ed yelled from the hall. “Even if you are pregnant, Will won’t know for months if it’s his.”

“What do you want me to do, Ed?” Vee screeched. “Have an abortion? That’s your way of dealing with little accidents, isn’t it?”

Ed’s face appeared back at the door.

“Will, you remember Susie Burton?” Vee stared at Ed. “Ed got her pregnant. Did you know your brother forced her to have an abortion?”

“Yes,” Will said and was rewarded with two shocked faces. “Now fuck off, Vee. I want to talk to Ed.”

“I’m hungry,” Vee whined.

“I’m not. Go upstairs and order yourself a takeout.”

Ed slumped on the couch and Will closed the door.

“How long have you known?” Ed asked.

“Susie came to see me, to ask me to get you to change your mind about marrying her. I said I wouldn’t, but if she did have the baby, I’d make sure you supported her.”

“I didn’t ask her to get rid of it,” Ed said. “I didn’t know until she’d already done it. She sprang the whole thing on me, baby then a wedding and I panicked. By the time I came to my senses, she’d had the abortion and it was too late.”

Will sat down next to him. “Do you regret it?”

“What’s the point? It happened and I can’t do anything about it. I don’t think I was ready to be a father or a husband.”

“Do you think I am?”

“Maybe you’ll have to be,” Ed said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The moment Will arrived back from work, Vee handed him a white paper bag.

“What’s this?”

He paled when he looked inside.

“Check it. See if I’ve tampered with it.”

It was still wrapped in cellophane. Will handed it back.

“Want to watch me pee on it as well?” She knew he’d decline but her heart still skipped.

“No,” he muttered.

Vee locked the toilet door and retrieved the little bottle she’d hidden in the cistern. It had cost her twenty pounds, but it was worth a lot more than that. She was lucky there was someone expecting a baby where she worked, even luckier that Chris agreed to give her a urine sample. Vee had concocted an elaborate story about her brother doing research at Leeds University on the reproductive rates of cacti by injecting them with pregnant women’s urine. Vee was quite proud of her inventiveness. She couldn’t believe how easy it had been. Chris had been only too happy to help. Vee grinned. English women were so gullible. Men too.

Will paced in the lounge. He’d spent all day thinking about this. He didn’t want Vee to be pregnant, but even before she’d done this test, he believed she was. He felt terrible. He’d let everyone down, himself included. Will wanted the mother of his child to be someone who’d have fun making sandcastles, playing hide and seek and jumping into puddles. That wasn’t Vee. She’d have her child in designer gear from the word go, scream if they got dirty, enroll them in ballet, even if it was a boy, and she’d want to call the kid some stupid name like Toffee or Bonbon. Breastfeeding was out and Will had always cherished this image of cuddling his wife while their child suckled at her breast. But even though Will hadn’t wanted a baby with Vee, it could be his and the fact that he didn’t love her wasn’t the child’s fault.

He’d support Vee through her pregnancy, but could he do it at a distance? Vee was such a flake, he knew he ought to be with her, looking after her, making sure she ate the right things and didn’t do anything stupid. But what would happen when the baby was born? Would it be enough to be a remote father? Will wasn’t sure it would, but if they remained together, life would be hell for everyone including the child. Staying with her was the right thing to do, but he didn’t want to do the right thing. Will exhaled. His hands were shaking. This was a fucking mess. He was a mess, but deep down, he knew

he couldn't live with her. He'd look after her while she was pregnant, and afterward he'd ask for a paternity test.

Vee emerged from the toilet and placed the wand on the coffee table.

"There's nothing there," Will said with relief.

"We have to wait. I haven't lied."

Will couldn't take his eyes from the panel, then his heart lurched. He was expecting a colored line but the word "Pregnant" suddenly appeared.

"I told you."

When Ed walked in and heard Vee crying, he thought for a moment everything was going to be all right, until he saw what was lying on *his* coffee table.

"Apologize, Ed," Vee sniffed.

"What for?"

"Because I'm having a baby."

"I'm not apologizing. I didn't make you pregnant. You don't know it was Will either. You probably have no idea whose it is."

"Ed!" Will warned.

"Is she staying here?"

Will nodded.

"Okay. I'm not."

This time Ed meant it. He packed his clothes. Everything else could wait.

He drove to the hotel, checked in and then sat on the bed. He felt miserable though there was an easy way to cheer himself up. He was within walking distance of the nightlife of Leeds, fucking distance of any number of available women. He could have a shower, tidy himself up and go out, only he didn't want to and he knew why.

* * * * *

Addie lay on the couch wondering if it was possible to think yourself dead, if you imagined every organ shutting down, whether you could will it happen. The doorbell rang. No use expecting Lisa or David to answer it, they'd gone to the pub. Addie had already opened the door to three lots of carol singers, convinced they were the same kids wearing different hats. She gave the first lot a pound and word must have zoomed around at the speed of light. She was going to be broke before the end of the evening. She sidled into the hall and slid along with her back to the wall.

"Addie, are you there?" Ed called through the letter box.

She sighed and got down on her stomach to lift up the flap. Ed's laughing eyes smiled at her.

"Hello," he said.

"I thought you were carol singers."

"While shepherds—"

"Please stop."

"If you let me in."

Addie got up and opened the door.

"Am I interrupting anything? You're not cooking another Stroganoff?" he asked.

"Why, are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"You better come in the kitchen, then," Addie said.

Ed followed. "On your own?"

"Yep. How about a pizza?"

"Love one. Give me the number. I'll ring."

Addie opened a cupboard. "I'll make one. It's just as quick."

"Can I help?"

"Okay. Wash your hands."

Addie emptied packets of pizza base mix into two bowls and took out a measuring jug. Then she looked at Ed's black trousers and sighed. He was a man. The flour was going to go everywhere. She pulled David's apron from the hook and tossed it over.

"It's a manly one," she said and Ed laughed.

The picture on the front was of Michelangelo's David. Lisa had bought it as a present when she'd been on a course in Florence.

"It's not very flattering," Ed complained. "I'm much bigger than this."

Addie chuckled. "Those were my brother's exact words."

She was right about the flour. It went everywhere, but eventually Ed managed to produce a base, full of holes.

"It's not very big," he complained.

"It swells up when it's somewhere warm."

Ed almost choked.

"Stop laughing," Addie said. "And stop poking it."

"It's a work of art."

"But not a circle."

"Should I try tossing it in the air?"

"No," Addie said in a firm voice.

It was a miracle she managed to get it off the work surface and onto a tray. While Ed wasn't looking, she teased a few of the holes together.

"Now for the toppings. Just copy me," Addie said.

"I missed you today. I needed someone to protect me from Charlotte. She went on and on about what she wanted to do to me at the Christmas party, until I told her I was bringing someone. Then she switched to the training course in Shropshire and made it clear she'd leave her door unlocked. Plus, she and Beth are competing over who has the most microscopic swimwear. Charlotte informed me she possesses the smallest bikini in the world."

Addie laughed.

"The thing is, she bloody well has me intrigued now," Ed said. "So what's your bikini like?"

"You're slipping, Ed. That wasn't very subtle."

"I've given up on subtlety. Wastes time. So?"

"Microscopic." It wasn't. "Now we wait while they cook." Addie closed the oven door.

She reached up to wipe a smudge of flour from Ed's cheek, but when she saw his Adam's apple lurch up and down, her hand faltered.

"Will you bring your bikini to Shropshire?" he asked.

"Not going." Addie began to load the dishwasher.

"Why?"

"What's the point? I'm not going to be working at Magelan's much longer."

Ed was silent for a moment, then smiled. "It would look good on your CV."

"For a job on a yacht?" Addie rubbed at the work surface.

"Well, yes, if the bikini's microscopic. Anyway, you're not really going to do that."

"You know, the more someone tells me I'm not going to do something, the more determined I am to do it."

Ed picked up a spoon and let it swing in front of Addie's face. "You are not going to bed with me. You are definitely not going to bed with me. You are absolutely not going to bed with me."

Addie wondered what he'd say if she did. "You don't want this pizza then?"

Ed groaned. "I am desperate for that pizza."

"Want a beer as well?"

"Beer, pizza and a sexy woman doing the cooking? Is this heaven?"

"This is to show you what you'll be missing when you go to hell. Get a couple of beers from the fridge."

Ed's mouth dropped open when Addie handed him his pizza.

"God it's enormous. I can't believe I made this." He took a huge bite. "Oh, it's delicious. I am so talented."

Addie found her appetite had returned. She'd only planned to eat a sandwich.

"So did you come over for food or something else?" she asked.

"I needed cheering up."

"And you thought of me?"

"I had nowhere else to go." Ed put on a pitiful voice.

"Well, you've spoiled my evening," Addie said.

He squinted. "Why, what were you doing?"

"I *was* watching football."

Ed laughed. "Who's playing?"

"No idea. I just like to ogle their bums. The rugby's even better because sometimes they get their shorts pulled down."

He stared at her. "What were you really doing?"

Addie knew her smile had slipped. "Thinking."

"Good job I came, then."

Addie nodded. "Yep."

"What were you thinking about?"

"No wonder women like you. Do you really want to know?"

He nodded.

"Really, Ed?"

"Yes."

"Why your brother runs hot and cold? Why my life is shit? Why my mother hates me? Nothing very important." She gave a wry smile.

"Do you still want him?" Ed asked.

Addie pushed her plate away. "It doesn't matter whether I do or not. He's made it clear there can't be anything between us."

"Fight for him," Ed said. "Come to the Christmas party tomorrow, come to Shropshire. Vee is not the right woman for Will. He knows that. Tell him how you feel, Addie. Make him understand what he's losing. I've seen the way he looks at you and the way he looks at her. I know it's you he wants."

Addie's heart pounded. Her mouth was dry. "He's married."

"You're not breaking anything up. Their marriage was over a long time ago, but Vee's a manipulative cow. If she hadn't just finished with her latest fuck she wouldn't be here. Every time something goes wrong in her life, she turns to Will to sort it out. The only reason he's not with you now is because he doesn't want you to get hurt. He needs your strength, Addie. If you care about him, help him."

She couldn't. "I'm not going to the party, Ed. You think I'm strong and I'm not. In fact, I'm not well. I've got bird flu."

"You're chickening out?"

"Very quick."

Ed smiled. "You know, you're right. You absolutely, definitely, positively shouldn't go."

"You've already tried that once. It's still not going to work."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Addie sat up to her neck in vanilla bubbles. Despite the fact that she'd been determined not to go to the Magellan Christmas party, she'd thought about what a fool she'd look if she didn't go. Everyone would wonder why she wasn't there. What was the point crying over something about which she could do nothing? Besides she'd already paid for the ticket and a meal was a meal.

"Addie, how much longer are you going to be?" Lisa called from outside the door.

"Nearly finished."

"David will be here soon, I need to come in."

Addie rose to her feet and looked down at the large lumps of foam sticking to her body. She pushed back the memory of another foam bath and molded herself a couple of breasts. Before they slid south, she fashioned a tall hat and a beard to go with them.

"Addie, what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

Still standing in the bath, Addie opened the window to get rid of some of the steam, and a gust of wind whipped a streak of foam from her arm and sent it sailing into the night sky. She looked down and then scooped up a heap of bubbles and tossed them out of the window. Minutes later the bath was almost clear of froth, the sky full of low flying clouds and Addie felt great.

She emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped round her, to see Lisa in a fit of giggles and David with foam dripping from his head and leather jacket.

"What happened to you?" Addie kept a straight face.

"I've no idea." David fumed. "Some idiot playing games."

"I'll wipe it off," Lisa said.

He followed Lisa into the bathroom and gave a bellow of rage. Addie guessed he'd seen the remains of foam in the tub.

"Sorry," she yelled and ran for it.

She heard Lisa talking to David and then they both laughed, the bathroom door slammed and Addie knew she was safe.

* * * * *

By the time Addie sat on the bus to Leeds, her newly found confidence had melted to slush. When she'd put on the red tube dress she bought in Keighley, she'd felt defiant. Now she felt an idiot. She'd taken extra care with her hair, straightened and spiked it and put on more makeup than usual. When she'd looked in the mirror, she

hardly recognized herself. She even wore the stupid high-heeled shoes and would probably break her ankles before she got there. Yet tempting as it was to catch the next bus home, she wanted Will to see what he'd thrown away.

As Addie teetered across the city to Angel's, three guys whistled at her. Her confidence shot up like a rocket. She walked taller and straighter. She could do this.

Charlotte the Harlot stood inside the entrance. Addie pulled off her coat before she could change her mind. She felt a shiver of pleasure when she saw Charlotte's mouth drop open.

"My God, Addie. I didn't recognize you. What a fabulous dress."

Addie smiled as if her life depended on it.

Ed stood at the bar trying to get the barman's attention.

"Where's your date?" Will asked.

"Applying another coat of plaster."

"What's she like?"

"Beautiful, brainless. She'll serve her purpose."

"Which is?"

"To keep the Witches of Magelan's at bay."

Will laughed. "Most guys would love to have three women chasing them."

"I only need one."

"Me too," Will said.

"Just not the one you've brought with you," Ed threw back.

Will sighed. "What was I supposed to do? She begged and cried and she's going to be on her own until Wednesday night while we're in Shropshire."

"What are you going to do if Addie turns up?"

Will had just caught the barman's eye, but he turned to face Ed.

"You told me she wasn't coming."

"She might change her mind."

"You said she definitely wouldn't be here."

"Hi," Addie said and two heads swiveled round.

She waved to the bartender. "Gin and tonic, please."

"You don't like gin and tonic," Will said.

"I've changed." Addie paid, picked up her drink and walked away.

Will and Ed watched her go.

"What the fuck is she wearing?" Ed said.

"What the fuck am I going to do?" Will groaned.

Addie took a sip from her glass and grimaced. God, it was awful. Still, it would last her all night, which was the whole point. She spotted Fred in the corner talking to a couple of the other drivers and made her way over, but before she got there, there was a tap on her shoulder. Addie turned and smiled in surprise.

"Hi, Evelyne. What are you doing here?"

"Exactly what I was going to ask you."

"I only work at the language school two days a week."

"My husband works for Magelan's. Will Mansell. You must know him."

Addie hoped the smile was still on her face because everything inside her was dying. "Will? Of course I do."

The Evelyne she knew, was Will's Vee. She worked at Easyspeak with Lisa, helping her with A-level French conversation. Vee was Evelyne. *Shit.*

"This is such a coincidence. Let's go and tell Will." Vee laughed.

Addie could detect no malice in Evelyne, no sense that she knew about her and Will. Was this the same woman Ed called a manipulative cow? Addie hadn't seen that. She was friendly at work, chatted with everyone. Addie followed Vee across the room, keeping her eyes away from Will when the pair of them reached his side.

"You see, Will, I *do* have someone to talk to. Addie works at the same place as me."

The moment's silence felt like hours to Addie.

"You're just assuming she wants to talk to you, Vee," Ed said. "Addie's kind to everyone." He took the drink from her hand and put it down. "Addie, you promised me a dance."

Addie let him lead her away from the ticking bomb, but as they reached the edge of the dance floor, a woman in a tight black dress appeared in front of them. She glared at Addie.

"Who's this?" she demanded.

"A friend. We're going to have a dance."

"It's okay, Ed. I'll go and talk to Fred," Addie said.

"No, we're going to dance," Ed insisted.

"I don't think so," the woman said. "You're here with me."

"Actually, you're here with me," Ed pointed out. "And I'll dance with who I like. If that's a problem, feel free to leave."

He took Addie's elbow and guided her to the middle of the room. The dance floor was already busy.

He put his mouth next to her ear. "Are you all right?"

"You don't need to dance with me, Ed."

"You must be kidding. You're the only woman here I want to dance with. You look sensational."

Addie gave a little smile and began to move less self-consciously.

"I keep having to remind myself to put my tongue away," he said. "Have you been hiding another person inside you? Any more dresses like that?"

"Dance, Ed. Don't talk."

By the time they went in for the meal, Addie was calm. She walked along the buffet, selecting from the dishes and then made straight for the table where Fred and his wife sat eating. Addie would eat, then leave. She watched as the woman with Ed steered him in the opposite direction, but her heart fluttered in panic as Vee made straight for her and sat at her side. Will followed.

"Have you come on your own?" Vee asked.

"Yes, my boyfriend, Noah, lives in Manchester." Addie couldn't look at Will.

"It's a pity he couldn't come tonight." Vee inspected a piece of cheese and then nibbled it daintily.

"His mother's sick."

"Well, you might find someone tonight you like better." Vee beamed.

"No, I won't." Addie made herself smile.

"Noah won't know if you get lucky."

When Addie realized Vee was serious, she was shocked. "I wouldn't do something like that."

Addie could hear Will talking to Fred, but knew he was listening to their conversation as well.

"So what's it like working for my gorgeous husband? Is he a slave driver? Does he make you stay late?"

Addie saw straight through Vee's smile, saw the insecurity, the anxiety. This was a different woman to the confident teacher she'd seen.

"Yes, he's a slave driver. All bosses are. I don't work late. I'm not paid enough. Plus, I'm leaving in two weeks, so I don't need to impress anyone."

Addie stuffed her mouth with bread so she didn't have to speak. She watched as Vee's eyes scanned the room. Will's eyes were on Addie. She looked back at her plate.

"You're not going to Shropshire, then?" Vee asked.

Addie emptied her mouth. "No."

"Who is going? Point them out."

"Vee, leave it," Will said.

Addie escaped by going to get another plate of food she didn't want and then struck up a conversation with Graham. Now she knew she was desperate.

Will knew he'd made another mistake. Seeing Addie in that red dress made him remember what had started off as one of the best nights of his life and how the woman sitting next to him had ruined it. He'd done the right thing going back to Vee after she'd told him she'd taken an overdose, but why hadn't he taken Addie with him? Instead, he'd hurt her, and continued to hurt her. He didn't deserve her. She was sweet and kind and too good for him, but he wanted another chance.

"Come and dance." Vee pulled at his arm. "I'm not eating this rubbish. You can take me for a meal afterwards."

"I don't want to dance and I don't want to take you for a meal."

"Just one dance, Will," Vee wheedled. "Please."

He let her pull him on to the crowded dance floor, his mind whirling with ways to tell Addie about the baby. Would she understand? He'd have to look after the child, share custody. Could he ask her to accept that? Vee pushed him away in disgust after he failed to make any effort to move. He watched her glancing back at him as she talked to people. He guessed she was trying to find out if anyone knew who he'd been fucking. Will looked for Addie but he was too late. He couldn't find her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Addie was sent to open the door at her mother's, Will was the last person she expected to see. She froze, as though she'd plunged into water pouring from a melting glacier.

"What are you doing here?" Will demanded.

"Isn't that my line?" she asked in confusion.

"The coach was supposed to leave an hour ago."

Now she understood.

"I'm not going on a team-building course. There's no point."

"But I want you to come," Will said. "Please."

Addie groaned.

"Adelina? What are you doing? Your food's going cold. Tell them we believe in Christmas and get back to the table."

"My mother thinks you're a Jehovah's Witness."

"I'll be anything you like if you come to Shropshire."

His fingers touched her hand and she drew away.

"You can't do this, Will. It isn't fair. You can't keep picking me up and throwing me away again."

"Give me one more chance," Will said in a low voice. "I made a mistake. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I wasn't. I want—"

"Adelina," her mother called.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Will asked.

"No. How did you know where I was?"

"Lisa—"

He straightened up and looked over her shoulder.

"Mrs. Winter, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I needed to speak to Addie."

"We're eating." Her mother furrowed her brow.

"I'm sorry," Will said.

"Come inside. Shut the door, Adelina. It's no wonder my gas bills are so high. Now, who are you?"

"Will Mansell." He offered his hand. "I'm Addie's boss—temporary boss, and our sales team is attending a training course at a hotel in Shropshire. A place has become available for Addie, but we need to leave immediately."

“Will Mansell. Will Mansell,” Joan repeated. “Oh yes, I know about you. I’ve met your brother.”

Addie’s shoulders slumped and Will’s eyebrows shot up.

“The coach is waiting. I—er—we—” He ran out of power like an exhausted runner.

Her mother could make anyone quake.

“It can wait a bit longer. We’re eating. Come and join us.” Joan’s eyes glittered.

Will followed Addie and her mother. When he walked into the dining room, everyone turned. Will looked like an antelope invited to dine with a pride of lions. She saw his eyes linger on Finn, and Will gave a little smile. She wondered why.

“Give Mr. Mansell your chair and get a stool,” Joan told Addie.

“Call me Will.”

“I thought your name was Noah,” David sniggered.

“That was a private joke,” Will said.

“Addie, introduce everyone,” Joan snapped.

“That’s my brother Finn, his wife Sally and their children Lucifer and Satan.”

“Adelina,” warned her mother.

“Trixie and Harry. My brother Hugh, his wife Miranda and their children Honey and Richard, and you’ve met the family pet.” Addie glared at David, warning him with her eyes not to cause trouble.

Addie was relieved when everyone was eating again. Will had his knee pressed against hers under the table.

“This is delicious, Mrs. Winter,” Will said. “The best Yorkshire pudding I’ve ever tasted.”

Addie wished she could have warned him. But then again...

“More?” Joan picked up another with the tongs and put it on Will’s plate. “More stuffing, more potatoes?”

“Thank you.”

“Eat those Brussels spouts, Addie. Do you think I can’t see them under the cabbage?”

Oh go on, humiliate me why don’t you.

“Brussels sprouts look like giant boogies,” Trixie announced.

“I don’t want any.” Honey pushed her plate away.

Joan glared at Addie. “See what you’ve done.”

“I like your Christmas tree,” Will tried, and when Addie’s mother glanced round, he speared three sprouts from Addie’s plate and stuffed them in his mouth.

And just like that, he was on the way to winning her back.

“I made the lantern,” Honey said. “It’s pink because it’s Barbie’s favorite color.”

“It’s very nice,” Will said.

"Trixie made the star on the top," Honey said.

"And the mouse," Trixie added. "That's Daddy's angel and those green things are supposed to be holly. He made those when he was a baby."

"There were chocolates too, but Richard ate five of them and threw up on Daddy's shoes, so Grandma had to put the others at the top of the tree." Honey giggled.

"What did you make?" Will asked Addie.

"A little felt stocking with a teddy in it."

"I threw that away. It fell apart," Joan said.

Addie looked at David's disintegrating icicle and knew her mother would never throw that away. She felt Will's eyes follow her gaze. When she glanced at him, he squeezed her knee.

"Ever been in trouble with the law, Will?" Finn asked.

Addie gulped.

"I gave up robbing banks a couple of years ago," Will said.

Only Addie laughed. A little too energetically.

"What do you think of Addie's hair?" Her mother looked at Will. "Is it suitable for someone looking for promotion?"

"Minefield ahead," Addie whispered.

"I like it," Will said in a loud voice.

"It looked better longer. She looks very masculine."

Kill me now, God, Addie pleaded.

"I can't see how anyone could think that," Will said and Addie heard the change in his voice.

"It's her own fault." Joan pressed on. "She should spend a bit of money on some nice clothes."

"Addie has a lovely red dress." Will smiled at her.

"Yeah, she does," David said. "Really short and tight."

All eyes turned to Addie.

"Sally's dress is nice," Hugh commented. "You'd look okay in something like that, Addie."

"No, she wouldn't," Joan said. "It would make her neck look even longer. And Sally's got a proper chest. She's more in proportion than Addie."

"Addie takes my breath away whatever she's wearing," Will said and the room went silent.

His knee pressed harder against hers. When he reached under the table for her hand, Addie let him take it.

"She would in that red dress," David muttered.

"We ought to be going." Will swallowed the last mouthful on his plate.

“Not until after you’ve had pudding,” Joan said. “I’ve made a nice apple crumble. Clear the table, Addie, while I talk to Will.”

“We have to leave now,” Addie said. “The coach is waiting.”

“Why wasn’t Addie on this training course in the first place?” Joan was an immovable force. “If she’s not going to get promoted, she may as well look for another job.”

“Why wouldn’t she get promoted?” Will asked.

“Are you going to give her a promotion?” Joan demanded.

“It’s not my company. If it was, I’d make sure Addie’s considerable talents were rewarded.”

“I understand she won’t be accompanying any more coach trips.”

“It’s not cost-effective, but she’s a brilliant coach rep.”

Joan snorted. “We wasted all that money on a degree for her to do that?”

Addie drew herself together ready to explode with fury. She hadn’t asked them for a penny. She’d supported herself.

“I don’t—” began Will, but Joan hadn’t finished.

“The only thing she excels at is—”

“Failing,” Addie said and in the ensuing silence you could have heard a fly sneeze, until Trixie giggled.

“What did you say?” Joan demanded.

“I’m obviously brilliant at being no good at anything, but it doesn’t say much for you, does it? I have half your genes and half Dad’s, so you have to share some responsibility for the way I turned out.”

“I don’t think this is the time or place—” Joan began.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Addie said. “You can be unpleasant to me anytime, but I’m not allowed to retaliate?” She knew she should shut up. She could see Orcs advancing, Dementors on the horizon, but she’d had enough.

“I...ouch.” Addie yelped as Will pinched her thigh.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to leave.” Will got to his feet and pulled Addie to hers. “I don’t want to keep them waiting any longer. Thank you for lunch. Sorry we have to rush off, Mrs. Winter.” Will kept Addie in front of him as he propelled her from the room.

Addie grabbed her jacket and purse as Will raced her out of the house. Once they were in his car and moving down the road, he gave an audible sigh of relief. Addie guessed he was congratulating himself on his escape from the jaws of a T-Rex.

“Does she ever say anything nice to you?” he asked.

Addie tried to think of something, and then tried again. No. Nothing came to mind.

“She can’t be all bad,” Will said.

She was an alien pretending to be human, but Addie couldn't say that. There was an uneasy silence.

"Is she critical like that with your brothers?"

"No."

"What about your father? What was he like?"

"The same. Strict."

"She's a great cook," Will said, his tone a little too bright.

He pulled up at the side of the road.

"I thought the coach was waiting," Addie said.

"No, I told Ed to go. We're driving down."

"So you lied to my mother?"

"I could hardly tell her the truth, we'd never have got away. And why did Finn think I'd been in trouble with the police?"

"No idea," Addie said. "Maybe you can see now why Japan appealed."

Will smiled.

"Why have we stopped?"

"Because I want to thank you for coming with me and because I want to kiss you." He unclipped Addie's seat belt and then his own. "I'm sorry, Addie. I'm sorry I hurt you. I don't know why I thought I could go back to the way things were before I met you. I can't. I didn't want you to have to deal with Vee, but I think you have to. I need you to believe that it's you I want and not her."

Will pulled her into his arms, pressed his lips against hers and Addie melted. She loved being kissed, loved kissing. Will's lips landed feathery touches all along her mouth, teasing it open until he could slip his tongue inside. Addie loved the taste of him, loved the feel of their tongues playing together. She felt a tug of desire as the kiss intensified.

He broke away and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "I'm glad the coach has gone because that means I get time alone with you."

"I get bad travel sickness," Addie said.

"Lying rat." He grinned.

Addie made a mental note to take two tablets when she got back to the house.

"What do I need to pack?" she asked as Will set off again.

"Some old gear for outside activities, plus smarter clothes for the meals. The hotel has a pool and there's a black tie event on Tuesday night. Wear that red dress and I'll give you a special prize."

Will's fingers reached over to clutch hers.

* * * * *

"You're back early," Lisa called as they came in the door. "How did you escape the old dragon?"

"Time off for good behavior," Addie shouted back.

"We've got a visitor," Lisa said.

Will followed Addie into the lounge and walked into her when she stopped dead.

"Vee, what are you doing here?" Will asked.

"I came to see Lisa. What are you doing here? You told me you were going to Shropshire."

"I am. Addie didn't turn up for the coach so I came to get her."

"I thought you said you weren't going." Vee turned to Addie.

"I didn't intend to, but I think there were some crossed wires somewhere. They have to balance the teams, so if I don't go I'll be letting people down."

"Do all your employees get such personal service?" Vee looked sullen.

"Yeah, they do, actually. I've got to pick up Chloe as well. Addie, hurry up and get your bag otherwise the coach is going to leave without us."

Somehow Addie's feet carried her out of the room and up the stairs. Had Vee guessed? Was that why she was there? Did she know what they'd been doing? Why had Will lied? Addie grabbed clothes at random from her drawers, pushed them in a bag and went back downstairs. Lisa stood in the hall mouthing questions. Will and Vee were arguing in the lounge.

"What's going on?" Lisa asked. "Why didn't you tell me that Evelyne was Will's wife?"

"I only found out on Friday night and I've hardly seen you."

"I didn't think you were still seeing him."

"I'm not."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "He's here, isn't he?"

"They're getting divorced," Addie said.

"That's not what she says. Addie, be careful. He's using you. Vee's just told me she's—"

"Great, you're ready." Will came out of the lounge.

"Give me a kiss before you go." Vee clung to Will's arm. "I'm going to miss you." She reached up and took hold of his head.

Addie looked away and then looked back. Will wasn't holding Vee, but their lips were together. It seemed like hours to Addie before he took her bag from her hand and threw it onto the backseat of the car. As they drove off, he tossed his phone into her lap.

"Call Ed, tell him if Vee phones in the next half an hour, he's to say the coach is waiting for us and Chloe. Tell him to switch off his mobile after that in case she rings again."

Addie hesitated.

"Please, Addie. Just do that and then we'll talk."

She scrolled through the numbers and found Ed's.

"Hi, Will."

"It's Addie."

"Stolen his phone?"

"Will says if Vee phones in the next thirty minutes tell her that you're waiting for us and Chloe. After that, switch off your phone so she can't reach you."

"Right." Ed drew out the word. "Who's Chloe?"

"Will's pitiful attempt to make Vee think I'm not the only one he's picking up."

Addie saw Will wince.

"You better get a move on. The weather forecast says snow," Ed said.

"Thanks, Ed. See you down there."

"Addie, I—"

"What?"

"Nothing. See you later."

Addie put down the phone.

"I can't believe she works at the same place as you," Will muttered.

Addie could. God hated her as much as her mother.

"I'm not sleeping with her, Addie. The divorce is going through. I've instructed my lawyer to hurry it up. Whether Vee wants it or not, it *will* happen. I told her there's someone else in my life. She doesn't know who."

"Didn't," Addie corrected. Vee wasn't stupid.

"When I told you I couldn't see you anymore, I was trying to protect you."

"Why did you think I needed protecting?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"Because I know what she can be like. She tries to sabotage all my relationships. A couple of months ago, I was in a restaurant in Greenwich with a client, who happened to be an attractive redhead. Vee walked up and told her I was HIV positive." He looked across. "I'm not. I could just about laugh that off, but she threatened another woman with a knife. That was serious, Addie. I didn't want her to mess things up for us. I didn't want her to frighten you off."

"She's popular at work. Lisa really likes her," Addie said feeling miserable.

"I liked her too. I married her. I must have seen something in her."

"You still do," Addie said.

There was a long silence.

"I'd like you less if you didn't," Addie said.

"It's you that I want, not her." Will reached over and put his hand on her knee.

Addie felt there was more to be said, but didn't want to be the one who said it.

"Ed says snow's forecast."

Will's face lit up. "Brilliant. Did you bring gloves?"

"I'm not sure what I brought. I wasn't thinking straight when I packed."

Addie pulled her bag from the back seat. She looked through the contents.

"Do you want the good news first or the bad?"

"The bad."

"I've packed trousers with a hole in the knee, two dirty tops, a thin jacket and a pair of walking boots. There's no sweater, no winter jacket, no toothbrush, no other shoes."

"What's the good news?"

"No underwear."

Will laughed. "Do we pass anywhere we could buy you a toothbrush?"

Addie looked at her watch. It was nearly three. "Meadowhall shopping center at Sheffield, although this time of year it also goes by the name of Dante's Inferno."

"I didn't hear you mention a dress. I was hoping for that red tube. We'll look for another one. When you come to London, I'll take you shopping."

"London?"

"Come and work for me," Will said.

Addie's heart did acrobatics. "Can a company have two managing directors?"

Will laughed. "I thought I'd start you off as tea lady."

"Not sex slave?"

He groaned.

"This is the turn," Addie said. "Stay in the left-hand lane."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Tell her about the baby, Will repeated in his head, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth because they were trapped in his throat. Addie's eyes were shining. She clutched his hand like a teenager and he couldn't do it. He'd wait. Will wanted to show her how much she meant to him before he told her about the baby, because if he said something now, she'd catch a train home.

He watched her as she took in the elaborate Christmas decorations in the shopping center, the singing penguins and animated polar bears. There was something infectiously child-like about her joy and Will could feel his heart coming back to life, scars inflicted by Vee healed by Addie. He wanted a child just like her, a little girl who was gentle and funny and kind. Not one like Vee who was shallow and pretentious. Will tried to swallow the lump in his throat and failed. What could he offer Addie? He loved her and he couldn't even bring himself to tell her.

By the time they were outside, the temperature had dropped and fat white flakes fell from the sky.

"Oh, it's snowing." Addie tipped her head up and closed her eyes.

"You should have let me buy you a coat." Will put his arm around her.

"I'm fine."

Will saw her shiver. "No, you're not."

He turned but the center was closing. Addie tugged him toward the car.

"I'm not letting you buy me a coat. I didn't want to let you pay for all this other stuff."

Will looked at her face and knew if he'd just told Vee he wanted to buy her a coat, she'd have wheedled her way back into the shopping center and gone straight to the designer labels.

A snowflake dropped onto Addie's cheek and Will kissed it away. Addie pressed herself against him and Will wrapped her in his arms.

"I don't deserve you," he whispered. "But when I'm with you, I feel as though I've started to breathe again." He held her away from his body, his hands on her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. Will felt like his heart had leapt from his chest into Addie's hands. It was up to her whether she gave it back or threw it on the ground. "I've been such a shit to you, Addie. I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me?"

She smiled. "Yes."

"Oh God, that was too easy. Don't forgive me so quickly."

Will lowered his mouth to hers, teasing her upper lip with his teeth before sliding his tongue along the length of her mouth. He kissed her while the snow fell all around them and Will thought he could have stood there forever because he never wanted to let her go.

It continued to snow as they drove through Derbyshire and into Nottinghamshire, but until they turned off the motorway it hadn't settled. Now, Addie saw ridges growing at the sides of the road, trees and bushes sporting their own winter coats.

She had a map book on her lap and a sheet of paper with directions to the hotel. Will said his satellite navigation system was on the blink.

"I am a brilliant navigator," she sang along to a song playing on the radio.

"I'm not so sure about that. This is the third time we've circled Kidderminster. Left or right at the next junction?" Will asked.

Addie scratched her finger over the map but didn't speak.

"Turn the book the right way up," Will said. "It might make me feel more confident."

"I need it that way round so I can tell right from left."

He groaned. "So is it left or right?"

"Shall I guess?"

Will winced. "Tell me the road number."

"The A4117."

Several minutes later Addie spoke again. "Er, did I say the A4117?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Why?"

"I think it should be the A4112."

"So are we lost?"

"No, we're fine. Keep going."

When she hadn't been looking at the snow, Addie had been distracted by Will. Every so often, he'd reach over and run his hand up her leg and Addie would squirm. When she tried to do the same back to him, he made her stop. She could see why and grinned. But every so often, her fingers crept back to his stiff cock and Will moaned.

Everything looked beautiful. Fat snowflakes raced toward the windscreen as though they traveled at warp speed in a galaxy of stars. The landscape was changing into something magical. Hedges were draped with crocheted blankets and stone walls transformed into piles of marshmallows. Snow had softened the edges of the world, hiding the faults and flaws, making it perfect. Addie loved it. She glanced at Will and thought she'd never been happier.

"Next left," she said with more confidence than she felt.

"Are you sure?"

"Do not question the navigator."

Two minutes later, the road began to narrow. "I think I meant right."

"Do you want me to turn round?"

Addie was impressed that he still sounded patient. David would've had his hands round her neck by now. Even Finn lost his temper when Addie navigated.

"Yes, please."

"Where exactly are we, Addie?"

"We're on a red road. Or it might be that yellow one. I can't tell. There's too much snow."

"The roads aren't actually red and yellow." Will laughed.

"Ha ha, very funny. But it's definitely Staffordshire."

"We're supposed to be in Shropshire!" He looked across at her.

Addie grinned. Then it was as if they'd been shaken in a snow globe. Visibility plummeted as white flakes flew at them from every direction.

"Shit." Will slowed right down.

Within a short time the road was covered. If Addie had been the one behind the wheel she'd have stopped, but Will drove on. There were hardly any other vehicles around, but every time she saw headlights, Addie shut her eyes and gripped the side of her seat.

"Have you got your eyes closed?" Will asked.

"Yes."

He chuckled. "Don't worry, Addie. I know how to drive in snow. No slamming on brakes, maintain high revs and take it steady. Do you want a go?"

"No."

"So which way at the crossroads?"

Addie opened her eyes again and shivered when she saw the amount of snow. "I'm very sorry, but I have no idea."

Will skidded to a halt at the junction. "Roughly where are we?"

Addie handed him the map book. "In here."

"And a little more precisely."

"Page fifty-six. The left-hand side."

Ten minutes later they were back on a main road. Conditions had improved and there were signs of civilization.

"I didn't realize Ludlow was so near the arctic," Addie muttered.

"I was going to call at a pub, but I'm not sure we ought to stop now. Are you starving?"

"Only for you," Addie said and then groaned.

"I wish you hadn't said that."

"I was lying. I'm desperate for food. I could eat an elephant." Addie smacked her lips. "Umm, roast elephant."

Will sighed. "You have exotic tastes."

By the time they pulled into the drive of the Richmond Manor Hotel, they'd laughed so much their faces ached. Addie had begun to hope everything would turn out right.

"Addie, we..."

"Yes?"

"We're booked in separate rooms," he began. "But—"

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll be careful. Knock three times fast and three times slow and say, 'Open sesame.' I might let you in."

"Or I could give you a key?"

"That would work."

They walked into the reception to find Genghis standing in front of a blazing log fire talking to Ed.

"Hey, you made it," Ed said. "How was the journey?"

"Terrible. I had a navigator who thought the M42 was a river."

"It was blue on the map," Addie said.

Genghis almost choked on her drink she laughed so hard.

Addie smiled at Ed and went up to the reception desk. "Addie Winter," she said.

"Welcome to Richmond Manor, Miss Winter. You're in Room 27 on the first floor. One key or two?"

"Two." Then stalled for a moment. "Er, in case I lose one. I've lost my house keys twice in the past year." She knew she should shut up before she looked a complete idiot, but no, she kept going, aiming for absolute idiot. "Once down a drain and once in a taxi." The annoying thing was it was true.

The guy pushed two keys across the counter. "Don't worry about these. They're only plastic cards. Breakfast is served from six thirty in the morning room. The pools and hot tubs are open until ten thirty at night. The restaurant has stopped serving dinner, but I could get chef to rustle up something for you."

Addie felt Will at her shoulder, his hand on her bottom, hidden from view by his body.

"Do you want the chef to cook something?" Addie asked.

"So long as it's not elephant."

"But you promised," Addie whispered.

"I was thinking of an omelet," the desk clerk suggested, looking worried.

“Elephant omelet.” Addie licked her lips. “Do they lay eggs?”

“Not sure. Maybe we should go for cheese,” Will suggested.

“Cheese would be fine,” Addie agreed and turned to the clerk. “What room was mine again?”

“Twenty-seven.”

Will had to have heard that, Addie thought, and slipped a key into his hand.

Will collected his own keys and was making for the stairs when Ed pulled him to one side.

“I’ve had ten missed calls from Vee and a vitriolic voice mail demanding to know why the fuck neither you nor I had our phones switched on.”

“I’ll ring her.”

“Have you talked to Addie?”

“Yes, all the way here.” Will smiled. “Ed, she’s just great. She’s so funny and sexy and she doesn’t know it. I don’t think I’ve ever –”

“About the baby,” Ed said.

Will’s smile faded. “Not yet.”

From the moment he had Addie in his car, Will had tried to find the right moment to tell her. It had been on the tip of his tongue several times and then the moment had passed either because Addie was so happy or he’d lost his courage. He had to tell her more than about the baby. He had to be honest and that meant telling her that he’d slept with Vee since she’d come to Leeds. Well, not slept with. Fucked in the bathroom. Only once, but that didn’t make it any better.

If there had never been any chance of Vee and Addie meeting again, he might have risked being selective with the truth, but Vee would do anything she could to ruin this so Will had to take the risk of ruining it himself. He had to tell Addie that he was weak, that he’d said yes to Vee when he should have said no. But later. He just wanted a few nights with Addie without fear of interruption. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, make her believe him.

Addie walked up the red carpeted staircase feeling like a queen. The hotel had once been a stately home, occupied by Lord and Lady somebody or other. Maybe they’d been clock collectors because there were timepieces of every shape and size all over the place. The ticking would have driven Addie mad. Along with the clocks, huge oil paintings of grim-looking people lined the walls.

On the first floor, a long galleried landing led to several bedrooms. Addie’s was at the end. The light was already on in the room. Her mouth fell open as she stepped inside. More paintings and elaborate gilded furniture made the place look like a museum. Addie expected to see a red cord preventing her from entering and signs on

the chairs saying "Do not use". A huge chandelier hung above a sumptuous bed. She dropped her bags, closed the door and explored.

A basket of fruit sat on a side table together with a little box containing four chocolates. Three. Two. Addie sucked the last dark truffle into her mouth and groaned. The bathroom was another marvel, but for its modernity. It had a large, free-standing tub and a separate shower. Twin glass washbasins hovered in midair below illuminated mirrors with crinkled glass edges. This was a different world and she was going to be different in it.

She'd just stripped off to change when the phone rang.

"What are you doing?" Will asked.

Addie smiled when she heard his voice. "Checking to see if I can lick my nipples."

"Oh God." He made a strangled noise.

Addie tucked the phone between her head and her ear, retrieved a newly purchased dress and slipped it on.

"Ooh, I can," she whispered. "But I'd rather you did it. Will? Will?"

Addie became aware that she was talking to no one.

"You little minx," he muttered, closing the door behind him. "You lied."

"Did I?" Addie gave a sly grin.

"I thought I'd better check the key worked." Will pulled her into his arms, sweeping his hands over her bottom to pin her against his body. "I'm next door, but I think I might have given the game away when I asked for two keys because I always lose mine down drains and in taxis."

"You didn't say that?" Addie asked in horror.

"Miss Gullible."

"Mr. Tease."

"Miss Striptease."

Will ran his thumbs over her nipples. Addie's insides clenched and lust surged through her veins in a flood tide.

"One kiss before we go downstairs?" Will asked.

"You know what will happen. We'll never eat."

"You're right. Though it kills me to say it, put on your shoes."

Will couldn't taste the food. It was fuel and that was all. He ordered a bottle of red wine and that was fuel too. All he could think about was getting back upstairs. He could barely keep his hands off her. If the tablecloth had been longer, he might have risked sliding his hand up her thigh and making her come but the cloth wasn't long and the waiter hovered, anxious for them to finish. *Not as anxious as me.* He watched Addie eat, willed her to hurry. His cock ached. His balls ached. His head ached with desire. Will was almost delirious with need.

"My room," he said as they reached the landing.

When the door was shut and the deadbolt engaged, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now where was I?" he asked. "Oh, I remember. About to strip you naked and have you for dessert."

He maneuvered her over to the bed and gently pushed her facedown. The bed dipped as Will positioned his knees on either side of her hips. He lowered the zipper of her dress and slid the material from her shoulders, freeing her arms so he could expose her back. He kissed her neck, nipping and nuzzling until she groaned and then feathered his lips along the top of her shoulders. Will licked down her back, bunching the dress over her hips, wanting to kiss every inch of her. She writhed and gasped, clutching the bedcover as he tormented her all the way to the bottom of her back, rubbing with his lightly stubbled chin, wetting her with his tongue, raking with his teeth.

"OhmyGodohmyGodohmy God," Addie mumbled.

It filled Will with joy that he could drive her as crazy as she drove him. He slid his hands under her body and cupped her breasts. Addie lifted herself up on her elbows and tipped her head back to his. As Will caressed her, he moaned deep in his throat.

"God, Addie. You are so sexy. All I could think about while we were eating was the fact that you weren't wearing a bra."

"Good job I didn't tell you what else I'm not wearing."

Will shifted backward so he could lift her rumpled dress. No panties. Her luscious curvy backside sent a spiral of desire twisting through his limbs, before it rushed to center on his rock-hard cock.

"Christ, Addie, you really are trying to kill me."

He dragged off the dress, flipped her onto her back and leaned with his mouth hovering over her face. Addie clutched his waist, hooked her legs around his knees and pulled him closer. As she tried to maneuver her lips under his, Will landed a dozen quick-fire kisses any place but and made her laugh.

"Hey, who's in control here?" he asked.

Will retreated and took hold of her feet, still wearing the sexy shoes he'd bought her. Bringing one foot to his mouth, he kissed her toes as he unfastened the clasp. "I don't know whether to shag you senseless or carry on kissing you all over."

"Can't you do both?"

One shoe hit the floor, the other followed. She was naked and he was still dressed and Will wondered how long he'd last once his clothes were gone. He lay beside her and rolled onto his back, lifting Addie to straddle him. Their gentle kisses morphed within moments to deep and passionate. Will blazed with the need to be inside her. His hands wrapped around her bottom and tugged her down on him so even through his clothes, she would feel him hard against her stomach. When Addie's hand slipped

between their bodies and pressed against his erection, Will gasped at the flash of heat and pleasure that shot through him.

Addie rubbed his cock and smiled. "I don't think this is going to work if you keep your clothes on. How about you do a slow and sexy striptease?"

Will slid from underneath her and stood. "Don't blink."

She giggled as he kicked off his shoes, yanked off his socks, ripped his shirt from his back, sending buttons flying, and scrambled out of his dark blue chinos and boxers.

"Well you failed on the slow but full marks for the sexy," she said.

His stomach was flat and hard, his hips narrow. She loved the dark wiry line that ran down the center of his body to his groin, and knelt to entwine her fingers in the thicker hair around his cock. The tip glistened with pre-cum and Addie ran her finger over the velvety, mushroom-shaped head, then put the finger in her mouth. Will released a strangled groan.

"Yum."

He lay next to her. "That all I get? Yum?"

"Lots of bold citrus, strawberry, raspberry and cherry flavors with the aroma of coffee and chocolate, which turns in the mouth to a lively mineral tease with hints of roasted pistachio and seaweed."

"I think I liked yum better." Will laughed.

"You have the most beautiful body," she whispered.

"Nowhere near as beautiful as yours. But I just have to see one thing. Show me how you lick your own nipples."

It wasn't as easy as she'd thought, but her struggles didn't make him laugh, only groan louder.

"You're such a naughty girl."

Addie squirmed with delight.

"My turn." Will gently squeezed a nipple with one hand as he bent to take the other in his mouth. His hot, wet tongue curled around the tip of her breast and Addie wrapped her arms around his shoulders as her brain began to fog.

Will's hand slipped between her legs and he nudged her clit with his thumb. The fog thickened. Impossible to focus on anything, all Addie could do was surrender to sensation and enjoy the ride. Her limbs trembled. Her body blazed. It hurt to breathe. The feeling of Will's finger rubbing, teasing, wound her on and on. Pressure built in Addie's core, the tightly twisted muscles on the point of an explosive unraveling when Will withdrew his hand from her pussy and stroked her stomach.

Addie growled. She caught the smirk on his face and narrowed her eyes.

"Good things come to those who wait," Will said.

"Bad things happen to those who make people wait and if you make me—"

His lips landed on hers and shut her up and his fingers returned to the place where she needed them. Tongue and finger thrusting together and Addie's world blurred again. Two fingers inside her. *Oh God, three?* She felt like there was a red button that Will kept sliding over but wouldn't press. Addie tried to buck into his hand but he wouldn't let her. Close, she was so close but he wouldn't take her over the edge.

Addie dragged her mouth from his. "Will. Please."

"Don't you want good things to happen?"

"You're killing me," she gasped.

He increased the speed of his thrusts, twisted his fingers and she fell apart, broke to pieces, sobbing and shuddering in his arms.

"God, Addie. I never want to let you go." He kept pressing that place inside her, the rhythm insistent, the tension surging up her spine to her skull until she unraveled again. *Could this kill me?* she wondered. *Could I die of too much pleasure?*

He let her rest then and her world slowly came back to rights as her breathing steadied

She gave a deep sigh. "Wow."

"Only wow?" Will asked. "Is that like yum?"

Addie opened her eyes. "I feel like you've introduced me to a parallel universe. I didn't know I could feel like this. Is it all men who can do this, or just you?"

"Just me. It's a very special gift."

She ran her hand down the smooth silky length of his cock, always amazed by how hard he felt. Addie cupped his velvety sac and stroked it with her thumb.

"No touching," Will said, lifting her hand away. "I want to be inside you for more than a couple of seconds and if you play with my balls, I won't even get that far."

He grabbed a condom, slid it on and moved over her. Addie wrapped her legs around him as Will eased inside her, his gaze fixed on her face. She cupped his cheeks, ran her fingers over his taut jaw. Will's eyes closed as he began to thrust. Addie could feel every inch of him driving into her, the hard, thick length so hot inside her she imagined herself catching fire. She *was* on fire. She loved him.

Oh God, I love him.

"Christ, Addie." Will gasped as he stiffened in the grip of his climax. "See what you do to me?"

He pulled her into his arms, smothered her with kisses, but didn't say the words Addie wanted to hear.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Down in the conference room, Addie pinned her name badge to her sweater. She picked up the folder of information about the training course and looked around at the chattering groups of people. Even the sight of the sad group of individuals from the Leeds office waving at her from the other side of the room, didn't dampen her spirits. Though the idea of Genghis, the Harlot, Beth and Graham ever forming a team of any kind seemed as likely as her mother telling her she looked nice.

Having spent the whole night with Will, cuddling him as if he were an oversized teddy bear, Addie wanted to sing and dance for joy. He made her feel safe and wanted, and even if he hadn't been able to bring himself to say he loved her, Addie knew he did. And after all, she hadn't said the words to him.

"Oh, you're with Graham," Genghis said when she saw Addie's badge.

Addie and Graham were the only ones with blue badges. The others from Leeds had yellow.

"Swap with me," Genghis ordered.

"You can't," said Ed, who'd come up behind them. "Each team needs a good balance of personalities. We need you with yellow, Ge – Delia."

"You don't have a badge," Charlotte said.

"I'm observing." Ed grinned. "Keeping a close eye on what you get up to."

"Ooh." As Charlotte fluttered her eyelashes, Addie sloped off to get coffee. There was no sign of Will. They'd not come down for breakfast. They'd been too busy. Addie's cheeks flamed.

"What *are* you thinking?" Ed asked at her ear.

Addie nearly dropped her drink. Ed was good at sneaking up when she didn't expect him.

"Nothing."

"You look lovely," he whispered. "Very sexy outfit."

Addie wore silver-gray corduroy trousers and a tight green sweater. "Me? You sure you don't think you're talking to Charlotte." The harlot's dress was so tight, Addie was surprised she could breathe.

"No, I'm talking to you," Ed said. "You're the one who looks sexy."

Addie swallowed hard. "I was aiming for smart and sophisticated."

"Well, you missed."

"Seats, please," a red-haired woman shouted, banging her clipboard on a table.

"Sit with me." Ed pulled out a padded wooden chair for Addie on the back row. On each seat was a pen, pencil and notepad, all bearing the Magelan logo.

Addie ran the pencil through her fingers. "I adore new pencils," she whispered.

Ed raised his eyebrows and Addie took it as a message to carry on. "I like hard ones though, not HBs. This is an HB which is a pity, but it feels lovely. It's not a nasty, cheap one. 2H is best. It stays hard and it doesn't get all over your fingers."

Ed stared at his pencil. "I had no idea."

"Of course they last much longer too, unlike the HBs, which are soft and messy."

He leaned toward her. "You have to stop now, Addie. There's only so much I can take of this."

She gulped. "I'm talking about pencils, Ed."

"I heard you like eating them. Will couldn't tell me for laughing."

Addie sighed. "It wasn't funny. I thought I was going to choke."

"Good morning, everyone."

Addie looked up when Will began speaking. She tried to look bright-eyed and attentive, but started to think about how she felt lying next to him, how he smelled sweet and spicy at the same time, and she lost track of what he was saying. She stared at his soft lips and ran her tongue slowly over her own, imagining she was kissing him. His eyes settled on hers and he faltered.

"I – er, you – umm," Will mumbled.

Addie felt a surge of naughtiness and sucked her finger as she looked at him. She heard Ed laughing quietly.

"I'd er – I'd like to introduce – er – Isaac Taylor," Will stuttered.

A small man about Will's age stepped forward. He wore a black sweater and black trousers that somehow didn't go with his happy face and the huge dimples in his cheeks. He looked like a Santa Claus who'd fallen down a sooty chimney.

"I'm Isaac Taylor. Good morning everyone and welcome. Thanks for your introduction, Will. I thought you'd forgotten my name."

Everyone laughed and Will gave a rueful smile.

"I think most of us have had dealings with the Mansell brothers' consulting business at one time or another. They blow into your quiet lives like whirlwinds, promising to improve your productivity, energy and commitment. Hell, they'll even promise you a new life. And what's the bit of advice we all remember? How we can sit on our chairs more effectively."

Will pointed an imaginary gun in Isaac's direction.

"We should have tried that with you," Ed said in Addie's ear.

"Seriously, folks, this course is going to equip you to be stronger team players. Over the next few days you'll gain a better understanding of your strengths and weaknesses. You'll learn something about yourself that you didn't know before. Some of you will be

looking for the opportunity to demonstrate your leadership skills, but remember teams need players as well as a captain. All thirty-one of you—thirty-two has fallen off the train on the way here and broken her ankle—will have the opportunity to develop as individuals while working toward being more effective team members. But how much you take away from this course depends on you. I expect some of you already think this is a waste of time and that we're a load of losers."

Addie heard Graham's distinctive donkey laugh.

"If you still think that on Wednesday, you'll be the loser."

Graham stopped laughing.

"Now, the weather has affected our plans, so the lion taming, blindfolded orienteering and naked sumo wrestling have been put on hold. Your group leaders will run through the changes. If you look in your folders you'll see where you're meeting. My last words—the more you put into this course, the more you'll get out of it. You've time for one more coffee before we split up. Enjoy yourselves."

There was a smattering of applause.

"What's your role in all this, Ed?" Addie asked.

"Looking to see if any of you show a flair for motivating and delegating."

She smiled. "If you get me another coffee, I'll be incredibly grateful."

"I'm not falling for that. Get it yourself." Ed laughed.

"Blue team, this way. Come on. Don't waste time chattering."

Addie looked up to see a floundering guy beckoning her. Graham and the rest of the blue badges stood in line behind him, poking their heads out either side like some multi-colored hydra.

"Could you break my ankle?" Addie whispered.

"Later," said Ed and winked.

Addie loved Ed's eyes. She couldn't ever imagine him sad.

Addie's group met in the library. There were seven of them—four guys, three women plus the group supervisor, Justin. Tony, the man who'd dragged her away from Ed, set about establishing his position as dominant silverback gorilla.

"Sit down everyone and I'll read out the first challenge," he said and grabbed the single chair facing the fire.

Addie sat on one of the two couches perpendicular to the fireplace. A guy called Bernie sat one side of her and a dark-haired beauty named Phaedra on the other. Addie turned to introduce herself.

"Hi, I'm—"

"Let's get on with it," Tony interrupted. "The quicker we get started, the best chance we have of winning."

"Hey, hold on."

There was a sudden silence. Even the fire stopped crackling. Addie waited to see who'd spoken. *Oops.*

"Don't you think we ought to get to know a bit about each other?" Addie asked.

Tony snorted. "We can all read. Our names are on our badges. We have thirty minutes to complete the first challenge and you want to swap recipes and makeup tips?"

Addie bristled. It was bad enough she had a domineering mother. No way would she let this guy trample all over her. "A couple of minutes saying hello isn't going to be wasted. This course is about more than winning. How can you work effectively with people if you know nothing about them?"

Tony looked at his watch. "Fine. I'm Tony Fell, marketing director of Magelan's."

Addie crumpled inside. *Shit.*

"Phaedra Sutton, HR director."

"Bernie Dunn, I manage a travel agency in Knightsbridge."

"Louise Shaw, the same in Islington."

Addie's heart sank so fast, she could feel it tickling her toes. How could she make what she did sound either interesting or important?

"James Bean, deputy marketing director."

"Graham Dixon, office manager, Leeds."

That was stretching it, Addie thought. But so could she.

"Addie Winter, photocopier controller, Leeds," she said stretching it even further.

She didn't miss the sneer that Tony cast her way, but everyone else laughed.

"Is there anything more you want to know? Like whether we're married or single, or can we get on with it now?" Tony snapped.

"Go ahead." Addie maintained her sunny smile and crumpled a little more inside.

She listened as he went through the first challenge which involved making a weight-bearing transportation system using paper, straws, string and a bag of marbles. There was no discussion. Alpha male Tony took charge, barked orders and everyone jumped. He glared at Addie a few times, but she said nothing, just folded and glued and wished she was back in bed, wrapped in the sheets and stuck to Will.

"Finished," Tony declared. "Eight minutes and thirteen seconds to spare. Well done, everyone. Good team effort."

"It's great, Tony," James said. "Excellent idea. Works really well."

The towers already sagged. Addie fought a snigger.

"It might have worked better if the paper had been folded three times," Bernie said in a quiet voice.

"It doesn't matter so long as it works," James said.

"How does everyone else feel about that?" Justin asked.

“Getting the job done as a team, to a satisfactory standard, within the time allocated was the challenge, and we met it. End of story.” Tony looked around, daring anyone to beat their chest harder. Addie had learnt her lesson. Her lips were zipped, glued and stapled.

There was silence.

“What do you think, Addie?” Justin asked.

That served her right, she thought. But since she’d already upset Tony and wasn’t going to be working at Magelan’s much longer, she had nothing to lose.

“If that was the challenge – fine. If the challenge was to involve all the team equally in deciding what we did and how we did it – not fine. If the challenge was to produce the best possible design – not fine.” She stopped. The hole she’d dug was deep enough.

Tony locked his arms across his chest. “So, do you have a better idea?”

“No, I’m useless at design and technology, but Bernie has spent his life building model planes so he could have had some good suggestions about weight and balance.”

Bernie stared at her, his mouth open. “I don’t build planes.”

Addie smiled at him. “But you might have. We could have found out before we started if anyone had any particular talents that would have helped us, but we didn’t.”

“Did anyone?” Tony asked.

He had a talent for lip-curling, Addie thought. She prayed for an amateur engineer. Silence.

Tony’s sneer turned to a nasty smile. “Well, if we need anything photocopied, we’ll be sure to ask you.”

“Please do.” Addie grinned. “I’m very good at it.”

Everyone but Tony laughed.

Addie started to enjoy herself. She didn’t care what these people thought. She’d never see them again. She didn’t have to impress anyone.

“Addie made a relevant comment,” Justin said. “Before you start the next challenge, spend a little time discussing what makes a team work. Remember the size of the team isn’t important. Successful marriages are excellent examples of good teamwork.”

“Teams need a strong leader.” Tony leapt straight in.

Addie wondered what his wife thought about that. “I thought we were talking about teams, not leaders,” she said.

“Teams need leaders, otherwise they go in circles and never make any decisions.” Tony glared at her, challenging her to defy him.

“Teams need effective communication,” Bernie said.

“We have to trust each other,” Phaedra added.

“And support each other,” Louise said.

“Teams should be able to collaborate and share responsibility,” Bernie suggested.

“To succeed we need a purpose, a vision,” Phaedra said.

Addie wondered if they’d all been reading the same book. They could certainly write it.

“And a leader with excellent motivational skills,” Tony said.

Addie couldn’t resist it. “And a big stick and an enormous carrot.”

A smile flashed across Justin’s face.

“That’s enough of that.” Tony picked up an envelope. “To make it fair, we’ll take turns being in charge. James, you lead the next challenge.” He smirked at Addie. “Unless you want us to put names in a hat and draw for it?”

“Is that how you got your job?” Addie asked.

Tony’s face became redder and rounder and Addie wondered if she could make him pop. That would be an interesting challenge.

James opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper. He looked at it for a few moments and then turned it upside down.

“Come on, James,” Tony said, his foot twitching. “What do we have to do?”

“I can’t read it.”

Tony snatched the sheet, scanned it and handed it to Phaedra. “Let everyone have a look,” he said.

When the sheet reached Addie, she gave a brief smile and knew this was Will’s doing. It returned to the hands of James.

“Some sort of code?” James suggested.

“Looks like a language,” Bernie offered.

“That’s what I thought,” Tony announced. “We’re in the library. There’s probably a dictionary. That will be the challenge, to see if we can find it. Louise, you start at that end, take the first two sections. Bernie, follow Louise.”

Addie sat and listened as he took charge again and allocated work to each member of the team.

“Opted out already,” Tony snapped at Addie who had not moved from her seat.

“If you’re not going to take part, what’s the point in being here?” Graham asked. “This is about team building.”

“I don’t need to look for a book,” Addie said. “I know what it says.”

“What?” Tony demanded.

“Coffee and biscuits in the breakfast room at eleven. Be prepared to exchange one of your team members.”

“How do you know?” Phaedra asked.

“It’s Japanese. I have a degree in it.”

A sea of incredulous faces turned in her direction.

* * * * *

At lunchtime Addie slipped upstairs and was disappointed not to find Will in either room. She stared out of the window. It had stopped snowing, the sun was out and the world looked new and clean. The hotel sat on a bluff above a river valley and the water below wound like a slinky black ribbon across a wedding-dressed landscape. Addie wanted to play and went back downstairs.

Outside the hotel, the pristine white grounds ached for a snowman, but Addie had left her gloves in the room. Taking a deep breath of the cold, crisp air, she closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun. How quickly life could change. Misery to happiness in the blink of a Will. She sighed with happiness and then jolted as something punched her in the back.

Some bastard had thrown a snowball. She glanced round and saw Ed tossing a ball of snow from hand to hand. He stood there smiling, his shirt sleeves rolled up, dark trousers crumpled low over his hips and there was a look in his eyes that brought Addie up short. Her heart lurched and she swallowed hard. This was Ed, not Will.

She bent and scooped up enough snow to make a large ball of her own, ignoring her freezing fingers. The first one she threw missed by miles and Ed laughed. The second one fell yards in front of him.

"Come nearer," he called. "I like to give the physically impaired a chance."

Addie stepped forward, throwing a fistful of snow every few feet. Ed ducked each of her pitches until Addie was about ten feet away.

"If you can't hit me from there, I'm going to take you to an optician," Ed said.

The following ball missed, but the one after, the one Ed hadn't seen in her other hand, didn't. It curved in a graceful arc and landed smack on top of his head. He stood stunned for a moment and then shook the snow from his hair and growled like a bear.

"Sucker!" Addie dashed past him toward the house.

The next snowball caught her on the neck. Snow slithered down her back and she squealed.

"You're going to regret that," she said and packed another ball in her hands.

When Will came out of the door, he stared in dismay at the scene unfolding before him. Ed and Addie were behaving like school kids. Addie chased Ed, then Ed chased Addie. Snowball after snowball flew through the air. They were both soaked and Addie was squealing.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Will bellowed and they both froze.

"Having fun," Ed said.

"I'm all wet." Addie shivered.

Will's eyes flashed between the pair of them and he tried to conceal his anger. Addie looked as she always did, sweet and innocent, but Will didn't miss the predatory

gleam in Ed's eye. The look that said, *game on*. Will clenched his fists. Ed grabbed a fistful of snow.

Addie squealed and leapt behind Will.

Now Addie couldn't see his face, Will glared at Ed. "You better get changed, Addie. Ten second start."

When Addie ran, Will moved toward Ed, who let the ball fall from his hand and started to kick snow off his shoes.

"What?" Ed lifted his hands in the air. "We were just playing."

"Don't," Will said, his fists clenched at his sides, his voice barely under control.

"Have you told her you're going to be a daddy?"

Will wanted to punch Ed and not just because of what he'd said.

"I'll tell her. I want us to have a few days of fun."

"This is wrong, Will."

Will walked right up to his brother, their faces inches apart. "It has nothing to do with you. Don't wreck this for me."

Will wanted Ed to answer, say he wasn't trying to, but his brother pushed past him and strode toward the hotel. Staring at his back, Will wondered how long Ed had been looking like that at Addie. He could feel his heart hammering. Had he missed something? Ed could flirt for a living. Was that all this was?

By the time Will reached her room, Addie wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing, just the black shoes he'd bought her the day before, her wet clothes on the floor at her feet. Will's mind converted to a single track, all thoughts of Ed banished.

"Oh Christ," he muttered and pulled her into his arms. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

"I wasn't—"

"I know, I know."

Will kissed her all over her face and neck before he allowed his lips to touch hers, because he knew what would happen when they did. When Addie opened her mouth and allowed his tongue in, the intensity of feeling that swept through him made Will forget to breathe. She had her own pure taste and intoxicating scent. Will groaned into her mouth as her hands moved to his trousers. When she unfastened the button, unzipped him and slid her hand inside his pants, he trembled.

Addie pushed his shirt aside and held him in her fist, rubbing him across her belly piercing. Moments later she was on her knees, had his cock in her mouth and Will was digging deep for control. She sucked gently and then harder and he pushed his fingers into her wet hair. Will sidestepped onto another planet. It had been a long while since anyone had done this for him. Vee wouldn't, not even with a flavored condom. He'd forgotten how good it felt to have soft warm lips wrapped around him. She trailed her

tongue from the tip to the base and back again, then licked at his crest, fluttering her tongue until Will's knees shook with the effort of holding back. When she opened her mouth and engulfed as much of him as she could take, Will's balls drew up.

"Addie, if you don't stop I'm going to come in your mouth," he whispered.

She paused, looked up at him and even that threatened to send Will tumbling out of control.

"Is that bad?" she asked.

Will moaned. "No, sweetheart. I'm just warning you."

She smiled and wrapped her lips and this time her hand as well around him. He was lost. The fact that he was dressed and she was naked except for those shoes was such a turn-on that he was surprised he hadn't exploded already. A few more sucks and Will felt the orgasm seize his brain. White lightning flashed down his spine, his balls exploded and his cock jerked in Addie's mouth. *Oh God, I'm going to choke her.* But she kept him where she wanted him, swallowed and swallowed until the last spasm had died away. When Addie let him out of her mouth, she licked him clean. Will needed to lie down.

"Did I do it right?" she asked.

He was incapable of speech. He sank to his knees and wrapped his arms around her, pressing his face into her hair. *Oh God, her first time.*

"Why is it called a blowjob? Should I have blown and not sucked?"

Will shook his head and gave a slow smile. "I think it's because it makes a guy blow his load."

"Guys like it, right?"

"This guy does."

Addie gave him a shy smile. "I liked doing it."

"Thank fuck for that. Now it's my turn," he said and pushed her back on the bed.

Chapter Thirty

Addie was only late for the afternoon session by a few minutes. When she walked into the library, Tony sat tapping his watch with his nail like a rabid woodpecker. There had been a change to the schedule, and instead of a hostage-taking scenario, they had to create a snow sculpture. Every team had been designated an area in a field at the side of the hotel, Wellington boots and waterproofs provided.

Addie's blue team came up with some bizarre suggestions, including a chess board— how would they do the black pieces? A flock of sheep—how would they see them? Finally, they voted for Louise's idea of the Titanic hitting the iceberg.

Once they were out working in the snow, it became clear Louise gave the best creative input, and everyone, except Tony, followed her instructions. His face grew redder and redder as he dragged piles of snow to their marked-off section. Addie guessed he intended them to construct a full size model of the ship.

"Look, I've made Leonardo and Kate," Addie said holding up two columns of snow.

"Which is which?" Bernie asked.

Addie stuck a lump on the front of one column and two lumps higher up on the other. Bernie laughed. But it gave them the idea for life boats containing miniature snow people. They each made one.

When the whistle blew, Addie found herself next to Will.

"Enjoy that?" he asked.

"I can't remember when I had so much fun. Oh yes, lunchtime," she said with a grin. "So, what do you think?"

Will looked at the other snow sculptures—a huge castle, a family of four on a couch watching TV and an enormous snowman and snowwoman in a compromising position.

"They're all good. It's going to take us ages to choose," he said.

"Hot chocolate in the library," Justin shouted.

"See you there?" Will asked.

"No, I'm going to test that bikini you bought me," she said.

Will groaned. "I'll make this a quick decision."

* * * * *

Addie shuffled through the glass conservatory in her hotel slippers, slid past the indoor pool toward the outer door. She pulled the hotel bathrobe tight around her body before stepping under the covered walkway that led to the outdoor pool and hot tub.

Judging by the unblemished snow, she was the first to risk frozen toes. She pushed the slippers into one of her pockets, along with her key, before leaving the robe on a bench. Addie hopped through the snow, trying not to yelp, and jumped straight in.

As she sank beneath the warm water, she sighed in pleasure. She'd been chilled that afternoon, but this was lovely, like swimming in a huge bath. She popped to the surface and set off through the steam to the far end, her wet hair crisping in the cold air. There was something decadent about swimming outside in the middle of winter, and even though she had to keep ducking under to defrost her head, Addie began to unwind.

"Is it warm?" Louise called from under the walkway.

"Fabulous," Addie shouted back.

Louise stood at the far end in a swirl of steam, a larger shape appeared behind her, then there was a squeal and a huge splash. James popped up next to Addie.

"Wow," he gasped. "This is great."

"James, you pig," Louise spluttered as she swam toward them.

"You were dithering," James said, edging behind Addie.

"Who won the snow sculpting?" she asked.

"The sex-crazed snowmen. Tony was apoplectic." James grinned.

"Oh God, that will be my fault," Addie said.

"No, he's blaming Lou."

Addie glanced at Louise, who was treading water next to her.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm his favorite detestable person," Addie said. "It won't take much for me to regain my rightful place. If he gets in the pool, I'll drown him."

"Everyone else stayed inside," James said. "The call of the bar was too strong."

"That's not very team-spirited. Just when I've come up with a new challenge. Who can lie longest on a sun lounger?" Addie said.

Louise grimaced. "The sun beds are covered in six inches of snow."

"Is that all? I thought it was more. Never mind. Want to play?" Addie asked.

"Not me," Louise said at once.

"I will." James swam in a circle around her. "Go on, Lou. It will be fun. We can jump in the hot tub together afterwards."

"Oh, all right."

Addie smiled. She'd wondered about those two. She also wondered if anyone had thought something similar about her and Will, and hoped they had. She didn't like it being a secret. Maybe when she wasn't working for Magelan's it would be different. Addie felt hands around her ankles and she plunged underwater. She came up coughing. Will lurked a few feet away, trying to look innocent.

She put on her just-you-wait face and swam toward him. Will launched a stream of water at her from his mouth.

"We're having a competition," Louise said.

"What are you planning?" Will asked.

"Lying on a sun lounger as long as you can," Addie said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ed slip into the pool and dip under the water.

"I'm in," Will said. He swam around to the back of Addie and whispered in her ear.

"I was wondering how I was going to deal with a certain issue that's come up. Lying in the snow should —"

Will disappeared under the surface and Ed popped up in his place.

"Was he annoying you?" Ed asked.

"No." Addie laughed.

"Well, he was annoying me," Ed said.

An arm came up from the water, wrapped around Ed's neck and pulled him under.

Addie swam out of the way as the water churned around the pair of them. There were more people in the pool now and Louise tried to persuade them to join in the challenge. Only the men agreed.

"How about you, Ed?" Louise asked.

"No way. I'll sit in the hot tub and count down from five once you're all on the side." He hoisted himself out. His whole body glistened and steamed as he moved across the snow to the Jacuzzi. Addie's breath caught in her throat. He looked — *Oh God, what's wrong with me?*

"Stop ogling my brother's bum," Will said at her ear.

"All out," Ed shouted.

Addie began to freeze as soon as she levered herself from the water. Everyone stamped up and down, clouds of water vapor pouring off their bodies.

"Ready?" Ed called. "Five. Four. Three. Two. One and a half. One and a quarter."

"Ed!" Will yelled.

"Go."

Louise had barely left her outline on the lounger before she squealed and headed for the hot tub.

Addie lay back and stared into the dark gray sky. A fat snowflake landed on her nose and she laughed.

"Christ, Addie, it's not funny," Will said at her side, his teeth chattering.

She scooped a handful of snow, molded it into a ball, and lobbed it straight onto his stomach.

Will gave a cry of anguish. "That's cheating."

"Oh, sorry." She threw another snowball at James and then yelped as several landed on her.

In the frenzy of flying snow, two more gave up and jumped into the pool. Addie had lost feeling in her back. She raised her hand to her head. Stiff hair. James joined Louise in the hot tub and as Addie had somehow expected, only she and Will were left.

"Keep going, Addie," Louise urged. "Don't give in."

"Easy for you to say when you're simmering like cannibal stew. If I stay here any longer I'll have to be chipped off with an ice pick."

Addie jumped up and sprang toward the hot tub, only to slip on the edge and fall headlong into Ed's lap. He pulled her up and she spat out a mouthful of water.

"Sorry. Did I hurt you?" she gasped.

"I'm okay. How about you?" Ed held her by the shoulders.

"I'm fine now I'm in hot water. Except it's so hot it hurts. *Oww.*"

Ed still held her. Addie waited.

"It's okay, Ed, you can let go now."

"Sorry."

But Addie didn't think he looked sorry at all. He looked sad. As Will slid in beside him, Ed let Addie go and sank so only his head remained above the bubbling surface.

"Congratulations," Addie told Will. "You win the prize for being the biggest idiot."

Will submerged his head under the churning water and then came back to the surface.

"Biggest what?" he asked.

"Idiot," Addie said.

"I thought that's what you said. Come over here."

James moved so Addie could sit next to Will. All at once, the snow came down more thickly, coating their hair and catching on their eyelashes.

"We look like those monkeys that sit in the hot springs in the Nagano mountains in Japan," Addie said.

"We are monkeys," Ed said. "We could be in the bar having a drink."

Under the water, Will's hand stroked her thigh. He slipped one finger inside her bikini and Addie slid a little further down in the water out of reach. Part of her was a bit hurt. James had his arm around Louise, yet Will wanted to touch her only where he couldn't be seen. But when Louise and James got out and she, Ed and Will were left, Will's hand moved up to her breast, clearly visible to Ed. Addie knew what Will was doing and squirmed away.

"You let me win," Will said.

"Is that what you think? Well, you'd have won in the end, so what would have been the point of another ten minutes of torture?"

"Why are you so sure I wouldn't have given in?"

Addie turned to Ed. "Would that have happened?"

“He never gives up. He’d have turned into an ice cube first.” Ed’s voice seemed subdued.

“See?” Addie turned back to Will. “Only now you’ll never know whether I let you win.”

Will groaned and Ed chuckled. “It took me fifteen years to learn that trick.”

“Want to try again?” Addie asked. “Ed can judge.”

“No, I have something else in mind that doesn’t require an audience,” Will said. “And if get back on that lounge I won’t be fit for it.”

With a speed that made her jump, Ed sprang out of the hot tub and strode off.

“What’s the matter with him?” Will asked.

Addie stared after Ed. She knew and so did Will.

Chapter Thirty-One

Addie opened the packet of stick-on bra cups and studied the diagram.

"Can't you wear the dress without them?" Will asked.

"No."

He leaned against the bathroom door watching her walk around in red lace pants, black shoes and nothing else.

"Why do we have to leave the hotel for the meal?" she asked.

Just what Will was thinking. "Jack likes to use a restaurant in Ludlow that belongs to a friend of his."

"So Jack's going to be there?"

"Yep. He'll be interfering tomorrow too, and presenting prizes."

"Ooh, am I in line for one?"

"You should be." Will sat down before he fell. His heart was extracting blood from his legs and pumping it to his groin.

Addie peeled off the adhesive tape, stuck it to the edge of the cup and pressed it under her breast.

"Is there a right and left?" he asked.

Addie's gaze flashed to his. "Why? Does it look wrong?"

"I just wondered."

She took her hand away and the cup flopped forward. Will earned a glare for his snicker. He tightened his lips when she fastened two of her fingers together. From then on it was all downhill. By the time Addie had the tape in place on the second cup, the first was peeling off. Addie clamped her hands over each breast.

"Don't laugh," she said.

"Want me to help?"

"You won't keep your hands still."

After a couple of minutes, Addie let go. The two pieces of foam dropped to the carpet.

"What did I do wrong?" she wailed.

Will retrieved them and examined the edges. "These aren't going to stick to anything. Are you sure you weren't supposed to stick the tape on you?"

"God, I give in." Addie pulled on the dress. "I feel half naked. I *am* half naked."

Will gulped. Her back was bare and her breasts covered only by strips of diaphanous material secured at her neck by a chain. A fast movement would reveal

everything. A slow movement would have a similar effect. In fact, she didn't even have to move at all.

"Well, that's that. I don't know why I let you buy me this dress. I can't go to the ball, evil fairy godfather."

"Don't you have it on back to front?"

"No, It's...oh." She rolled her eyes. "Will, I won't be able to move in this in case my boobs pop out."

"Great."

"I mean it."

"They're only little things. No one will notice."

"Bastard."

"Hussy."

"All right, I'll sit with my jacket on."

"Are you going to dance with me with your jacket on too?" he asked.

Addie lifted her face to his. "Dancing?"

Will kissed her nose, then her lips. "I only want to dance with you. I don't want you dancing with anyone else. At all. *Especially not Ed.* "You're mine and I'm yours."

* * * * *

They traveled to the restaurant by coach. Jack Magelan was waiting to shake hands and exchange a few words as each person arrived. When Addie moved in front of him he acted as though she was the invisible woman. She stood with her hand out for a few awkward seconds before moving away, her face burning. Will hadn't noticed, but Genghis shot Addie a puzzled look. For once Addie felt a hint of sympathy from her boss. Addie lingered nearby and watched. She was the only person Jack treated like that. Maybe he knew she was leaving.

Will came up with two glasses of champagne and handed one to her.

"Cheer up," he said.

Addie smiled. Who cared about Jack Magelan and his hairy palms.

"You look a bit silly in that jacket. Aren't you going to take it off?"

"No, I'd look even sillier without it."

"No, you won't. You look delicious. Please take it off."

Addie surrendered it to the cloakroom in bad grace and came back, looking for Will, her arms pinned at her side. She felt self-conscious, sure everyone was staring at her. The least Will could do was stay with her. But he was talking to Jack, so she went to check the seating plan. Addie was disappointed to see each group had been put together. Will and Ed were with Jack and Isaac.

A loud voice announced it was time to eat. When she got to her table, Addie found her place card between Tony and Graham, and groaned. If she hadn't messed around with her jacket she'd have had time to move her name. Now it was too late.

"I'm not happy about the judging of the snow sculpture," Tony said the moment he sat down. His eyes homed in on Addie's chest. "We should...have known choosing...the Titanic would...be a disaster."

At the other end of the table Louise was turning into a lobster.

"Have you always been a male-chauvinist Vietnamese potbelly pig?" Addie asked.

To his credit, Tony laughed. "Yes, and proud of it."

"We did all vote for the Titanic, Tony." Phaedra pointed out. "Even you."

To Addie's relief, Tony turned to lecture Bernie about Hawaii. Graham was busy boring Phaedra about Australia, and Louise and James had their heads glued together. Addie wished she was with Will. She risked a glance. He looked her way and smiled. She cheered up.

Addie was about to devour a scrumptious-looking *crème brûlée* when she heard a collective intake of male breaths. She looked up and was zapped by a massive jolt of electricity. Vee glided across the room wearing a long white wool coat with a fluffy faux fur collar. She shook a few flakes of snow from her head and her hair swirled around her face like a silky river. Jack jumped to his feet and kissed her on each cheek.

"Who's that?" Graham asked.

"Will's wife," Tony said. "Met her once. French woman. Gorgeous. I thought they'd separated."

Will stood and took the coat from Vee's shoulders, then passed it to a waiter. Addie took comfort from the fact that Will's face looked thunderous. When Vee's gaze began to sweep the room, Addie picked up her wine and took a huge gulp. When she risked another glance, a chair had been placed between Will and Jack, and Vee sat smiling like a cartoon cat. Addie told herself not to look again. Instead, she stared at her dessert but couldn't have eaten it to save her life.

"Don't you want that, Addie?" Graham asked.

She pushed it toward him. Speaking was beyond her. It was a miracle she could breathe. Something else was going to happen, Addie could feel the inevitability of it. It was like watching a plane spiraling out of the sky, knowing she was powerless to do anything except watch the disaster unfold.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jack said, tapping a spoon against a glass. "Attention, please."

Addie only half-listened as Jack thanked them for attending the training course, asked them to take the lessons they'd learned back to their part of the business and help it grow.

“Try not to spill too much blood tomorrow making sure your team comes out on top, because whilst winning is important, it isn’t everything,” Jack said.

“Yeah, right,” Tony whispered. “I’ll remind him of that at the next board meeting.”

As Jack spoke, waiters moved around the room pouring champagne. Jack made jokes and people laughed. Addie tried to pull herself together. This wasn’t the end of the world. Will hadn’t expected Vee to turn up.

“Do we all have some bubbly?” Jack asked. “Great. Now, apart from toasting our success as a company and welcoming the staff of Booth’s to our fold, we have something else to celebrate. Two people in this room are pretty soon going to be admitted into a special club. Will Mansell found out a week ago he’s going to be a father. So I’d like to make a toast. To fatherhood.” Jack raised his glass. “To Will and Vee and their future little bundle of joy.”

Oh, Addie was wrong. It *was* the end of the world.

As Vee flung her arms around Will and laughed, Addie was frozen in time while the world carried on around her. The pain flooding her body was so severe she was quite sure people could see her distress. She wanted to run, but although she’d stood for the toast with everyone else, her feet refused to move. She watched in amazement as her hand picked up the champagne and raised it in the air. Treacherous fingers brought the glass to her lips, but she didn’t drink. The liquid spat its bubbles onto her face, cheering her stupidity. Addie sank down.

“Why did the stupid twit get pregnant if they’re not together anymore?” Graham muttered.

For a moment, Addie liked him.

“Although, I wouldn’t mind giving her a root myself,” he added.

And the moment was over. Addie’s body might not have been capable of movement, but her mind tossed like a rudderless yacht. She had no energy left to do anything other than breathe and even that was an effort.

Around her, people began to leave their tables and congregate at the bar. Someone turned up the music. Louise and James went to dance under a swirling disco ball that peppered the room with light. Graham shot over to Genghis, and Tony disappeared. Addie sat alone at the table, struggling with the most terrible emptiness in her heart, wondering if there was any way to get a train or a bus home. And then she saw Vee walking toward her and knew it was too late to do anything.

Vee sat on Tony’s chair.

“Hi, Addie.”

Her voice sounded normal. Addie wasn’t sure she could manage that trick.

“Congratulations,” she said. Too squeaky. *Damn.*

“Thank you. We’re so excited.”

We. They were we. “How many weeks?” Addie gulped her wine.

"I think it's seven." Vee lowered her voice. "But to be honest, it could be less than two. We got a bit carried away after I came up from London." She giggled. "I think Will was making up for not seeing me for a while."

Addie had thought she lay at the bottom of the hole, but it turned out there was further to fall. The day she and Will had so much fun at Robin Hood's Bay, the day Addie had lost her virginity, the day Will let her run from his bed, that same day he'd welcomed Vee into it. In everything else that had happened, it seemed the worst betrayal of all.

Vee leaned closer. "Will and I lost our first baby. I was in a car accident and the baby died."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Addie couldn't take in what Vee was saying. Did Vee really expect her to feel sorry for her? Grief swamped Addie, huge waves pounding her down into the sand.

"Will blamed himself. It almost destroyed us. We've been through a rocky patch, but now we have another chance. Will was so thrilled last week when he found out I was pregnant."

Addie shivered, her skin clammy with shock. She picked up her champagne with trembling fingers, drained the glass and looked at Tony's untouched drink.

"Will's always wanted lots of children." Vee smiled. "I'm not too keen on the names he has in mind. I had to veto Indiana and Maverick." She laughed, the shrill noise cutting Addie like a knife.

Addie had intended the alcohol to numb her, but instead she felt sick.

"I know I'm not supposed to mind what I have, but I'd love a boy. I want him to look just like Will. Don't you think he's good-looking? I bet everyone at work fancies him. Do you? Does Chloe? Which one is she?"

Vee still smiled. Predator's teeth. Addie's meal gave her a warning that it no longer wished to remain in her stomach. She swallowed hard.

"If you'll excuse me, I need the loo."

Addie got to her feet and knocked over her chair as she dashed from the table.

Will hadn't thought he could feel much worse until he saw Vee with Addie. His first inclination was to rush over, and then he realized there was no point because Addie would never forgive him for this and he could never forgive Vee.

"Do something," Ed said at his ear.

"What's the point?"

"Addie's the point. Do you want me to go over there?"

Will shook his head.

"Then sort it out," Ed snapped.

Addie's face had the pallor of someone who was going to throw up. Will felt the same way. As he neared the table, she bolted and he was left with Vee.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

Vee helped herself to champagne.

"You shouldn't be drinking when you're pregnant." Will stopped himself moving the glass out of reach.

"A little champagne won't hurt."

Will clenched his fists, counted to five and took a deep breath. Nothing helped. He still boiled with rage. "What are you doing here?"

"Jack and I thought it would be a good idea to—"

"Jack? What does this have to do with Jack?"

"You know how fond he is of me." Vee smiled. "I told Jack that I didn't think you and Addie should be near each other when I wasn't around. And don't try to look innocent. I'm not that naïve. I saw the way she looked at you at the Christmas party with her stupid cow eyes. I saw the way you looked at her at her house. Anyway, you got off lightly. I could have made a big scene and accused her of stealing my husband."

Will closed his eyes for a moment, hoping for a miracle. He didn't get one. Vee hadn't vanished in a puff of smoke. "You and I are not together anymore. How many more times do I have to say it? The divorce is back on track. Three weeks and the marriage is over. The baby changes nothing. I'll support the two of you until you prove the child is mine, but I don't want—"

"Shut up," she shouted. "Just shut up."

"I won't shut up. How dare you do this? Letting Jack announce it like that. I won't be manipulated—"

"The first of many." Jack slapped Will on the back.

"That's what I keep telling him," Vee said, tucking her arm into Jack's.

"Jack, do me a favor. Dance with Vee."

Will walked away before either of them could protest, but found himself trapped in a whirlpool of affection as he crossed the room. People touched him on the arm, congratulated him and what was he supposed to say? Thank you? He could hardly blurt out the truth, that he wished the baby didn't exist, that he didn't even know if the child was his.

Addie's happiness slipped through her fingers like water, and soon, every good thing about her life would be gone. She pushed open the door of the Ladies' to find there was a line. She couldn't even throw up in peace.

"Addie, I love your dress," Phaedra said. "It's beautiful."

Addie nodded, she didn't dare speak.

"Are you okay?" Phaedra looked at her with concern.

“Headache,” Addie muttered, torn between a desire to cry and the need to vomit. The door opened behind them. Vee walked in and Addie could do neither.

“Congratulations,” someone called.

“Thank you. We’re so excited.”

Addie reached the head of the line and was moving toward the vacated cubicle when Vee swept forward and pushed her out of the way.

“I’m desperate. It must be the baby. You don’t mind do you?”

Vee slammed the door in her face.

Addie had to be on her own. The remains of her dignity hung by the flimsiest of threads. She left the toilet, retrieved her jacket from the cloakroom and went outside.

The darkest part of the car park beckoned. Hoping for a crazy psycho killer to put her out of her misery, Addie struggled through the snow. Out of sight of the restaurant doors, she leaned over a wall and brought up everything she’d eaten. If it hadn’t been for the fact that she knew why her stomach was trying to kill her, she’d have been worried. She swept a handful of snow from the top of the wall into her mouth and then spat it out, kept going until her mouth was as numb as her toes. Pity the snow couldn’t numb her brain.

When her stomach stopped rebelling and the psycho killer failed to appear, Addie walked back into the cleared part of the parking area. The temperature had plummeted. She’d hoped to sneak onto the coach, but the doors were locked. She pulled on her gloves and kept walking to keep warm. The shock of snow melting on her bare toes made every step painful. Will loved her shoes. She loved Will. Oh God. She loved him. But he’d known Vee was pregnant and said nothing.

She was a fool. All dreams of a future with Will dissolved like the snow under her feet. There would be no her and Will going for meals together, no holding hands in the rain, no cuddling in the cinema. She’d never see his home in London. She’d never have his baby. Addie slumped against a car. He didn’t love her. She’d made excuses for him over and over again. She should have realized long ago what a mistake she was making, that she’d only clung to Will because he’d let her believe she was lovable. Now, she could see her mother had been right all along. She wasn’t loveable at all.

After her third circuit of the car park, Addie stopped by a red car and gave a short laugh. So that was how Vee had got to Shropshire. Lisa’s car. Why had Lisa done that? But a moment later, Addie sat behind the wheel having retrieved a spare key from a hidden magnetic box. Addie decided she’d wait in the car until the others started to come out and until then she’d think of nothing that might upset her.

Good plan, but everything upset her. Her world had imploded. She refused to cry. No way would blotchy cheeks and red eyes betray her. Her face nearly melted under the pressure of keeping the tears at bay.

Will looked everywhere for Addie. It hadn't escaped his attention that Vee had disappeared too. He concluded they had to be in the Ladies'. Together. He stared at the door wondering what they were saying. He wanted Addie to walk out so he could explain, but it was Vee who emerged.

"Waiting for me?" she asked.

"No. Is Addie in there?"

"Come and dance."

"Is Addie in there?" Will repeated.

Vee moved closer to him and slid her hand under his jacket. Will pushed her away.

"I'll tell Jack you're not being very nice to me," she said.

"You can tell him what you like."

Louise came out of the toilets and slipped past them. "Excuse me."

"Did you see Addie in there?" Will asked.

"No."

"Forget her. Come and dance with me." Vee pulled his arm.

Will looked at her and wished she wasn't a woman so he could punch her. "Grow up, Vee. It's over. I don't want you anymore. After what you've done tonight, I never want to see you again."

Vee grabbed her coat from the cloakroom and stalked outside. She was furious with Will and furious with herself for underestimating his feelings for that cow. She'd give him time to cool down. Vee needed to be looked after. She didn't cope well on her own. She'd envisaged a month or so of being pampered, maybe even a nice holiday, before she "lost" the baby. Now she'd have to think up something else.

She couldn't lose Will, she just couldn't. He'd loved her once, so he could love her again. He was the only man who'd ever really looked after her, cherished her. The others ended up letting her down. Will had never done that. It had been a mistake to let him slip through her fingers, but she hadn't lost him yet.

Vee almost smiled when she saw Addie sitting in the car. In her opinion, some people were born predators and others were born prey. Vee considered herself the ultimate predator and who was she to resist when prey just lay down and asked for it?

She dragged open the door and glared at Addie. "What are you doing in my car?"

Addie jumped. "It's not your car."

"Lisa lent it to me, not you. I want to go back to the hotel."

Addie got out and Vee changed her mind. If Addie was with her, she wasn't with Will. "You can come with me, but I'm driving. You can show me the way."

"I'll wait for the coach," Addie said.

"You and I need to talk."

“I have nothing to say to you.” Addie started toward the restaurant and Vee caught hold of her arm. She softened her voice. “Please, Addie. I’m tired. I know I’m probably the last person you want to be with but I really want to go back to the hotel. Will’s working so I don’t want to bother him, only I don’t know the way back.”

When Addie sighed and got in the other side of the car, Vee forced back a giggle.

“Right at the crossroads,” Addie said and then added in a quiet voice, “I think.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was a while before Addie realized they'd taken a wrong turn. Vee had gone on and on about how she and Will wanted to give their marriage another go for the sake of the baby and Addie wondered what the hell she'd been thinking, getting in a car with this witch. She hadn't been thinking, well not beyond getting back to the hotel as fast as possible and not having to speak to Will ever again. Only she'd run from someone she *should* have talked to and into the path of someone she didn't *want* to talk to. All her life she'd shied away from confrontation. She wanted to be different, thought Will had made her different but it wasn't so easy to change.

Addie stared through the window. She hadn't been paying attention, now they were lost and to make matters worse it had started to snow. She kept hoping that the hotel would hove into view like a blazing beacon. It didn't.

"Slow down a bit," Addie said as they slid into a bend.

"I'm not going fast. Don't be such a wimp. What the hell did Will see in you?"

Addie stayed silent.

"I know you've been fucking my husband and you're not the first. Did you think you were?"

Addie kept her eyes forward. The car speeded up.

"Will usually goes for pretty, delicate women, not giant beanstalks. How tall are you?"

Addie wrapped her fingers around the edge of the seat. When she made mistakes, she made big ones. Why had she got in the car? She'd been thinking it would give her the chance to pack and slip away before the coach returned. She should have carried on thinking. Instead she was stuck listening to Vee's venomous voice. She felt like an incompetent knife thrower's assistant, waiting for the blade to draw blood.

"You're not his type. He hates women with big feet and ugly hands. He'll get bored of you. He'll come back to me like he always does, but this time he'll stay because of our baby."

Vee's voice broke and a knife pierced Addie's heart.

"You're such a cow," Vee sobbed. "Couldn't you find a man of your own? Did you have to steal mine?"

The car slithered and Addie bit back the impulse to tell her to be careful.

"I didn't know he was married. I didn't know about the baby. If I had, I wouldn't have got involved with him. I'm sorry." *Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.*

“Just stay away from him. While he thinks he can still sleep with you, he won’t do the right thing and look after me and our child. He’s mine, not yours.”

The razor edge in Vee’s voice gave Addie chills.

“*Chatte*, you’re ruining everything. Have you any idea how much I fucking hate you?” Vee shrieked.

The car began to shift sideways and Addie put her palms against the dashboard. As the vehicle slid out of control, Vee panicked and wrenched at the wheel. The car shot across the road.

“Oh God,” Vee screamed.

Addie bit back her own cry as the car spun in circles while Vee struggled with the wheel. So this was it, Addie thought. She was going to die sitting next to the person she hated most in the world.

“Why won’t it stop?” Vee yelled. “It’s your fault.”

And at those words, Addie moved from resignation that her number was up, to desperation that it shouldn’t be up with Vee.

“Take your foot off the brake,” she ordered.

“Are you crazy?”

“You’re making it worse when you brake.”

But Vee slammed her foot down as the car crested a hill and began to move faster. The wheels locked. “*Merde*.”

“Stop braking,” Addie shouted.

By now they were tobogganing sideways. Addie clung to her seat.

“Do something,” Vee sobbed.

What was Addie supposed to do? Wave a magic wand like Harry bloody Potter? She watched in fascinated horror as the view through the windscreen changed from snow-covered hedge to snow-covered road and back to snow-covered hedge and then to snow-covered bank. *Shit*. Addie shut her eyes.

As the car tipped over, Addie’s head smashed against the side window. The impact slammed the air from her lungs. The airbag exploded from the steering wheel and Vee stopped screaming for a few seconds before she started again. Louder.

Addie opened her eyes. The engine was off. The car was at a crazy angle, but it could have been worse. At least she was still alive and so, unfortunately, was Vee.

“You idiot, you stupid fucking idiot,” Vee shouted.

“Shut the fuck up, Vee. We aren’t dead.”

“Why did you tell me to stop braking?” Vee demanded. “Look what you’ve done. We’re stuck now.”

Addie tried to move, but the seat belt pinned her in place and Vee hung above in her white coat like an avenging angel.

"Merde," Vee said and elbowed Addie in the face as she tried to push herself up past the deflating airbag.

"Are you all right?" Addie asked. "Are you hurt?"

"You're hurting me," Vee snapped.

Since Addie was trapped under Vee, she wondered how that was possible.

"There's no way out my side. You'll have to unfasten your belt and try to open your door," Addie said.

Vee struggled briefly and gave up. "Why don't you call Will," she snapped.

"I don't have a phone."

"Moron."

Addie bridled and asked a question to which she thought she already knew the answer. "Why don't you use yours?"

"I left my purse at the restaurant."

The snow had already started to build up on the windshield and the temperature was dropping inside the car.

"Well, the coach should be along soon," Vee muttered.

"Provided we've come the same way."

"What do you mean?"

Addie winced as Vee's elbow pressed into her ribs.

"We may not be on the right road," she admitted.

"You wanted this to happen." Vee tried to push herself away from Addie. "You wanted to kill me so you can have Will."

"Yes, that's right," Addie said. "I deliberately drove us into a ditch and now I'm going to strangle you and bury you in the snow."

Neither of them said anything for several minutes.

"I'm cold," Vee said.

"Turn the engine on. Only not for long in case the exhaust's blocked."

But turning the key did nothing. Cold was seeping into the vehicle, finding its way past the door seals, through the dashboard, up through the floor. Addie could see her breath as she exhaled, the windows already fogged.

"I smell something burning," Vee yelled.

She began to thrash around. Addie tried to avoid her flailing arms and Vee dropped onto her as the seat belt came undone. Moments later, Vee pushed open the door, her pointed heels pressing into Addie's side as she stood on her to lever herself out. Once she was free of Vee's weight, Addie unclipped herself and followed, squirming through the gap as she lifted the heavy door.

Vee stood in the middle of the road. The snow fell steadily. There was no sign of life in any direction, no lights and no other tire tracks, apart from the ones that showed their slithery path down the hill, over the bank and into the ditch.

"My boots are going to be ruined," Vee wailed. "They're Manolo Blahniks."

Addie looked down at her open-toed cocktail shoes and bit her lip. Vee wore a long woolen winter coat while Addie had a little jacket over a nonexistent evening dress.

"There might be something in the car we can use," Addie said.

"Oh yes," Vee said. "I remember seeing a pair of Wellingtons."

Addie retrieved the key from the ignition and opened the trunk. She dragged Vee's case out into the snow, and while Vee busied herself with that, she picked up Lisa's pink Wellingtons. Vee took off her coat to pull on two sweaters and then put the coat back on. She wrapped a silver-gray pashmina round her head and neck, clipped up her case and put it back in the car.

Addie hated herself for asking, but did it anyway. "Is there a sweater I could wear or a pair of trousers?"

"No, all my clothes are much too small for you. You'll ruin them."

Addie gritted her teeth and leaned against the toppled car. She slipped off her shoe and forced her foot into a Wellington. Lisa was two sizes smaller than her, but Addie's toes were already numb. She pushed her foot into the other boot and jammed her shoes in her pockets. Her fingers touched her gloves and she pulled them out. Addie didn't miss Vee's venomous look when she saw them.

"Now what do we do?" Vee demanded.

"We should stay with the car."

But Addie was beginning to wonder how far they were off the right road. Maybe even if people came looking, they wouldn't find them.

"If we stay here we might freeze to death," Vee said.

"If we walk we might end up too tired to reach safety and die anyway."

"This is all your fault." Vee pushed her hard and Addie fell against the car.

"No, it isn't. I wasn't driving, you were."

"Oh, my baby." Vee clutched her stomach.

Addie winced. "Maybe we should get back in the car. It will be warmer,"

"No, I think we've waited long enough," Vee said. "We're lost, thanks to you. No one is going to find us. We may as well keep going." She took two steps before she slipped and fell.

Addie rushed to her side. "Are you all right?"

Vee began to wail. "No, I'm not all right. I can't be expected to walk in these boots. I need those Wellingtons."

"I need them more. I can't walk in open-toed shoes. If you want to walk, we'll walk. Hang on to me and we'll do this together," Addie said.

They moved through the snow in silence, Vee sliding and Addie keeping her on her feet.

Addie was wet, tired and cold in any order. Her hair was plastered to her head and the bottom of her dress dragged in the snow, gathering icy lumps like a dog's paws. Her feet hurt so much she could barely lift one leg in front of the other. But their progress was slow because Vee couldn't walk without slipping. To make matters worse, Addie had no idea whether they were walking toward or away from safety.

"I need to rest," Vee whined.

"We can't. We might get hypothermia." Addie was already shivering, her fingers numb even inside the gloves.

"I don't care."

Addie pulled her on, toying with the idea of burying her under the next snowdrift. "Think of the baby. Keep going."

"I can't. I have to stop."

"Let me see if I can carry you for a bit," Addie said.

Vee didn't argue. Addie staggered a few steps after Vee jumped on her back and then she set off again. Head down. One foot in front of the other. Vee snuggled against her and Addie's back at least felt warmer, but her legs were like blocks of ice.

"I'll never forget the day I met Will," Vee said in her ear. "It was so romantic. I was rollerblading in Paris. Will pulled me into his arms as I was about to dive into the Seine. We took one look at each other and that was it."

"Shut up."

"Will's parents are lovely. His mum and I have so much in common."

Ten green bottles, hanging on the wall, Addie sang silently.

"When I met Will, I knew he'd look after me forever."

And if one green bottle should accidentally fall and hit you on the head, I'd be bloody glad. As a reward for that thought Addie slipped and fell. Vee landed on top of her, knocking the air from her lungs.

"We're going to die," Vee moaned in her ear.

So tempting.

"My fingers are cold. Could I have your gloves for a while?"

Addie pulled them off and gave them to her. She could tuck her hands behind Vee's legs.

Addie wasn't sure how far she'd walked before she heard something other than Vee whining. By the time they'd turned the corner the vehicle had gone, its tracks clearly visible.

Vee dropped from Addie's back and started to cry. Addie forced an arm to comfort her. She'd have been happier petting a Tasmanian Devil.

"It'll be okay. Now we know this road's in use, someone else will come along. Climb on again. You're not too heavy."

"I'm not heavy at all," Vee said in indignation.

She felt heavier and heavier with each step Addie took. They shouldn't have left the car. What was the advice? Stay with your vehicle. What if Vee lost the baby? Addie kept going.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Hey, this is the Ladies'," one of the waitresses protested as Ed walked through the door.

"Sorry. Looking for someone."

Inside the toilets, a wave of shocked faces turned from the mirror. None of them Addie's.

"Addie?" he called at the line of closed doors.

No answer. Ed swallowed hard and then bent down so he could check under the doors of the cubicles.

"What are you doing, you pervert?" a woman yelled. "I'm going to tell the manager."

A purse collided with Ed's head. With no sign of Addie's dress or the sexy high heels, Ed beat a hasty retreat. He didn't know where else to look and suspected there *was* nowhere else.

Will strode toward him. "A waiter saw two women drive off in a red car. One of them was definitely Vee."

"You think the other is Addie? Why the hell would she go anywhere with Vee?"

A dozen scenarios ran through Ed's head. All of them bad.

"I've paid the waiter to drive me back to the hotel. I'm not waiting for the coach," Will said.

"I'll come too."

When they got back, there was no sign of Vee or Addie. Will went to check upstairs while Ed looked around the hotel. He even braved the Ladies' again, this time they were empty. Back in the lobby, each looked at the other and their shoulders dropped.

"So we just wait?" Will asked.

"They set off before us. Why aren't they here?"

"Maybe Addie was navigating." Will gave a little smile.

"You don't think Vee would do anything stupid, do you?"

"What? You mean did she force Addie into the car at knifepoint because she intends to kill her and bury her in the woods?"

Ed gulped. "That wasn't funny. You know what Vee's like. All this would have been so easy to avoid. You should have told Addie about the baby. How do you think she felt, watching bloody Jack Magellan toasting the happy event?"

Will pulled at his hair with his fingers. "I was going to tell her, but it's not easy."

Ed's jaw tightened. "Easy? You're supposed to be thinking about Addie, not yourself."

"I am thinking about her," Will said. "Let's go and look for them. We'll organize some sort of search party."

* * * * *

Addie trudged along the drive, trailing her dress through the slush like a jilted bride, with Vee straggling behind as the reluctant bridesmaid. She heard her name being called and looked up to see Will running toward them, Ed close behind.

"Look, we made it," Addie said, and turned to see Vee collapse onto the snow.

Addie clomped back and dropped at her side. "Vee?"

Vee opened her eyes. "Fuck off and die." Her eyes closed again.

Addie recoiled.

Will slid to a halt. She saw his confusion before his gaze dropped to Vee lying motionless in the snow. He scooped her into his arms.

"Vee! Wake up," he said.

She moaned and pressed her face against Will's chest, sliding her arm over his shoulder. Addie bit the inside of her cheek.

"What happened?" Will asked.

"The car skidded," Addie said. "Vee—"

Vee moaned in a well-timed interruption, as Ed reached them.

"Are you okay, Addie?" Ed asked.

"I'm fine."

Will was already walking back up the drive, carrying Vee. Addie dropped her head and followed, one painful step after the other. In a minute, she could take off these god-awful boots and have a warm bath. Tomorrow, she'd go back to Leeds on the train and forget the day she invented Noah, the nowhere man—forget everything that followed.

"God, Addie, you're soaked," Ed said. "How long have you been walking?"

"Not sure. Got lost." She limped on.

Addie saw the flurry of activity around the entrance to the hotel, as Will arrived with Vee, and sighed.

"We were about to call the police and organize a search party," Ed said.

"So I wouldn't have got away with burying her in a snowdrift then." If the snow in England lasted for longer than a couple of days, she might have thought about it.

She trudged into the lobby, blinking against the bright light. Vee lay on a couch by the fire. A large Christmas tree had appeared in their absence, a Genghis-type with color-coordinated baubles and a thousand twinkling lights. The scene was straight from

a Hallmark movie – roaring log fire, beautifully decorated tree, tragic heroine reclining on the couch, and a sea of worried faces. How could Addie be anything but the villain here? Will hadn't even asked if she was okay.

Vee's pashmina had been removed to reveal dry, sleek hair. Addie's hand rose to her own bedraggled locks dripping icy water down her back. Vee moaned as Will knelt at her side and rubbed her hands in his.

"Are you all right, Addie?" Graham asked.

She gave him a grateful smile and then staggered as Jack Magelan elbowed her out of the way as he swept toward Vee. Ed reached out to steady her, but Addie pulled away, wrapping her arms around herself, her eyes glued to the tableau playing out in front of her.

"How is she, Will?" Jack asked.

Ed's fingers held Addie's chin, turned her head. "Where's the blood come from?"

"Blood?"

Ed showed her his fingers.

"Oh. Banged my head when the car tipped over."

"Shit, I thought you broke down."

Addie glanced between Vee and Ed. Ed's face had gone pale. Vee had rosy cheeks like someone had slapped her. Addie wanted to slap her. She wondered whether she could get closer to the fire, but Jack and Will were in the way. Better to go upstairs and take a hot bath. She bent to pick up her gloves from where Vee had dropped them. Gloves Will had bought.

With impeccable timing, Vee gave a wretched moan and clutched her stomach. "My baby."

Addie flinched.

"Will, you need to get her straight to a hospital," Jack said.

Addie's eyes were on Will. He looked so helpless, but he looked at Vee, not her. He cared about Vee, not her. She'd kept giving him chances, but there was only so much she could take. Addie couldn't help him. She could only help herself. She needed to get warm again. She slid through the gathering of people, her dress dragging behind her like a dirty rag, leaving a snail trail of muddy water. She was so cold, she'd stopped shivering.

"Will," Ed whispered in his brother's ear. "Snap out of it. She's conning you."

"Mmm, mmm, mmm." Vee whimpered like a puppy, her hands roving over her stomach.

"Vee, you need to go to hospital," Jack said. "My chauffeur will take you and Will."

"I'm fine," Vee gasped.

"You have to think of the baby," Jack insisted. "Tell her, Will."

"You need to be looked at, Vee. If you're in pain," Will said.

"Has Addie gone?" Vee whispered.

Ed narrowed his eyes. *What was she up to?*

"Addie frightened me," Vee said. "She made me drive her back to the hotel and told me she wouldn't let Will go. She started screaming and pushing me. When she grabbed the wheel, we skidded and crashed. It was her fault."

There was a collective gasp from those watching. Will stood in stunned silence. Jack harrumphed. Ed rolled his eyes. *Un-fucking-believable.*

"You mean Addie caused the accident?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Vee said. "I wanted to stay with the car, but she insisted we walk back. She said it wasn't far, but it was a lie. She had Wellingtons and gloves. I was so cold and wearing these silly boots. I think she wanted me to lose the baby."

Vee burst into tears. Will bent down and put his arm around her. Ed thought it was like watching a soap opera. Will knew what Vee was like, how could he possibly believe this? He tried to catch Will's eye.

"I'm going to call the police," Jack said.

Vee won't let that happen, Ed thought.

"No, don't," Vee sobbed. "She can't help it. She's sick. I feel sorry for her."

Ed let out a snort of disbelief and Jack glared at him before turning back to Vee and patting her on the shoulder. "She doesn't deserve such charity."

"If Vee's going to hospital, then Addie ought to go too," Ed said.

"She was fit enough to slope off to her room. Leave her where she is," Jack snapped. "She should be ashamed of herself. Vee, you must speak to the police. The woman shouldn't be allowed to get away with this sort of behavior."

Vee groaned again, even more loudly. Will winced and when he reached out to stroke her face, Ed knew Addie had lost.

Addie moved up the stairs at the speed of frost creeping up a window. She kept telling herself just one more step, but every movement was an effort. Back in her room, she groaned in relief and trudged to the bathroom. After a brief struggle to make stiff and unresponsive fingers unfasten the buttons on her jacket, she gave up. She slumped on the floor and made an unsuccessful attempt to get her feet out of the Wellingtons. If she'd had the energy, Addie would have cried with frustration.

She rested for a moment, leaning back against the bath and then tried again. Superglue couldn't have been more effective. They were on for life. She reached for the tap behind her, hoping hot soapy water might work a miracle.

Ed followed the trail of water to Addie's room. The door hadn't closed. He knocked, but there was no answer.

“Addie?”

Ed pushed the door open a little at a time. She wasn't standing there naked. She wasn't in bed.

“Addie? You left your door open,” he called.

When she still didn't reply, Ed walked into the room and closed the door behind him. He flicked on the light and glanced around before he moved to the bathroom. The door swung open at his touch.

“Addie?”

She lay in the tub, the only color on her face a dark smear of blood. Her skin was translucent, her lips hardly visible. His heart began to slam around in his chest like a trapped animal.

Then she opened her eyes and looked up.

“Jesus Christ, Addie. You scared the shit out of me. I thought you were dead. What are you doing?”

“Taking a bath.”

“In evening dress and Wellington boots?”

“Boots won't come off,” she said. “Thought soapy water might help.”

Ed took off his dinner jacket and tossed it onto the vanity unit. When he felt the water, he yelped. “Addie, this isn't even warm. Can't you tell?”

He grasped her hand, alarmed by the temperature and color of her fingers. A yank to pull the plug, then Ed reached for her foot. One tug at the boot and Addie slid onto her back.

“Maybe that's why people got buried in their boots, because the bloody things wouldn't come off. I'm going to have to cut you out of them.”

“No. They're Lisa's. I can't afford to buy another pair.”

“I'll buy them.”

Ed opened the penknife on his key ring, lifted one foot over the side and water poured over his trousers. He cut the boot from the top down and peeled away the rubber to reveal a cold, white foot. As he lifted her other leg, Addie closed her eyes.

“Addie, talk to me,” Ed said. “No going to sleep until you're warm.”

Her eyes opened, and for a moment Ed forgot what he was doing. He knelt there in a puddle of cold water, mesmerized by her thick dark lashes, the shadowy smudges above her cheek bones, and the way the flecks of color in her irises swirled together. She had the most fantastic eyes he'd ever seen.

“Thank you for helping me,” she whispered.

Once the other boot was off, he turned on the taps and let the bath fill around her. Tears sprang into Addie's eyes and Ed's heart kicked him.

“Oh God, is it too hot?”

“My toes and fingers are burning.”

The water wasn't too hot, but the more it began to cover her, the more she whimpered, and the more Ed wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her. He reached for the buttons on her jacket and unfastened them, gently pulling her arms free.

"What's in your pocket?"

"Shoes. Forgot. Couldn't walk in them. Vee's boots were slippery. Oh, my dress," Addie wailed. "Will bought—"

Ed tried not to look at her breasts, but it wasn't easy because they were neatly outlined under the thin material, and now he'd told himself not to look, he couldn't help it. He thought about brushing her nipples with his fingers and his blood flashed from thin to thick in an instant, pooling inconveniently in his groin. Only an idiot thought about sex at a time like this. He was an idiot.

"The water's too hot," she yelped.

"It's not, Addie. You're very cold."

As her body warmed up, the cut on her head started to bleed and Ed held a washcloth against it.

"Vee didn't faint," she muttered. "Pretended."

"That's not a surprise. I noticed she wore your gloves."

"Hands cold."

"And yours weren't?"

"She okay?"

"Will's gone with her to hospital."

Addie's lip trembled. "Oh God, I thought she faked it. She might lose the baby."

Ed was tempted to say "good". He checked her head. The bleeding had stopped.

"Why didn't he tell me?" she whispered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

And Ed's heart kicked its way into his throat and lodged there like some insidious alien growth.

"What happened with the car?" He was desperate to change the subject.

"Vee drove too fast and kept braking. We slid all over the road and tipped up."

"Why the hell did you get in the car with her?"

"I was running away. I thought I could get back to the hotel and leave before everyone else came back."

"Coward."

She gave a little smile. "I know." Addie winced as she wriggled her toes under the water. "Ooh, my feet are on fire."

"It's just your circulation getting back to normal." Ed wondered if massaging Addie's fingers would cause him problems. Probably. "Vee said you made her drive back and that she wanted to stay with the car."

"She's lying." Addie's eyes sparked.

"You grabbed the wheel."

A surge of water soaked Ed's sleeve as Addie tried to sit up.

"No, I did not!" She slumped again. "But it *was* my fault we took the wrong road and now she might have lost the baby. Vee told me their first child died in a car accident."

Ed chewed his lip as Addie's eyes filled with tears.

"Not a child, Addie. The baby hadn't been born. Vee was a couple of months pregnant and the accident was her fault. She drove off in a temper after Will had caught her cheating on him. Vee's an expert at evading responsibility. Nothing's ever her fault."

Ed could almost see the cogs turning in Addie's head.

"She told Will I'd caused the crash?"

"Yes. She said you were jealous and hoped the baby died."

"Christ, what a bitch." Her face crumpled. "I wish *I* was dead."

Ed grabbed hold of her hand. "You don't mean that. I didn't tell you what Vee said so that you'd feel like that. But you need to understand what she's like. You're tired and upset, Addie. Everything will look different in the morning."

"You're right. It will, because your brother's not in my world anymore."

She looked into Ed's eyes and he wanted to kill Will for hurting her.

"Thank you for helping me. If you pass me a towel you can go. I'll be fine."

Ed got to his feet and pulled a large white towel from the rack. He dropped it onto the bath mat and after picking up his jacket, went back into the bedroom. He sat on the bed. He didn't want to leave until he knew she was all right. He didn't want to leave, period. He was confused. No, he wasn't. He knew how he felt about Addie. It was the way he felt about his brother that confused him. He was angry with Will for hurting her and at the same time, glad Will had fucked up.

When there was no noise from the bathroom, not even the sound of the tub emptying, Ed knocked on the door.

"Addie?"

He wasn't sure he could handle seeing her naked, but the bad part of him hoped she was. She sat slumped against the bath, wrapped in a towel. Ed bit his lip. "God, Addie."

He picked her up, trying to keep the towel in place between his hands and her body. He was shocked by how cold she felt. As he laid her on the bed, the bottom edge of the towel slid away. Ed saw her lace underpants and swallowed hard. He drew the sheet and duvet around her, and before he could talk himself out of it, he reached under the covers and retrieved the wet towel. She didn't move. Not even a shiver.

Ed sat on the bed. So much for telling himself not to get involved. Addie had found a way through his wall without even trying. He touched her cheek, ran his finger down

the line of her jaw. She opened her eyes. They were so full of sadness, Ed wanted to weep.

"Ed," she whispered. "Oh, Ed."

When she said his name, he was lost. He lay down next to her on top of the duvet and tried to hug her through the covers.

"Jesus, Addie, you're like a block of ice. You shouldn't be this cold."

"Get in bed with me."

He froze. Had she said that or was it in his head? In his head. But it wasn't as bad an idea as it sounded, using his body heat to warm her. Before thinking reminded him he had an ulterior motive, Ed kicked off his shoes, pulled off his socks and unfastened his shirt. He wasn't sure if he dared take off his trousers, but surely the more of him that came in contact with her skin, the better? And they *were* wet.

"Oh, fuck it," Ed muttered and chucked his trousers next to his shirt.

He winced when the back of Addie's wet pants touched his stomach and had to suppress a gasp as he pressed himself against the length of her cold body. It should have been an effective dampener to his ardor, but it wasn't. Ed put his leg over hers, pressed his chest against her, trying to get as much of his body as possible in contact with hers. With her feet sandwiched between his calves, he moved his arms around her, and held her cold hands in his.

All Ed intended to do was hold her, but he couldn't help breathing in her scent and found himself pressing his lips into her damp hair. He grew even harder and hoped Addie didn't notice, but wondered how she could not. He didn't have much of a choice as to what to do about it. It normally wasn't a problem when he was in bed with a woman, but on this occasion he either had to think it away—not easy—or slip into the bathroom for a minute. Probably less.

His lips were on her neck. How had that happened? He should stop right now. It wasn't too late. But he wanted to kiss her. His mouth took charge. He let go of her hands, turned her over and kissed her.

Ed wasn't sure what he expected. He hadn't thought that far ahead. But she neither pushed him away, nor slapped his face. Instead, her mouth opened and she tasted so sweet, Ed lost his head. He sucked on her lips, slipped his tongue into her mouth and kept on kissing her. He was slow and gentle, taking his time, savoring every moment. When Addie's tongue brushed against his, a strangled cry erupted from his throat.

Ed wanted the kiss to last forever but he was scared of pushing too fast. The back of his hand touched her breast and when he heard the breath catch in her throat, a surge of lust swept over him, scooped him into a riptide and dragged him out to sea. His heart pounded so hard it scared him.

"Addie." He breathed her name. "Addie."

His hands were all over her, wanting to touch, cherish and warm every inch of her. Wrong time, wrong place, but not the wrong woman. Ed dragged his common sense out of its hiding place. "Should I stop?" he whispered.

"I don't know."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No – Yes – I don't know – I don't know, Ed. I'm confused. I can't think straight."

"Maybe you shouldn't think." Ed drew his fingers up her arms. Her hands were on his back, holding him, but she didn't speak, didn't tell him it was okay.

This was where he should bring her such pleasure, she'd forget to think. Ed was good in bed. He loved women's bodies, loved finding the places that drove them wild. But he couldn't make her forget Will. Not tonight. So he wasn't going to touch her. Well, not in that way. Ed wrapped his arms around Addie and held her tight.

God, don't let me fall in love, Ed pleaded, but he knew it was too late.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Vee groaned all the way to the hospital, but with frustration, not pain. How was she going to get out of this? Every few minutes, Will asked if she was okay and she grew increasingly annoyed. When a doctor examined her, it would be obvious she wasn't pregnant. But weren't doctors supposed to maintain confidentiality? Maybe her secret was safe. If Will found out she'd tricked him, he'd go through with the divorce.

In an ideal world, she'd be starting her period now, instead of in a couple of days when it was due. She intended to pretend she'd miscarried. A hint of blood and Will would believe her. Vee knew she could make this work.

"How are you feeling?" Will asked.

She pushed back her irritation and moaned again.

"We'll be there soon," he said.

Vee curled up against him and wished she could turn the clock back two years. Things had been perfect then. Will had loved her. He didn't now. She wasn't stupid, but she could make him love her again and it wasn't going to happen while Amazon Addie was around. Vee bristled. What did Will see in her? She didn't look after herself, her nails were a disgrace. She was far too tall and not super-model elegant, just gangly.

"I hope Addie's all right," Vee whispered.

No response.

"What is it you see in her, Will?"

"She's funny and kind."

Vee bit the inside of her lip. She was fucking kind. Maybe she wasn't funny, but how could that be an attraction?

"Is she good in bed?" Vee asked.

"I'm not going to answer that."

"I suppose you enjoyed fucking a virgin." Vee remembered losing her virginity at age fourteen in a wood outside Paris. A disappointment. If she could do it all over again, she'd pick someone more experienced. Philippe, her friend's brother, had barely got inside her before he'd climaxed.

"How do you know she was a virgin?"

"Lisa told me." And Will had just confirmed it. "You slept with her the first time on the day I arrived in Leeds. And you slept with me afterwards. So were you still thinking of her?" Vee regretted that as soon as she'd said it. She was supposed to be winning him back, not driving him away. She needed to get him to London. Everything would be all right then. Her friends all liked Will. It hadn't been the same since they'd split up.

Time for more melodrama. "Oh, oh," she groaned and clutched her stomach.

"Hang on."

Vee gritted her teeth. She'd spoiled her lovely white coat collapsing onto the snowy drive. It better be worth it.

"I'll be fine, darling," she whispered. "And if we lose this baby, we can always try for another."

* * * * *

They got back to the hotel at three thirty in the morning. Vee slept in his arms all the way back, while Will sat wedged against the door handle, thinking. The doctor had given her a clean bill of health. In fact, Will had the impression the doctor thought they'd wasted his time. The guy was curt, but putting up with Vee complaining at that time in the morning would have made a saint curse.

While Vee was fine, something had happened to Will. As he sat in the waiting room, he thought about what it would like to be a father. Vee was far too needy to survive on her own, and if he walked away another man would bring up his child. Another man would see the first smile, hear the first word and be thrilled by the first step. Will would have to accept his child calling another man daddy. So unless a paternity test proved otherwise, Will wanted to be this child's father and he'd make sure he at least shared custody.

He settled Vee in his bed and pulled the duvet over her. She'd not moaned at all on the way back. Will wasn't taken in by the miraculous recovery because he'd come to the conclusion there had been nothing wrong in the first place. He put his hand in his pocket and his fingers closed around the key to Addie's room. Will had no idea what to say to her, but she was the one person he wanted to talk to. He didn't believe Vee's version of the accident. He knew her too well, but because he hadn't said anything, Addie would think he didn't believe her. He'd hurt her and now he had to put things right. Again.

When Will opened the door and saw Ed in bed with Addie, he froze. After a moment, he backed out of the room and closed the door with a gentle click. Leaning against the wall outside, he tried to draw a breath into his lungs and couldn't. When at last the air rushed in, Will knew he was going to cry and he didn't know where to go. He stood on the landing with tears rolling down his cheeks, caught between a woman he no longer wanted, and another he could no longer have, one that he knew he didn't deserve.

He thought about getting in his car and driving away, but instead he went back to his room and lay down on the couch.

Sleep was impossible. The idea of Ed holding Addie in his arms, putting his tongue into her mouth, fondling her breasts, thrusting his dick inside her, made him feel sick.

The knowledge that they'd slept together had destroyed something inside him. He'd never forgive Ed for this, never. He didn't blame Addie at all.

Will got up and walked over to the mini bar. He swept all the bottles onto the floor. He regretted the noise, fearful of waking Vee, but there was no sound from the bed. Will sat with his back to the wall and picked a bottle at random. He unscrewed the top and tipped it into his mouth. Gin. He thought of Addie and the time she'd caught the piece of lemon in her mouth and eaten it rather than spit it out. The tears began again.

After the fourth bottle, Will didn't even taste what he was drinking and he didn't stop until he'd finished everything. He wanted to be unconscious, but instead he was filled with fury.

As Will left the room, Ed opened his eyes and watched him go. He pulled Addie closer. His heart had started to beat faster when he heard the door open. He knew who it was. Ed pressed his lips against Addie's neck. She was warm now, though not all over. Her toes were little icicles wedged between his calves.

Guilt clawed his stomach because he knew how Will felt about Addie. They'd always steered clear of each other's women. Until now. Will thought Ed liked the tarty ones with no brain, and that he'd sleep with anything in a skirt, but he was wrong. Ed had slept around, he didn't deny it, but he was choosier than Will thought. And despite what Will imagined, Ed knew the difference between fucking and making love. Addie had woken something inside him and he hadn't even had sex with her. His dick hardened and he bit back a groan.

Was it love? Was that what it was? Did he love this mixed-up, funny woman with crazy-colored eyes? If he did love her, he'd not treated her well. It was no good pretending to himself that he hadn't expected Will to come to her room when he got back. Ed wanted Will to see them together, but as usual hadn't thought beyond that. Now he'd pushed Addie into a difficult situation. He should have waited. Maybe he'd messed up any chance he had with her. His heart started to pound.

She lay motionless in his embrace. Then something happened that made Ed feel a whole lot worse. His arm was getting wet. She'd seen Will come in. Would she blame Ed for what Will had seen? Her tears fell faster.

"Trying to drown me?" He rolled her over and tilted her face toward his. Ed brushed away a tear with his thumb and forced himself to ask the question. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's not you, Ed. You've been kind."

His stomach twisted. "Do you think I'm in bed with you because I'm kind? I'm not."

"I shouldn't have done this."

Ed felt bursts of pain all over his chest, as though he'd been hit by machine-gun fire.

“You haven’t done anything. I was trying to warm you up. You were cold. You might have had hypothermia. I wanted—”

Addie put a finger against his lips. Her body rolled nearer and he tried to keep his overeager dick from touching her, stop his hands reaching for her breasts.

“I know. You only wanted to warm me up.”

Ed moved her hand from his mouth. “I wanted more than that.” He struggled to breathe under the suffocating weight inside his chest. This might be his only chance to make her see what he could be, to believe him. “I want you, Addie Winter. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anyone more. You are so beautiful, you make my heart ache. I wanted you from the moment I saw you pretending to do those sit-ups in the gym and especially after you lay on that deflating ball and then tried to hide it. Only I didn’t want you for the right reason then, and I do now.” He took a deep breath. “So while part of me is sad you didn’t ask me to spend the night in your room instead of Will, another part of me is glad, because this way I got to know you, to be your friend.”

Addie’s heart skipped around like a spring lamb. Ed wanted her? From the moment he’d climbed into bed, she’d been expecting him to try something, for his hands to cup her breasts or creep between her legs, but he hadn’t touched her like that. He’d pressed his face into her hair and when his breath hit her neck, a shiver of excitement had raced through her. She’d felt his erection against her back. She could hardly miss it, but he hadn’t rubbed against her, or tried to make love to her. It wasn’t the Ed she’d imagined with the others from the office. But maybe he’d figured she needed a different Ed. A slower version.

“Are you still thinking or have you gone to sleep?” Ed whispered. “I mean it, Addie. I know you’re in love with Will, but I had to tell you how I feel.”

Was she in love with Will? He looked like a model, kissed like a demon and she’d thought he was all-round gorgeous. The first man, the first person to make her feel loved and wanted, only he’d let her down. Not just once. He didn’t *want* her enough. He didn’t *love* her enough. There was only so much she could forgive and now he was going to be a father whether he liked it or not. He had a responsibility to do the right thing and Addie had to do the right thing too and walk away.

Ed squeezed her fingers. “Do I have a chance?”

How could she believe anything Ed said? She knew what he was like—sexy, smiley-eyed Ed who’d slept his way around the office from the day he’d arrived. Daisy, Beth, Charlotte and now Addie. Addie had a sudden jolt as she realized their names ran from A to D. Was this some kind of game? But then he’d not made love to her. The irony was she wanted him to. Only why? Because she needed to be held, to be wanted? Was she that desperate? Hardly fair to Ed. Addie was pretty sure that if Ed kissed her now, they’d make love. She just needed to be special to someone.

“When you let me hold your hand in Lincoln, it was all I could do not to pull you into my arms and kiss you ’til you forgot Will. I don’t remember the last time I felt that

kind of attraction. I saw another side of you, a strong confident woman. I like being bossed around. Well, sometimes. I'm babbling. Talk to me, Addie."

"I'm thinking," she whispered.

No matter what Ed said, Addie couldn't believe he was serious about her. She knew his kind. A player. This was just another technique especially employed for naïve women like her. Ed could charm virgins out of their pants, only this time his brother had got there first. And while part of Addie liked the way he held her, she remembered Daisy telling her about their date and knew she'd be one in a line of conquests.

Still, a little part of her wished Ed would do more than hold her and she wasn't sure she understood why she felt like that. It was Will she loved, wasn't it? But Ed was funny and kind. It had been Ed who'd picked her up almost every time that Will had let her down. Ed who'd noticed she was hurt when Will hit her with his car. Ed who'd come looking for her and driven her home after Vee turned up. Ed had even tried to help Will by explaining he'd left because Vee had taken the overdose.

Addie tightened her hold on Ed's fingers. Ed had shown he cared in a way Will never had. He lay with her now, not trying to take advantage, just being there for her, giving her time to think. Addie cared for Ed. More than cared. A lump erupted in her throat and forced tears to her eyes. She should be happy and instead she felt sad.

"Do you want me to go back to my room?" Ed whispered.

"No." She needed him. She had to tell him that. "Please hold me."

Addie let herself relax in his arms and finally slept.

* * * * *

Addie stood tapping her fingers on the front desk when out of the corner of her eye she saw Will and Vee coming down the stairs. She turned, hoping to be mistaken for the potted fern.

"Oh, Addie, how are you?" Vee called.

Addie stared at the wire-spectacled guy behind reception, willing him to find the information she'd asked for. Failing that, just talk to her.

"Well, thank you for asking how I am." Vee sounded indignant. "I could have lost my baby you know. I still could."

"Vee, shut up," Will said.

Addie glanced across and saw Will rubbing the heel of his hand over his forehead.

"It serves you right," Vee hissed. "You drank the entire mini bar."

Addie no longer felt the need to soothe Will's head and take away the pain. She was sad he was hurting and wished he could sort himself out but she couldn't do it for him. She'd always remember he was the first guy to make her believe she was someone worth loving, even if she wasn't the one he could love the most. But part of her hated him for letting her down. He could have told her everything and he'd told her nothing.

Even now, there was no apology. When he'd come into the room and seen her with Ed, he'd walked out again and drunk himself to oblivion. He could have dragged Ed out of her bed and he hadn't. The last thing she wanted was the pair of them to fight but Will had just given up. She'd thought he was perfect but how could anyone be perfect? Addie saw she'd been asking too much, not of Will, but of herself. She was intelligent and sensitive but as far as relationships were concerned, she had the experience of a teenager.

"Eleven twenty," the desk clerk said.

"Thank you."

"Come and have breakfast," Vee said to Addie. "I can tell you how I got on at the hospital."

Addie would rather stick her head in a wasp's nest. She didn't turn or raise her eyes beyond the level of the desk, pretending interest in a brochure about golf.

"Vee, you go ahead. I'll be there in a minute," Will said.

Addie looked down for a gaping chasm. Nope, solid floor.

"Will?" Vee whined.

Addie tried to convince her feet to move, but after Will turned Vee toward the breakfast room, he made straight for her. Oh God, now he wanted to speak to her, Addie didn't want to speak to him. Golf had never looked so fascinating. She clutched the brochure so hard, it ripped as Will took it from her.

"Be careful with Ed. He's quick to entice women into his bed and just as quick to get rid of them. He's slept with most of the women in the office."

Is that all you have to say? No apology? No words of kindness?

"His relationships don't last," Will said.

Could he not hear himself? Addie raised her eyes to his. "Nor do mine. I seem to be following a pattern, sleeping with men who can't wait to get rid of me."

Will paled. "Addie, Ed will hurt you."

"And you haven't?" Addie pressed her nails into her palms. "You're going to be a father, Will. Congratulations. Your wife's waiting for you." If he'd said one more word, she'd have broken down. If he'd said he loved her, she might have thrown herself into his arms. He said nothing. After he'd walked away, she turned her attention to the goggle-eyed clerk.

"Could I order a taxi to get me there for that train?" she asked.

"No," Ed said as he came up behind her. "You're not leaving."

"I want to go home."

"We don't always get what we want." He took her elbow and directed her toward the front door. "I need to have a word with you in private."

As they stepped outside, Addie shivered.

"I expected to wake up with you lying next to me. I was looking forward to a kiss," Ed said with a smile.

And maybe more than that, Addie thought.

"You mustn't leave. Don't let Vee win. Fight back, Addie. Give your version of what happened."

He wanted her to fight for Will? Addie wrapped her arms around herself. Maybe she'd imagined last night, made it into something it wasn't. Oh God, Ed was just being kind and she'd thought – She looked up as a tow truck came along the drive.

"You want everyone to believe Vee or you?"

"Why would anyone believe me?" Addie mumbled.

"You're not giving them the chance if you keep quiet." Ed moved closer. "What did Will just say to you?"

"That you'll hurt me. That your relationships don't last."

Ed sighed. "I've had two long-term affairs and had my heart broken twice. I didn't think I wanted to risk another, but I do."

Addie's pulse jumped.

"I won't push you, Addie. I know this is bad timing. But I promise I'll never hurt you."

"How can you promise that?" Addie kept looking down.

Ed turned her to face him. He bent his head, and kissed her. He brushed his lips along hers, a feathery touch, and when she didn't pull away, he kissed her more firmly, sliding his tongue along the underside of her top lip. Addie melted, molding her body into his and he tightened his grip. Why did he make her feel like this? She knew what he was like so why did she want him?

Because she trusted him.

The thought hit Addie like a thump in the chest. Ed was the one she trusted.

The truck pulled up next to them and Addie broke away, taking little panting breaths, lazy smoke signals puffing into the cold morning air.

"I can promise I'll never hurt you because I want to keep doing that," he said.

Addie gulped. "Lisa's." She pointed to the car behind the truck.

They watched as the driver got out to disengage the vehicle.

"How much damage?" Ed asked.

"Not too pretty down the left-hand side, but nothing major. Is it yours?" the man asked.

"My friend's," Addie said.

"It needs a new airbag. I've taken the other one off. The car's drivable."

"Why wouldn't it start?" she asked.

"Probably snow in the electrics. It's fine now."

Addie checked it out. The left-hand side was dented and scratched.

"Lisa will go berserk." She turned to the man. "How did you know where it was?"

"The guy that paid me said to follow the footprints, although I was told there were two people."

"Meaning?" Ed asked.

"For most of the way, there was only one set of prints."

Addie signed a form and was handed the key.

"How come, Addie?" Ed said at her ear.

Addie hesitated.

"Well?"

"I gave Vee a piggy-back some of the way."

"She didn't even walk?"

"She couldn't. She kept slipping."

"You saved her life," Ed said. "It was her fault she crashed, not yours. She pretended she was at death's fucking door and you were the one who could have died. You wore a flimsy jacket, she had a long winter coat. You had open-toed shoes, she was in leather boots. You *had* to wear the Wellingtons even though the damn things almost cut off your circulation. You gave her your gloves. She let you carry her back and then pretended to faint on the drive. She's a piece of shit."

"She's having Will's baby."

"Don't go, Addie. She'll continue to lie about you." He curled his fingers around hers. "She twists everything. She's a vicious, nasty —"

"What did she do to you?" Addie whispered.

Ed stuck his hands in his pockets.

"What did she do?"

"Came round to my flat once when Will was away. They were married by then. She'd brought champagne. I went to open it, then I couldn't find her at first. When I did, I wished I hadn't. She was in my bed, naked." He gave Addie a little smile. "She said Will would never find out and she wanted to know what she'd been missing."

"Oh God."

"I walked out. She got her own back. She told Will I'd made a pass at her, stuck my hand up her skirt and my tongue down her throat. Will said he believed me, but I...I always wondered if he did."

"Why is Will still with her?" Addie asked. "Does he love her?"

Ed hesitated. "No, he loves you. That's why you have to come and have breakfast and show Vee she's not won."

As they walked into the morning room, Addie felt as though she'd gone through an airport scanner and set off an ear-splitting siren. Everyone looked at her. She poured herself a glass of orange. *Please don't sit with Vee and Will*, she pleaded. Ed headed in the opposite direction, only he didn't pick an empty table, but one with two spaces left.

"Morning." He smiled at everyone.

Addie put down her drink and scuttled back to the buffet. She made sure she didn't return to the table until Ed was seated.

"How are you, Addie?" Phaedra asked. "What a scary night!"

"Fine, I—"

"Not really," Ed said. "That idiot over there almost killed her."

Addie caught the glances that flashed across the table.

"I thought you were driving?" Phaedra said.

Addie's back stiffened. "No, I wasn't."

"The car tipped up on to the passenger side. Addie was lucky she just grazed her head. She ought to have gone to hospital to be checked out too."

Ed's hand rested on her knee under the table.

"She carried Vee the majority of the way back here."

"Ed," Addie whispered.

She knew what he was trying to do and wasn't sure if he was helping, but it felt good to have someone standing up for her. She heard Vee make a snappy comment and when Addie looked up, she and Will had gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The blue group had gathered in the library. Ed bent his head to kiss Addie at the door and she pulled away. His lips pressed together in a tight line, and she knew she'd hurt him. But he squeezed her hand and shot her a little smile before he left. Addie's mind whirled. Ed had held her and kissed her yet told her Will loved her. Had he suspected Will would come into the room last night? Had she? Her shoulders slumped again.

Addie walked in feeling as confident as a bleeding swimmer about to take a dip with a squad of piranhas. Once inside the room, she sidled along the wall and sat on a chair at the edge of the group.

"Good morning, everyone," Justin said. "Well, you might not have won the snow-sculpting contest yesterday, but you worked well as a team. We're not going to get cold this morning, but snow is still on the menu. I want you to work on your own to begin with, making a list of ten things you would do if you were stuck in a blizzard."

Addie retreated to the window seat. What was important? Shelter and food. Something to keep her warm. Someone to keep her warm. Will had breathed life into her, and then thrown her back under a snowdrift. She wasn't sure what Ed had done. Seen an opportunity and taken it? But he hadn't. He'd looked after her. Addie chewed her pencil. He'd said he wanted her from the moment he saw her in the gym. Heat flooded her face as she remembered trying to hide the deflated ball. How could she believe him? He was trying to make up for the fact that Will was a bastard.

She looked at the blank pad of paper in her hand. What was the point? Justin hadn't said if you were on your own, outside or inside, nor where you were, halfway up Everest or mid-Shropshire. A snowstorm could last for days or hours. How could you decide what to do if you didn't know all the facts?

"Two minutes," Justin called.

Addie had written nothing but left neat rings of indentations along the yellow pencil. She scribbled a list and sighed. She still wanted to run away.

"Okay." Justin looked round the room. "Who wants to start?"

It was soon clear to Addie that her mind had migrated to Mars. While the others debated the need for a Primus stove, Addie focused on two faces. Will's smile when he leapt in the air with the kite, then his despair when he lifted Vee from the snowy drive. Ed's grin when he teased her in Lincoln and the hope in his eyes when he said he wanted her. The same face that wanted Daisy and Beth and Charlotte. And how many before them?

"Addie?" Justin said.

Her head snapped up and she banged it on the window.

"Er...I'd put on the TV and check the weather forecast. Might rain in an hour. We wouldn't need to bother doing anything."

"How are you going to put on the TV if there's no electricity?" Tony asked, looking round the room expecting everyone to agree she was an idiot.

"In my blizzard, the electricity supply is uninterrupted."

"Anything else?" Justin asked.

"I might dig out my snowplow to bury Tony."

Louise and Phaedra giggled. Tony harrumphed and Addie refused to speak again.

She half-listened as Justin summed up. Her mind was on driving home. She'd take Lisa's car. She was certain Will would drive Vee back, so Addie would be doing everyone a favor. She'd never see Will or Ed again, never go back to Magelan's. She'd use the computer at the language school and look for a cheap flight to anywhere.

Addie didn't notice Jack Magelan until he stood in front of her. Vee was by the door. Not good. Addie stood, one hand still clutching her pad of paper.

"You're fired. I want you to leave the hotel at once," he said.

The room was silent. Everyone stared at her and even though he'd spoken in a low tone, Addie knew they'd heard.

"Actually, I resigned the day you took over. Didn't Will tell you?"

"I know you threatened to resign because Will refused you a salary increase," Jack said. "Even after you offered him your virginity."

Addie's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"I have no wish to employ someone who's prepared to sacrifice self-respect for money. You need professional help, young lady. Your obsession with Will Mansell almost cost two lives."

Addie let the pad of paper fall to the floor. Fury boiled inside her, shooting up from her toes and out her mouth. "How dare you make a judgment without hearing both sides? You've accepted her word without even talking to me. You have the gall to speak to me in an offensive way in front of a room full of witnesses and yet expect me to roll over? Well, I won't. I'm the injured party here, not her. My lawyer will be in touch."

She turned to Vee. "As for you, well, you've got what you want, Will at the end of a leash. Isn't that enough? Why are you telling lies about me?"

"I'm not lying. You're so bitter and twisted you make me sick. My God, you even threw yourself under Will's car so he'd feel sorry for you."

"That was an accident."

Vee pursed her lips. "So you say. Will's knows he made a terrible mistake getting involved with you, but he did it from pity, you were so desperate."

"Vee, that's enough." Jack tried to turn her away, but she pulled free and stepped up to Addie.

“Now you’ve resorted to sleeping with his brother, trying to make Will jealous.”

There was complete silence. Jack looked shocked. Addie could feel everyone waiting to see what she’d say. How did Vee know Ed had spent the night in her room? Had Will told her?

“I’m not the bad person here,” Addie said. “I’ve never intentionally hurt anyone and I don’t lie to get what I want. You’re a bitch, Vee. Even Will doesn’t deserve a monster like you.”

Addie kept her head up and took a few steps toward the door before turning. “Thanks, Justin. I’ve learned a lot about people over the last few days.” She looked around the group. “Bye, everyone. Nice to have met you.”

“Bye, Addie,” Justin said. “It was my pleasure.”

As she walked out, she heard the others calling goodbye. The moment she’d closed the door, Addie’s control vanished. Her breath came out in jagged gasps as she bolted for the stairs. All she could think about was getting as far away from everyone as possible.

Back in her room, she changed clothes, put on her ripped jeans and an old sweater. She left every item Will had bought her in a heap outside his room. Then she ran.

* * * * *

Ed discovered at lunchtime that Addie had gone. He heard people gossiping about the scene Vee had made, and after Phaedra and Louise told him what happened, he stormed up to Will’s room. A pile of clothes lay outside the door, Addie’s bedraggled cocktail dress on the top. Ed knocked on the door and picked everything up.

When Will appeared, Ed thrust the pile into his arms. “I want to speak to your pet reptile.”

“She’s resting.”

Ed tried to push past, but Will blocked the way.

“Do you know what the bitch told Jack? Did you hear what the pair of them said about Addie in front of her coworkers?”

“I don’t care,” Will said in a flat voice. “It’s over, Ed.”

“Well, you didn’t fucking deserve her.”

“I’m not talking about Addie. I’m talking about me and you. We’re finished.”

Ed stepped back in shock. “What?”

“You heard. I’m buying you out of the business.”

“You stupid wanker. I don’t care about you and me. Listen to what I’m saying. Vee told Jack that Addie offered you her virginity in exchange for an increase in salary. Why the fuck did you tell her Addie was a virgin? Vee ridiculed her in front of everyone.”

Only the slight flare of Will’s nostrils told Ed his brother had heard what he said. His face remained expressionless.

“So what’s your part in all this, Ed?”

“I’m trying to do what you should be doing, which is to protect Addie from that manipulative cunt.”

“By fucking her?”

“By trying to warm her up after she half-froze to death.”

Will’s eyes were so dark they were almost black. “You mean you didn’t fuck her?”

Ed knew there was no point telling the truth. Will wouldn’t believe him and a vindictive part of him didn’t want to deny it.

“One set of footprints, Will, that’s what the tow truck driver followed. Even after Addie learned in the most humiliating way that you were going to be a daddy, she had a big enough heart to carry Vee on her back last night. Vee even wore Addie’s gloves. I had to cut the fucking boots off Addie’s feet.” He was shouting now. “It took me hours to warm her up. She was freezing and she’d cut her head. She wore a thin jacket and that fucking evening dress, while Vee wore sweaters and a winter coat. It was Addie who needed to be in hospital. All I did was get her warm again. She’s the one who could have died. Do you even realize that? And it was all because of you.” Ed poked a finger in Will’s chest. “Because *you* were a coward. *Your* fault. Understand?” Ed took a deep breath and exhaled noisily. “Now, we’re finished.” And he walked away.

Will kicked the door closed. Addie had given back everything he’d bought her. He pressed his face into the clothes, breathing in the scent of her and then dumped the lot on the floor. He looked at them and wanted to cry. Vee walked out of the bathroom and he glanced up. Her eyes streamed with tears. He couldn’t even bloody cry on his own.

He didn’t want Vee. He wanted Addie. He could still have fixed things but he’d made it even worse because he’d let Vee manipulate him. Addie was the one who’d really suffered. She’d been humiliated and hurt.

“What have you been saying about Addie? You didn’t tell me she carried you back last night.”

“Will,” she wailed.

He sniffed. She stank of “Eternity”. He could smell it from the other side of the room. She’d probably squirted perfume in her eyes.

“Will. I’ve lost our baby.” She took two steps in his direction.

He gulped. “You’ve lost the baby? How?”

“What do you mean how?”

“Well, how?” he repeated in bewilderment.

“Do you think I left it in the supermarket?” she snapped.

Will narrowed his brows. Vee cried harder. She’d lost it? How convenient was that?

“Please, Will,” she sobbed. “Our little baby.”

Guilt struck like a machete.

"I had this terrible pain and there was blood and the baby's gone."

"Where?"

"What do you mean, where?"

"Where's the baby?" Will repeated.

"Will, it was a cluster of cells. It wasn't a proper baby. I flushed it away." She waved her hand in the air.

"What?" His stomach rolled.

"What did you expect me to do? Fish it out of the loo and put it in a coffin so we could have a funeral?" She gave a hiccupping sob.

Will tried to get his head round this. Vee no longer pregnant. No baby. He wasn't going to be a father. The thought of not being tied to Vee for the rest of his life made his head spin.

"Were you ever pregnant?" he asked.

Her mouth dropped open. "Will," she cried.

He'd ruined things with Addie and it could have been avoided. His brain accelerated. He should have put Vee back on a train the night she arrived in Leeds. No, he should have let Vee see him in bed with Addie. This was Ed's fault. No, it wasn't. Will's head pounded as his thoughts came to a screeching halt. It was all his fault. Ed was right.

"Will," Vee wailed. "I've lost my baby."

He jumped as Vee flung herself into his arms. He wanted to push her away, shout at her, but it wasn't the right time.

When she stopped crying, and it hadn't seemed to take long, he sat her on the bed and dropped down next to her. She reeked of perfume. His eyes watered.

"Do you need to go to hospital?" he asked.

"No point. It's gone." She rested her hand on his knee.

Will lifted the hand away. "Vee, you should go back to London."

Her eyes opened wide. A lone tear slipped over her bottom lid.

"I know you're upset about losing the baby, but pregnant or not, it makes no difference. We're getting divorced."

"You bastard," she gasped. "She won't take you back now."

"This isn't about Addie. It's about you and me and it's gone on too long. It's not fair to either of us. I've had enough, Vee. I've had enough of you constantly coming to me when things go wrong. What you did to Addie was disgusting. She'd done nothing to deserve it. You need to sort yourself out. I can't do it for you."

The tears dropped faster.

"It's not all your fault. I should have stopped this a long time ago," he said in a quiet voice.

"I'll tell Jack."

"You seem to have told Jack plenty already." Will rubbed the heels of his palms over his temples. His head ached.

"You'll lose his business. He's my godfather. He'll be on my side."

Will's jaw tightened. "I don't give a shit."

"What have I done wrong?" Vee wailed.

Tempted to tell her she'd never done anything right, he pressed his lips together.

"Will, I don't want to be on my own. Not after this. My stomach hurts. I'm upset. Drive me back to Leeds. I'll only stay a few days. The language school closes at the end of the week. Please, do this one last thing for me."

Will sighed and gave in. "You lie down and I'll pack."

He took her suitcase from the wardrobe, put it on the bed, and flipped it open. It was empty except for a photograph—a shot of him on the beach at Robin Hood's Bay, clinging onto Addie's power kite. He felt a ripple of pleasure remembering the fun they'd had, the pair of them eating those fat chips as they sat on the harbor wall, then a shiver of unease that Vee should have the photo.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"Addie sent it to you. I opened the letter."

Will had to turn away again and blink back the tears.

He made such a mess of packing the clothes that within minutes, Vee was unpacking everything again.

"For God's sake, Will. Let me do it."

Will's phone vibrated in his pocket.

"You're supposed to be in this meeting," Jack said.

"I'll be right down."

Jack waved Will over when he went into the room. All the group leaders were there, gathered for the discussion about prize giving.

"Where's Ed?" Jack asked. "His phone's switched off."

"No idea."

"Well, sit down, man. We've wasted enough time. Justin—your turn."

Will sat next to Jack and stretched out his legs.

"Addie was the outstanding member of my group. She—" Justin began.

"Oh, no. Forget her. Pick someone else," Jack snapped.

Justin's face hardened and he dropped his papers on the table.

"Hang on," Will said. "Why should he pick someone else?"

Jack turned and patted him on the knee. "I think you should keep out of this one, Will. Conflict of interest."

“What?” Will’s temper teetered on the point of eruption.

Jack’s eyes flitted around the faces. “Justin – who else?”

“Nobody else,” Will said.

Jack’s face turned through several shades of red, the veins bulging at his temples.

“Don’t you tell me what to do,” Jack barked.

“If Addie deserves the prize, give her the prize,” Will said.

“You’re taking this woman’s side over your wife?”

“Vee is a liar and a cheat. It’s a grave mistake believing anything she says.”

“Vee’s my goddaughter. She wouldn’t lie to me.” Jack reared up in his chair.

“She’s my wife and she’s lied to me. Unless you give Addie the prize she deserves and offer her a public apology, our business relationship is over.”

Will didn’t wait for a response. He got up and walked out.

His head was spinning. He wanted Addie. He wanted to hold her and make things right, not for him but for her. Ed was right, he should have been taking care of her. How could he not have seen how much she needed looking after? How could he have believed Vee when he knew what she was like?

Chapter Thirty-Six

Addie turned up the radio as loud as she could stand. She didn't want music, just noise. It was a long drive, made even longer by numerous wrong turns before she reached the motorway. With each wrong turn she remembered the drive down with Will, how happy she'd been. Every time she'd got them lost, he'd taken control and found the right way without showing an ounce of irritation. Addie wondered what the journey would have been like with Ed. Maybe they'd never have got there. She smiled.

What if she'd asked Ed to be Noah instead of Will? Would she be driving home alone if she had? A horn blared and she tensed but it wasn't meant for her. It had all seemed so simple, once upon a time. Find someone to love her and life would be perfect. She could see it was easier to love no one, easier if no one loved her.

The pain in her chest was constant, and Addie accepted it as normal. Being humiliated by her mother was bad enough, but what Vee and Jack had done was cruel. It hurt to think people believed things about her that weren't true. Addie had never come across anyone like Vee before. She doubted she was pregnant. If she was, Addie felt sorry for the baby. But she understood a little better why Will had behaved as he had. The woman was a witch.

Addie rolled her neck and shoulders, making a conscious effort to relax her grip on the steering wheel. She was stiff as a corpse. Her eyes ached from concentrating. It was dark and the M1 was busy, stop-start traffic that ebbed and flowed without reason. The snow had melted to slush in heavy rain and the windscreen wipers struggled. Every passing vehicle rocked the car and spat back a spray of dirty, greasy water, and Addie flinched, her body heavy with physical and mental exhaustion. Her head was full of buzzing insects, conflicting thoughts vying for her attention. All she wanted to do was collapse into bed, sleep and everything to be sorted when she woke.

She could do nothing to stop the surges of emotion that rolled from her heart. What had Will thought when he'd seen her in bed with Ed? What had gone through Ed's mind? He worked alongside Will. They were brothers. They lived together. Addie knew she shouldn't have let Ed get in bed with her, shouldn't have let him kiss her. Her fault. She'd messed everything up.

The best thing for everyone would be to forget she'd ever met the Mansell brothers.

When Addie pulled up on her street, the house was dark. She doubted Lisa was asleep which meant she was out. Great, because Addie didn't want to talk. The day had sucked everything out of her. She shouldn't have carried on driving, but desperation to get back overwhelmed common sense. She caught sight of someone lurking in the shadows, felt a flutter of hope and stamped on it. Probably just a neighbor. Dejected,

she lugged her bag through the door and up the stairs. Thought about whether she had the energy for a shower, decided not, then flicked on the light in her room.

She gasped. Was she in the wrong house?

Addie closed her eyes and then opened them. It *was* her room but it smelled like a chlorine-filled swimming pool and looked as though a violent storm had rushed through. She released a shaky breath. Every one of her clip-framed photographs lay smashed on the floor, glass scattered everywhere. On top of the duvet lay a heap of soggy books, together with upturned bottles of bleach and toilet cleaner. Pages had been ripped out and tossed around like confetti. Someone had hacked at her curtains and slashed her rug.

She opened her wardrobe with shaking hands. Her clothes hung in ribbons, her shoes were wet and ruined. Every Christmas present she'd bought was trashed—the wrap for her mother had been ripped, the necklaces torn apart, the wooden bowls gouged. Addie turned around. Her bedside lamp was broken and her alarm clock lay in the mess on the duvet. So did her camera. *Oh no*. The pain in her heart spiked. Addie pulled open her bedside drawer. Everything in there was wet and stank of chlorine. Noah's cards had been torn, her teddy bear's head cut off and the stuffing pulled out of his body. Everything she owned had been ruined.

On Sunday, after she and Will had left, this was what Vee had done and Lisa hadn't stopped her. Maybe Lisa didn't know. They were supposed to keep out of each other's rooms. If she did know, Addie would never be able forgive her. She looked to see if there was anything she could salvage, but Vee had been very thorough. Addie wasn't insured because she hadn't thought she had anything worth stealing. A rampaging, jealous woman hadn't entered her head.

The stairs creaked.

"Lisa?" she called.

"Fucking hell," said a voice.

Not Lisa. Addie spun around to find herself facing Spiderman in a black hoody. She blinked as her brain tried to compute why there was a guy in her room wearing a mask.

I left the door open.

"You left the door open."

She'd been so tired, she mustn't have closed it properly.

Addie groaned. "Are you a burglar?"

"Opportunist liberator," Spiderman corrected. "But looks like someone beat me to it."

"Yes, so you might as well leave," she said.

"After you give me your purse."

If Addie had the energy to laugh, she would have. "Couldn't you go and rob someone else?"

"That's not very sociable."

“My brothers are policemen,” she said in desperation.

“Your brothers aren’t here. Give me your money.”

He wasn’t going to be very pleased with three pounds sixty, Addie thought. But as she took her wallet out of her bag, something snapped. Without considering the consequences, she threw the bag at him and made a break for the door. Addie was nowhere near quick enough. He caught her arm and yanked her back. She brought her knee up into his crotch, but it was an ineffectual gesture and made matters worse because now he was pissed off. As they tussled, his fist slammed into the side of her head, sending Addie tumbling onto the broken glass. When she lifted her hands, she saw red flowers blossoming over her palms, but had no sensation of pain.

“You fucking bitch.”

He kicked her in the side and the pain took her breath away. When the foot hit her again, she wrapped her arms around his lower leg and pulled him over. While part of her brain was telling her to curl up and protect herself, the other part refused to give in. She drew strength from her anger and they rolled around on the floor with him swearing and lashing out and Addie thumping him anywhere she could.

She should have known Spiderman would win. It didn’t take long for him to pin her facedown. He sat on her back, crushing her ribs so she couldn’t breathe.

“You’re hiding something. Where’s the money?”

She choked out a laugh. It wasn’t funny but it was. He dragged her up by her hair and slammed her head down on the floor. The pain ricocheted through her brain as everything lost focus. Addie could hear him talking, but couldn’t make out what he was saying. She tried to shut her eyes to block out beckoning tunnels of bright light and then lost the ability to do anything.

* * * * *

Lisa gave a yippee of delight when David pulled up outside the house. She climbed off the bike and removed her helmet. “One more minute with your mother and I swear I’d have slit my wrists.”

“She’d have made you clean up the mess.”

“I know. Oh look, there’s a light on. Addie must be in. I thought she wasn’t back until tomorrow.”

Lisa had discovered something she needed to tell Addie. A colleague at the language school had let something slip. Soon-to-pop Chris had boasted about doing work for Evelyne’s scientist brother, saying she’d have to be permanently pregnant to supply him with urine. It had seemed so odd, Lisa asked her to explain and now she knew the truth—Vee wasn’t pregnant. She was so desperate to keep Will she’d let him think she was having a baby because with Chris’ urine sample, she’d made sure of a positive reading on the test.

Lisa didn't like being used. When Vee said she was pregnant, Lisa had felt bad that Addie had got involved with a guy whose wife was expecting. Vee had sobbed and wailed after Will and Addie had left. Lisa had never heard Addie mention anyone called Chloe so knew Will was lying about the coach. She let Vee stay the night and even lent her the car. Big mistakes. But the worst mistake was talking to Vee about Addie. She'd told her stuff she should have kept secret, told her how Addie had picked Will up in a gym and asked him to stay the night, how he'd knocked her over in his car and that he'd been the first guy Addie had slept with. Lisa hoped giving Addie the news about the fake pregnancy would make up for it.

"Oh, my car's back." Lisa walked down to it. "Fucking hell! David, come and look at this."

Ed pulled his Boxster in behind Lisa's car and jumped out.

"What are you doing here?" Lisa asked.

"Long story," Ed said.

"Do you know what happened to my car?"

"Yes."

"You'd better come in and tell me then. Ed, this is David, Addie's brother. David— Ed. Will's brother."

The two men nodded at each other.

"Nice wheels." David admired the Boxster. "What's the acceleration?"

"Zero to sixty in six-point-two seconds."

David whistled and Lisa stamped on his foot. "How about my car?"

David slid his arms round her waist and pressed his mouth to her neck. "Can't that wait?"

"David, I am so not in the mood." Lisa elbowed him in the chest. "I arrive back after having been on my best behavior at your mother's to find my car has been smashed up." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "I am not thinking about sex."

"But I like it when you're pissed off."

Lisa rolled her eyes and stormed up to the house. She stopped so abruptly, David banged into her and Ed banged into David.

"The door's open." Lisa walked in. "Addie?" she shouted. "Get down here. You left the door open and what's happened to my car?"

Silence.

"Addie," Lisa yelled and when there was still no reply, she stomped upstairs.

When Ed and David heard Lisa scream, they both froze. The sight of Spiderman flying toward them, stirred them into action. David made a grab for him and they fell back into Ed. For a few moments it was a maelstrom of arms and legs, thumps and

swipes, grunting and shouting until David managed to pin the guy facedown with his arms behind his back while Ed sat on his legs. All three were panting. David pulled Spiderman up by his hair and wrenched the mask from his face.

"Who the hell are you?" David demanded.

And then Lisa screamed again and this time it sounded different. Ed's eyes shot to the stairs. He fumbled in his pocket for his mobile and pressed 999.

"He's killed Addie." Lisa stumbled down, clutching the banister, her face white with shock. "She won't wake up."

Ed's world slipped away.

The man underneath him struggled. Ed wanted to crush him.

"Ambulance," Ed said into his phone.

"Take Ed's phone off him. You speak to them," David ordered Lisa. "Go and get the handcuffs out of your bedside drawer. Ed, check on Addie. I can hold this bastard."

Ed raced upstairs. The door of Addie's room stood open. She lay on her back, blood speckling her face and her hands. He dropped down next to her.

"Addie, Addie, oh God."

He tilted her head back and put his mouth against hers, felt a faint draught of air as Addie exhaled, and he exhaled. He didn't dare move her. All he could do was hold her hand.

Ed wouldn't leave Addie's side. He went with her in the ambulance and talked to her the whole way there. It was only when the doctor in the hospital told him he was interfering with their work that Ed retreated to the corridor. He paced up and down, wearing a hole in his jacket pocket with his finger, pulling at a loose thread. He was still pacing when he saw David and Lisa coming down the corridor, followed by Addie's mother and a tall guy with curly fair hair who looked a lot like David.

"How is she?" Lisa asked.

"I don't know," Ed said. "They won't let me see her."

"You were with Addie in Lincoln," Addie's mother said.

Ed held out his hand. "Ed Mansell."

His hand was feather touched and dropped.

"Where's your brother? Why isn't he here?"

Ed felt like she'd stabbed him. "Will doesn't know."

"Don't you think you'd better tell him?"

Ed nodded.

"You can go now," she said.

"I want to wait until Addie regains consciousness."

"There's no need."

The door to the Observation Unit opened and a young woman emerged, a stethoscope round her neck. She retreated when five people stepped toward her.

"How is she?" they chorused.

"I think she'll be fine."

"Can we see her?" Ed just got in first.

"Are you her husband?"

"No, he's not. I'm her mother." She elbowed Ed out of the way and then turned to face him. "You may as well go."

Ed backed off, but he didn't go far. He wandered through the maze of corridors. His skin itched in dermatology, he limped through orthopedics and his heart hurt in cardiology. When he stumbled across the hospital shop, he looked round for something he could buy Addie. Then he remembered her wrecked room. What could he buy her when she'd lost everything? He wished he'd hit the guy harder. He picked up a little silky-soft, gray teddy bear holding a card that said "I love you" and moments later thrust it to the back of the display. One at the front, just as cute, held a bunch of flowers with no message. He bought that.

When he got back to Addie's ward, he'd expected to have to hang around and wait for her relatives to leave, but there was no one in the corridor. Ed pressed the buzzer and a nurse let him through.

"I just—" he began.

"I know. I remember you from earlier. Her family have all gone. Do you want to sit with her for a bit, before we transfer her to a ward? Ten minutes, no more," the nurse said.

Ed nodded. "Is she awake?"

"Not yet."

Ed's heart pounded as he drew closer to Addie's bed. She looked so fragile. There were tiny scratches all over her face. Her hands were bandaged, just the tips of her fingers poked out. He wanted to sweep her into his arms and hold her tight, never let her go. He put the little gray bear beside her in the bed, sat down on the hard plastic chair and reached for her fingers.

"Hi, sweetheart. Everything's going to be fine. I thumped Spiderman for you. How brave am I?" Ed didn't know what to say. "Wake up, Addie. You have to be all right. I wish I'd... Do you know how much I care about you?" He lowered his voice to a whisper, leaned close to her head. "I told myself I wouldn't be hurt again, that's why I flit from woman to woman, because that way no one gets hurt, only I don't want to flit from you. I want to be with you forever. I love you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

When Ed pulled up on the drive of the rented house in Alwoodley, he was surprised to see Will's Lexus outside. He took a deep breath before he opened the door. He somehow wasn't surprised to see Vee in the hall.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

She stood with a glass of wine in her hand, glaring at him. Ed had never felt more like hitting a woman in his life.

"You're not supposed to be drinking. You're pregnant."

"Not anymore. I lost it."

"That was careless."

She sneered. "That's just the sort of flippant, unpleasant remark I'd expect from you, Ed Mansell. Don't you have any compassion? It was your brother's child as well."

"If it ever existed."

Will appeared at the door to the kitchen. "What do you want?"

What Ed had been hoping for was a bed to save him looking for a hotel. He'd been going to keep Addie to himself but now he wanted to shock Will. "Addie's in hospital," he said.

"What?" Will staggered and his shoulder hit the wall.

"She's been attacked by a burglar," Ed continued.

"Poor Addie." Vee tucked her arm into Will's. He shrugged her off.

Ed could see the fear in Will's eyes and the pain, and wondered if Will was too blind to see it in his.

"Which hospital?" Vee asked. "We'll send flowers."

"Leeds General Infirmary."

"What happened?" Will asked.

Ed was about to explain when there was a loud knocking at the door behind him. He was nearest so he opened it. He didn't recognize the man standing there, but judging by the strangled cry that erupted from Will—he did.

"Addie! Is she okay?" Will asked.

"She will be. Can I come in?"

Ed moved aside. This had to be Addie's other brother. He looked like David and the brother he never got introduced to at the hospital. Another man followed.

"You must be Ed. I'm Addie's oldest brother, Finn." Finn shook Ed's hand, squeezing it hard. Ed tried not to wince. "Thanks for what you did, helping David, though of course you didn't use excessive force, did you?"

"He fell over in the scuffle," Ed said, flexing his sore fingers behind his back.

"Yes, that's what David said." Finn turned to Vee. "And you're Evelyne or do you prefer to be called Vee? I've heard all about you."

"Well, I hope you're going to listen to the other side of the story. The accident wasn't my fault. She was trying to grab the wheel, I—"

"Shut up, Vee," Ed snapped. "Weren't you listening? This is Addie's *brother*."

"I'm not here about the accident," Finn said in a quiet voice, not taking his eyes away from Vee. "When Addie got home today, she found her room had been wrecked. I don't think she has one possession left intact. Her clothes have been shredded, her books soaked with bleach, her bed ruined and every one of her photographs spoiled. Even her teddy bear was torn apart."

"What does that have to do with me? The man who attacked her must have done it," Vee said.

"He says not. He admits to the assault but not to the destruction. Since there's no logic in that, I'm inclined to believe him. I understand you spent Sunday night in Addie's room."

"I didn't do anything." Vee edged toward Will.

"There'll be fingerprints."

"Well, I was in her room so of course there will be prints. Lisa let me stay. I slept in Addie's bed, but I didn't do anything to her things."

"Lying to the police?" Ed glared at her.

Vee's eyes shot to Will.

"All Addie's brothers are policemen," he said.

Vee clutched her stomach and swayed. "Sorry. I don't feel well. I've just lost my baby." She lurched into Will's arms so he had to catch her. Will helped her into the lounge and onto the couch. The others followed.

Finn stared at her dispassionately. Ed liked him.

"I believe you're friends with Chris Burton, a teacher at Easyspeak language school?" Finn said.

"Yes."

Ed had no idea what this was about, nor where it was going, but Vee looked like a trapped rat. Her eyes darted everywhere but Finn's face.

"You asked for a sample of her urine for some experiment being done by your brother," Finn said.

"Vee doesn't have a brother," Will said.

"Is this Chris pregnant, by any chance?" Ed asked. The Hallelujah chorus started up in his head.

"Very," Finn said.

Loud drum roll.

Will slumped onto a chair, as though all the bones had been sucked out of his body. "You were never pregnant? You pretended you were, pretended to lose it? All that collapsing and feeling ill?" Ed could see the truth zinging through Will as everything connected. "No wonder that doctor thought we were nuts." Will shook his head. "You had a photograph in your suitcase. You said Addie sent it." He fixed his black eyes on Vee. "You took it from her."

"Did you destroy Addie's room?" Finn asked.

Ed wished he could enjoy this. If it wasn't for the fact that Addie had been hurt, he'd have whooped in delight. He wanted to shout "I told you so" at Will. He could see Vee thinking about continuing to lie, and then the moment it struck her that it was over.

"Yes. It served the cow right." She stood up.

No contrition, Ed noted. Smug and defiant to the end. The bitch.

"Why?" Finn asked. "Why would you do such a vicious thing? What had Addie ever done to you? She wouldn't hurt a fly. She's the kindest person I know."

"She let my husband fall in love with her."

For a moment no one spoke.

Will broke the silence. "Pack a bag and get out. I never want to see or speak to you again."

"Where can I go?" she wailed.

The man standing behind Finn spoke. "To the police station with me. I'm arresting you on suspicion of causing criminal damage to property belonging to Addie Winter."

Vee's eyes shot to Will. "Will!"

"You could go to prison," Finn said.

"Will, help me!"

Ed folded his arms across his chest. He wished Addie was here to see this.

"Will." Vee cried now. Ed thought the tears might be genuine. "Get me a lawyer. Ring somebody, please."

Will looked up at her and shook his head.

"I take it she won't be coming back here?" Finn asked.

"No," Ed said.

"Get your things together. After you've been charged, you can find a hotel to stay in," Finn said.

Vee got to her feet and with one last look at Will, she walked out.

Will put his head in his hands. "I can't believe this. I'll pay for all the damage. Whatever Vee has spoiled, I'll replace it."

"Any news on Addie?" Ed asked.

"She's being kept in hospital tonight. Then she'll have to stay with our mother. I think it's best she's left alone. She'll need time to pull herself together."

"What about the guy who attacked her?" Ed said.

"Local drug addict. We'll need a statement from you, Ed."

"Right. Will Vee go to prison?" Ed tried not to sound too eager.

Finn shrugged. "Probably not, but it won't hurt her to think she might."

"What about a solicitor?" Will asked.

"We can get a duty solicitor in." Finn paused. "Are you two still married?"

"Not for want of trying not to be."

"Only, I won't have Addie hurt anymore." Finn stared him right in the eyes. "She hasn't had an easy time. I know you care about her. I saw the way you ate her sprouts last Sunday. That used to be my job."

Will cast him a little smile and Ed sank in mud. What chance did he have when Addie's mother and brothers all thought she and Will should be together?

Vee appeared at the door, her eyes red and puffy. "Will?"

He didn't even look at her. Ed did. He grinned.

"There's no need to look so pleased." She sniffed.

"Yes, there is," Ed said and smiled harder.

When Vee and Finn had gone, Ed closed the door and went back into the lounge. Will sat on the couch with his head tipped back and his eyes closed.

"This was supposed to be a nice, simple job," Ed said. "A change from London."

"Do you think she's gone?"

"For now, but if you mean for good, that's up to you." Ed paused. "I wish to God I'd let her come upstairs that day and find you with Addie."

"Only if you'd moved all the knives. She really is crazy." Will sat up and rubbed his neck. "I don't know what all this was about. Why would she think I'd want her after all she's done? I don't even know why she still wants me."

"Probably because she can't have you. She's not used to people saying no. And that's your fault. You treated her like a princess when you got married."

"That's how you're supposed to treat the person you love."

"But you let Vee walk all over you. Addie is fun and kind and she expected nothing in return except to be loved, but you kept walking away from her to sort out your conniving ex-wife. You need your head examined."

Will glared at him and then sagged.

"You let Addie down," Ed said.

"I know."

"I thought you deserved to be with someone like her, but you don't."

Will gave a short laugh. "And you do?" He raised his eyes to Ed's. "You waited until I was taking Vee to hospital and stepped right in. You're my brother, for fuck's sake. I've never gone after any woman you've wanted. I've even stood back and let you make moves on ones I liked. Why couldn't you leave Addie alone?"

The barb hit and Ed swallowed hard. "Addie needed looking after too, but you ignored her."

"So why didn't you?" Will demanded. "You could have left her alone. Can you imagine how I felt when I came back to see if she was okay, only to find her in bed with you?"

Ed heard a little voice urging him to tell Will he hadn't made love to her. He ignored it.

"You've done nothing but hurt her," Ed said. "You've run to Vee every time she's whined and you've walked away from Addie. I've watched you hurting her and felt guilty letting you do it. When she and Vee got back to the hotel after the car crash, you ignored Addie. She was nearly unconscious from hypothermia. She needed to be cared for. It was her who needed to go to hospital, not Vee. *You* looked as though you didn't even care."

"I thought Vee was pregnant. I thought she was losing the baby."

"But you were supposed to love Addie. I don't understand you, Will. What were you thinking? I encouraged you to go after Addie because at the start I wanted the pair of you to be together. I thought Vee would fuck off for good. I wasn't even thinking of Addie, just of helping you. But I saw how she looked at you and the way you looked at her and I thought—maybe this is it for Will, maybe this is the real thing. God, Will, all you had to do was love Addie and you couldn't even get that right."

"Was she the only one in the office you hadn't fucked? Got a full score sheet now?"

Every muscle in Ed's body tensed. "I like Addie. I didn't drag her into bed. I got to know her. I made friends with her. Just because you didn't do the right thing, don't make me feel guilty for helping her."

"You fucked her. Who exactly were you helping by fucking her?"

Ed took a deep breath. "I love her."

Will stared at him. "I loved her first."

"She isn't a toy we're fighting over," Ed said in a quiet voice.

"But we *are* fighting. I'm not going to let you take her, Ed. You've flitted from woman to woman all your life. When you throw Addie away, you'll break her."

Ed's jaw tightened. "Do you know me at all?"

"I know you too well."

* * * * *

Ed didn't stay the night in Alwoodley. He couldn't stand to be near Will. Instead he drove back to the hospital and sweet-talked one of the night nurses into letting him see Addie. Her eyes were closed and Ed thought she was asleep, but as he sat on the chair at her bedside, she spoke. "Hi, Ed."

His pulse rocketed. "How did you know it was me?"

"Your smell."

"Oh God, I knew I should've had a shower," he whispered.

Addie laughed and then groaned. "Ouch."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like someone's been kicking me. And of course it's my fault."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because I should have handed over the pathetic sum in my purse, as my mother will no doubt repeatedly tell me."

Ed's hand crept onto the bed and touched the tips of Addie's fingers with the tips of his own. "Are your hands badly cut?"

"Apparently I look like I've gone a couple of rounds with Edward Scissorhands."

"Don't say that. For one very long minute I thought you were dead. If he'd killed you, I think I might have killed him." Ed meant it.

"God, Ed, you shouldn't tangle with Spiderman."

"I thumped him. My fingers still hurt."

Addie gave them a little squeeze. "My hero," she whispered.

He wished he was.

"Finn arrested Vee for wrecking your room," Ed said.

"Oh shit. I want to forget she exists, not have this drag out for months."

"She's not pregnant. She never was." Ed's hand itched to reach out and brush the hair from Addie's poor scratched face.

"I was beginning to wonder. So how's Will?"

"Pissed off." Ed wanted to leave it there, but he couldn't. "Not about the baby. He never wanted that. Not with her. He's pissed off because all of this could have been avoided. It's my fault. I fucked things up. If I'd let Vee burst in on you two the evening you came back from Robin Hood's Bay, none of this would have happened. And – and he thinks we – I –"

"That we didn't just sleep together?"

Ed nodded. "Well, we didn't just sleep together."

Addie opened her eyes wider. "I don't remember..."

"No, I didn't mean that." His heart hurt. The thing actually hurt. How could that be? The words moved to his mouth from his head, but got stuck.

"Why didn't you tell him?" she asked.

"I don't know," Ed lied.

"You look shattered," Addie said.

"I'm exhausted. Fighting Spiderman wore me out. Is there room in that bed for me?" he asked.

"I can't hurt him, Ed."

He tried to pull his hand away, but Addie clung on to one finger with the tips of hers.

"So you'll hurt yourself instead?" *And me*, he wanted to add.

"He's your brother. You're friends. You run a business together. I won't come between you. I'm not that important."

"Christ, Addie. Listen to yourself. If you want him, go for it." He wanted the words back. That hadn't been what he'd been trying to say.

She moved her hand. "I'm tired."

Ed got to his feet.

"I'll come and see you."

"Don't," Addie muttered. "I can't do this, Ed. I can't come between you and Will. We all have to let this go."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Addie? Oh, your poor face. Christ! Addie, sweetheart?"

The voice pulled her back from a world where she was safe. Suddenly her hands hurt, her ribs ached and she remembered.

"I'm so sorry, angel. I'd give anything for this not to have happened to you. The nurse has only let me in for a minute. I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. I know I keep saying that, but I need you to understand how much you mean to me. I wish I could turn back the clock and meet you all over again, because I'd never let you out of my arms."

Once upon a time, that was what she'd wished too.

"I want to spend the rest of my life looking after you. When you get out of here, I want to take you on holiday. Anywhere you like."

She opened her eyes and looked straight at him. Will smiled.

"Vee's gone," he whispered. "Really gone. I want you to come to London and move in with me. If you don't want to work for me, I'll help you find a job. I know you and Ed – Well, it's okay, Addie. I let you down. You've never done anything wrong. Never. I want to make everything right. Please give me another chance."

Beneath the sheet, Addie clutched the little gray bear Ed had given her, squeezing it in her fingers. "Go away," she muttered.

As her eyes closed again, she heard him give a shaky sigh.

"I love you," he whispered. "I'll always love you."

Addie waited until he'd gone before she pulled the bear out and pressed it to her face. She buried silent sobs in its fur.

* * * * *

She had one night in hospital before Hugh collected her and took her to her mother's. There was nowhere else to go. Her room was still under investigation by scene of crime officers. Addie was installed in her childhood bedroom. Her mother delivered meals on trays, most of which Addie flushed down the toilet. The meals came with plenty of advice, all of which went the same way.

Lisa and David were the first permitted to visit.

"How are you?" Lisa asked, clutching a Christmas present and a box of mints.

"Sore."

"I was so scared." Lisa glanced at David and he hugged her. "Made me realize you never know what's going to happen in life. I've decided to stop being mean to David."

"Now he'll be even more unbearable," Addie said.

"We're engaged," David said. "We wanted you to know first because if it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have met."

"I'm really sorry, Lisa," Addie said.

David stuck out his tongue. "Just don't tell anyone, okay? And act surprised when we announce it."

"I want to apologize," Lisa said. "Sorry, Addie. Sorry for ever thinking Vee could be right about anything. We talked about you. I wish I'd never said anything to her."

"David, go away," Addie said.

He rolled his eyes but got to his feet.

"And don't listen through the wall."

"I've never done that," he said, twisting his mouth.

"No, but I have. So I know how easy it is."

He laughed and Addie heard his steps on the stairs.

"Go all the way down. I know that trick too," she called.

They heard the thump of him descending. Lisa put the Christmas present and the mints on the bed. "For you. I'm going up to my parents' this afternoon and David's bringing me back to make the announcement here."

"What did you tell Vee?" Addie asked, undeflected.

And as Lisa spoke, Addie realized that it hadn't been Will at all. Vee's information about her losing her virginity had come from Lisa. All Vee had done was manipulate it until it fitted her design.

"I really am sorry, Addie. Can you forgive me?" Lisa asked. "I had no idea she'd done that to your room. I left her in the house while I went out with David."

Addie forgave her, but knew things wouldn't be the same between them.

No sooner had David and Lisa gone, than Finn appeared.

"How are you feeling?"

Addie thought she was going to get fed up of hearing those words and fed up of lying and saying she was fine, when she wasn't fine at all. She stuffed a chocolate in her mouth.

"We've brought you a present. It's from the three of us," Finn said and handed her a mobile phone. "It's for Christmas, but we thought you'd like it now in case there was anyone you wanted to call. It's a pay-as-you-go. There's a hundred pounds' worth of credit on it."

"Thanks, Finn. That's great," she said.

They couldn't know that she had no one to call.

* * * * *

Ed and Will phoned the house. When she refused to speak to them, they turned up—though never together. Addie wouldn't see them. Flowers arrived from both. Addie wouldn't have them in her room. She wanted to forget and they wouldn't let her. A large check arrived from Will to cover the damage done by Vee. Addie ripped it in half.

Addie didn't leave her bedroom, seldom stirred from the bed. She lay curled up, clutching the little gray bear, waiting for her heart to stop aching or to simply stop. Ed and Will had been defeated by her mother. Although she'd said she didn't want to see them, they'd accepted it. A tiny part of her wished one of them had forced his way in and raced up the stairs to save her. But maybe that only happened in the movies. In the end, Addie realized nothing was going to happen. Unless she did something, her life would just go on in its dreary, disappointing way. She had to save herself.

She'd spent too much of her life saying sorry. Things had to change. *She* had to change. How could she expect anyone to love her, if she didn't love herself? She *was* worth loving. There was nothing wrong with her. Only she didn't want to be *in* love because it hurt. She could have neither Will nor Ed because having one would destroy the other. So she'd done the right thing and given them both up.

Then she cried because she didn't want both of them, she only wanted one and she would never be able to tell him.

* * * * *

Addie didn't venture downstairs until the day before Christmas Eve. She waited until her mother had gone out. Mince pies cooled on the work surface. Addie wondered if her mother had counted them, ate one anyway and rearranged the rest so there was no gap. The mince pie was followed by packet of cheese straws. She'd only meant to eat one and hadn't been able to stop. Addie almost threw the packet in the bin but knew her mother would notice. She opened the drawer to get the key to the back door in order to hide the evidence in the dustbin and made a discovery.

Twenty "get well soon" cards from friends and students at Easyspeak language school and one from Magelan's signed by everyone in the office and garage, even Genghis. But not by Will and Ed. Every envelope had been opened. Addie sat and read the messages and felt overwhelmed. Why had her mother hidden them?

She made herself a cup of coffee, sat and waited.

"About time you pulled yourself together," her mother muttered as she walked into the kitchen. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." *Like death.*

Joan stared at the mince pies, then looked at Addie.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Addie asked.

"You could have washed the dishes." Joan turned on the tap and began to fill the bowl. "I've put two hundred pounds in your bank account. You can buy more Christmas presents and pay me back when you get another job."

"Thank you."

"Obviously, you'll have to live here for a while. I won't charge you rent, you can help me around the house. What's happened isn't entirely your fault."

Addie knew that was what she'd been waiting for. The blow to knock some sense into her head.

"None of it is my fault. Do you think I wanted to be attacked?"

Her mother harrumphed. "You left the door open. You were asking for trouble. Then you tried to fight. You didn't use any common sense."

The fact that her mother was right, made it worse. But Addie wouldn't back down now. She wanted answers.

"Why didn't you give me all the get-well cards?"

Her mother scrubbed at a saucepan.

"Why didn't you want me to know that people cared about me?"

Silence.

"Why don't you love me?" Addie tried.

Her mother turned away from the sink, her hands dropping suds to the tiled floor.

Addie took a deep breath. "What have I done that's so bad, you can't even stand to let me kiss you or hug you? The boys hug you, but you barely tolerate a touch from me. I don't understand. What did I do?" Addie tried not to sound hopeful with her next question. "Was I adopted?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You've seen your birth certificate. You know whose child you are."

Addie watched the soapy drops making a puddle on the floor, and couldn't raise her eyes to her mother's face because she'd desperately hoped for adoption, hoped she wasn't related to this person who disliked her. Then she looked up, because whatever the truth, she needed to know.

"You don't even like me." Addie stared straight at her mother. "You've never said you're proud of me, that I look nice, or that I'm pretty. It's almost as though you take delight in finding me a disappointment."

Joan grabbed a tea towel and dried her hands. "I just want you to make something of yourself, be someone."

"I am someone," Addie shot back. "I'm—"

"You have no job, no money, and no foot on the housing ladder."

"If you remember, I came back to Leeds because I was asked to. The job at Booth's was a stop-gap. I can look for a proper job now."

Her mother snorted. "Doing what with no skills, no professional qualifications?"

"I have a degree."

"What use is Japanese if you don't like Japan? You only did it because you knew your father and I would think it was a waste of time. That's been you all along. Deliberately awkward. I did everything I could to make sure you turned out right, but you resisted me all the way." Her mother's eyes tightened, every line on her face seemed deeper.

Addie wouldn't back down. "Nothing I ever did was good enough. You've never loved me. Dad didn't either. You never put your arms around me, never said you loved me."

Her mother said nothing. She turned and put her hands back in the washing up bowl. Addie swallowed hard. This wasn't going to end with them crying in each other's arms. Then her mother spoke again, her back toward Addie.

"I was raped."

The words hung in the air between them as though her mother wished them back and Addie wished them not heard. Three words and Addie thought she understood everything. Her mother washed a glass, rinsed the soap away and put it on the draining board.

"The result of the rape was a nasty sexually transmitted disease and you. How could anything beautiful come out of that?"

Addie realized she hadn't understood at all.

Her mother's flat voice went on, addressing her image in the window, not Addie. "I was coming out of church. I'd been to do the flowers and your biological father grabbed me in the graveyard. He wore a balaclava, but I saw his eyes. You have the same eyes. The exact. Same. Vile. Eyes."

Her mother turned around. Addie wanted to hold her but the look on her mother's face was one of hate. The last spark of hope in Addie fluttered and went out.

"The boys don't know and I don't want them to. I didn't want you to know. But you pushed and pushed."

Addie's world slammed to a halt.

"Satisfied now? I won't say any more about it, so don't mention it again. I could have had you aborted, but I thought it was wrong. Silas was a decent man and accepted you as if you were his. We did our best, but it wasn't enough. Whatever genetic donation you got from that man dominates what I gave you."

There was complete silence. Even the kitchen clock held its breath.

Addie pressed her nails into her palms. "I'm very sorry that happened to you. I'm sorry I've disappointed you. Thank you for lending me the money. I'll pay you back as soon as I can." She took a deep breath. "I'm leaving tomorrow for the Lake District to spend Christmas with friends, so I'll sleep at my place tonight to see what I can salvage of my things. I'll buy the replacement presents this afternoon and drop them off at Finn's."

Addie could hardly believe she spoke coherently. She felt as though she was being pressed between two sheets of metal. Everywhere hurt. Her mother had done the right thing and not had an abortion and then done the wrong thing and blamed Addie for an act of violence that wasn't her fault. How could she do that to a child?

"Your brothers are expecting you to spend Christmas here," said her mother.

But you don't want me, Addie thought. She'd never been wanted.

"My friends are looking forward to seeing me." She heard her voice break and as the lie came from her mouth, a powerful surge of pain spiraled through her.

"You may as well take your presents with you."

Joan pushed three small packets into a plastic bag, thrust it at Addie and turned away. Addie moved up behind her and put her arms around her. Her mother stiffened and Addie let her go. Addie knew she'd never try to touch her again.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

As she left the house, Addie was filled with a strange kind of contentment knowing she wasn't the problem, only what she represented. When her mother looked at her, she didn't see her daughter, but the memory of something awful—the man who'd raped her. So Addie *was* lovable, just not to her mother and father. She understood now, though it didn't make it right.

Her mind flicked back over the years, remembering how her parents seemed reluctant to celebrate her birthday, the frequent lectures about not allowing lecherous men to touch her, and the way the TV was switched off at the slightest hint of nudity. Now she knew why. Her mother had frightened her about sex and made Addie think it was something bad. Once she'd left home and started her diet of romance books, Addie learned that it wasn't, but thought it was an unattainable dream.

What her parents had done, treating her like an outcast, was unkind beyond belief. How could they blame her? But it explained everything. All the comments about her appearance, all their attempts to change her had been because she wasn't their creation, not like her brothers. Addie would never have treated a child of hers in that way.

Then she wondered about the man who was her natural father, though there had been nothing natural about what he'd done to her mother. Addie would never know him, or anything about him. She'd never felt so alone in her entire life.

* * * * *

The bell rang the following morning as Addie dragged another plastic bag of her ruined possessions down the stairs. She opened the door to Will and Ed and her heart lurched into an unsteady beat. Ed hung back a few steps behind Will, his eyes fixed on the ground, looking as though he'd rather be anywhere else. She felt the same way. Will was trying to smile and failing, his hands fidgeting at his sides.

"We'd like to talk to you," Will said. "Can we come in?"

Addie hesitated. She'd told herself that never seeing either of them again was the best way to get through this, but her feet developed a mind of their own and she stepped aside.

"Santa been early?" Ed asked as he passed the line of black bags in the hall. Addie looked up and saw him wince as Will elbowed him in the ribs.

"Oh, sorry," Ed muttered, staring at the nearest bag.

Addie pushed down the headless teddy bear poking from the top.

"How are you feeling?" Will asked.

“Fine, thank you.”

They followed her into the living room. On the floor by the fireplace was a small fiber optic Christmas tree, the tips of the branches fading from green to red and back to green again. Since she’d be holed up in the house over Christmas, Addie had dragged it out of the attic in an attempt to cheer herself up. Her eyes lingered on the three small presents in front of it.

“I thought you were going to stay with friends in the Lake District?” Ed blurted.

Addie looked up in surprise.

“Your mother called me this morning,” Will explained.

Addie felt like she’d touched a live wire, shock sped through her, and she slumped on a chair. “My mother called you?”

“She said she thought you’d like to see me now,” Will said.

Addie glanced at Ed. He turned away but when she looked at Will, she felt Ed’s attention return to her.

“I was – we were worried about you,” Will said.

“I’m fine. The cuts are healing on my hands. Look, no bandages.” She waved them in the air. “My face is fine. My ribs are okay. I’m fine,” she rambled. “Fine.” Her voice trailed away.

“Good, but that’s not what I meant.” Will sat on the couch.

Ed slumped on a chair away from Will, his eyes down, his shoulders too. He picked at one of his nails. Will stared straight at her, hope written all over his face.

“I spoke to Jack yesterday,” Will said. “He – well, he sends his apologies. He’s writing to you. He’s issued a company statement making his apology public. He said your job’s still there if you want it. He’d like to talk to you about a position more in keeping with your ability. Something in the marketing department.”

Working for Tony, Addie thought in alarm. “No.”

“Then come and work for me. Ed’s leaving.”

Addie flashed another glance at Ed, whose eyes were now focused on the Christmas edition of the *Radio Times*, draped over the chair arm.

“No, thank you,” she said.

Will gave a frustrated sigh. “What do you want, Addie? What can we do to make this better?”

“What is it that *you* want?” she fired back. “I told you both to go away. You’re making this harder. Why have you come here?”

“Ed?” Will said.

“I can’t,” Ed mumbled.

“You’re supposed to go first, we agreed.”

“Can’t,” Ed repeated.

Will sighed and turned to Addie. "First of all, I want to tell you I'm sorry for everything that's happened, except I'm not sorry you asked me to be your Noah. I fell in love with you. And it was because I didn't want to hurt you and because I was a coward that I didn't tell you what I should have. I never lied to you, but I didn't tell you everything. If I'd just explained right from the start—but I was frightened of losing you." He took a deep breath and gripped the edge of the couch.

Addie couldn't take her eyes off him. Will swallowed hard.

"I want you to know that I think about you all the time. I can't stop thinking about you. I love you, Addie. I love the way you chew your pencils. I love your beautiful Alsatian eyes. I love the way you can swear in a hundred languages." He gave a shaky smile. "I love you teetering in those high heels. I love making love to you. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy."

Will dropped down at her feet. Addie saw the look of horror on Ed's face.

"I've been selfish and stupid. I thought of myself when I should have been thinking of you. I know I don't deserve another chance but I'm begging you to give me one. I want us to start again. That night you carried Vee back in the snow, I pushed you into Ed's arms by not taking care of you. He shouldn't have taken advantage of you, but that's—"

"He didn't," Addie said.

"Didn't what?" Will asked.

"I didn't take advantage of her," Ed said.

Will looked between the pair of them, gave a bewildered laugh and sat back on the couch. There was silence for a while before he spoke again, this time to Ed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you wanted to believe the worst in me."

"Because you thought I wouldn't want Addie if I thought she'd slept with you," Will snapped.

Addie saw Ed's fists clench as he came up out of the chair. "So why didn't you drag me from the bed and throw me out of the room?"

Will jumped to his feet.

"Stop it," she shouted. "Stop fighting."

Ed turned to her and his heart burst. She looked so confused and hurt and this was all their fault.

"I'm sorry, Addie," he said in a quiet voice.

He was suffocating. God, what could he say? He didn't want Will to love her because he loved her. He loved everything about her too, and he wanted to look after her for the rest of his life. He wanted her by his side when he went to bed and there when he woke up. He wanted her to laugh at his jokes and tease him when he was showing off. He wanted to watch her licking mustard off her fingers and he wanted her

to lick it off his. More important, he didn't want his old life. He wanted a new life with Addie.

He could have said all that and more, but the need to do the right thing was a heavy weight on him. Ed hadn't wanted to come today. Will had made him. Now he had to make sure he did the best job he could of hiding the truth.

"I think – you're very special, Addie." That sounded terrible. Couldn't he come up with something better than that? "And I need to apologize too. I'm sorry about what happened that night in the hotel. I was trying to help you and I did take advantage of the situation. Well, not complete advantage but –"

Ed could feel Will's eyes on him. He made himself keep looking at Addie because this was the last time he would see her. *Sorry, Ed wanted to say, sorry for pushing you into his arms, sorry for telling you to fight for him when I wanted to fight for you myself. Sorry for not trying harder.*

He had to choke out the next words. "Will adores you, Addie. Please give him another chance."

He saw confusion flash across her eyes, and knew he'd hurt her again.

"Are you saying I was one of your flings?" she asked.

"Yes." Ed made himself look her in the eyes.

"He's lying," Will said.

Ed kept looking at Addie. "I'm not. You know what I'm like. I'm a tart. I've slept my way through the office. Just missing an A." Except he hadn't slept with any of them, just taken them out and enjoyed their company.

"You can settle this," Will said. "Choose between us."

Ed wanted to be anywhere else in the world because this was hell.

"Maybe I should tell you both how I feel," Addie said. "Ed, I think you're the kindest person I've ever met. You're thoughtful, sensitive, reliable and you're funny. You make me laugh."

"You missed good-looking," Ed said.

Addie smiled. "Very good-looking. You have beautiful eyes and you always look happy, well nearly always. You've been there for me when I needed you. You wanted me when I most needed to be wanted. You'll always have a piece of my heart."

Ed felt so ill he wondered if he was dying.

Addie turned to Will. "The other piece of my heart is yours because you gave me hope that I could be loved. You're a good person, Will, and I know you never meant to hurt me."

"She didn't say you were good-looking," Ed said.

"Shut up, Ed," Will said.

"Will was the Noah straight out of my dreams. How could I not adore him?"

Ed knew he was going to be sick. He kept swallowing but it didn't make him feel better.

"I love both of you," she whispered.

"You must love one of us more," Will insisted. "Whoever you choose, we'll accept it. We've talked about it. We can do it. We can't both lose you."

Addie released a shaky breath.

"You don't need to choose," Ed said in a quiet voice. He saw what Will didn't, that Addie couldn't, wouldn't choose.

"Shut up," Will said.

"You've fallen out with each other because of me," Addie said. "You don't want to work together anymore. The pair of you won't even sit on the same couch and I'm the only one who can put this right. Go back to London. Keep working together and stay friends. You'll never see me again. Remember you both made me happy."

"And we both made you sad," Ed said. "Will loves you, Addie. You love him."

Addie wrapped her arms around herself. "I know what you're trying to do, Ed. I said you were the kindest person I'd ever met and I know what you're doing."

"Let me," he pleaded. "Let me do this, please. You love Will. I know you do."

Ed's heart was doing acrobatics in his chest. He didn't want her to choose. He didn't want to know.

"Ed, would you go and make me a cup of coffee?" Addie asked.

He got up without a word and left them alone.

Addie crossed the room and sat by Will. She took hold of his hand. His fingers were shaking, his stomach in knots. If she chose Ed, Will would never see his brother again because no matter what he'd said to Ed, he could never bear to see Addie again, not if she was with Ed. He looked at her beautiful face, her eyes staring into his and he knew. His world began to dissolve like snow falling into water.

"I won't choose," Addie said. "I can't. Ed saw that. I don't want to hurt either of you, but if I choose one, I hurt the other. Ed's given me up for you. He loves you that much, Will. I don't think you'd have done that for him. You couldn't give up Vee for me."

"I tried." He could barely force the words from his mouth.

"I know you did and I know what she's like. I understand how hard it was. But you had the chance to show me what I meant to you by being honest with me, more than one chance."

He chewed the inside of his cheek and tasted blood in his mouth. "I never wanted you to be hurt."

"I know. You tried to do the right thing for everyone, but you didn't see that you couldn't do that without people getting hurt. Most of all, you needed to do the right thing for yourself. Somehow that got lost."

"She's gone now," he said in desperation.

"I'm glad for you because you can move on, but not with me."

Now she'd said it, Will crumpled. He clutched her fingers. "How am I going to survive this? When I look at you I can't breathe. How can I stand it?" A tear ran down his cheek.

"The same way I'll stand it." Addie stifled a sob.

"Can I kiss you?" Will asked. "Our last kiss?"

Before Addie could answer, he pulled her into his arms and speared his fingers through the hair at the back of her head, pressing his lips against hers. It was the sweetest, gentlest kiss he knew he'd ever given her. He wanted to change her mind, but knew it was too late.

Ed hadn't listened to what they were saying, but when the murmur of voices stopped, he pushed open the door. When he saw Addie in Will's arms, his pulse rocketed and he went back into the kitchen. This was what he wanted, wasn't it? Addie and Will together? For them to be happy? He'd survive. He'd put a smile on his face and be glad for his brother. Glad for Addie. He could let them be happy. He'd only see her with Will on special occasions. Christmas and their mother's birthday.

He slipped out of the house. He'd leave Leeds in the morning, go down to see his mum and then go before Will got there because Addie would be with him. *Oh God*. His heart hurt.

* * * * *

Ed got lost driving back to Alwoodley. He wasn't thinking straight. He was half way to York before he realized his mistake and turned round.

When he saw Will's Lexus on the drive he almost didn't stop. But he found Will alone and packing.

"Are you leaving already?" Ed asked.

"Yes."

"Look after her, Will," Ed whispered.

"Addie's not coming with me."

Will thrust his shirts into the case without folding them. If his voice hadn't already told Ed something was wrong, that action did. Will emptied his boxers and socks straight from the drawer into the case.

"I saw you kissing her," Ed blurted.

"Nothing there anymore. The spark's gone," Will said in a flat voice.

“I don’t believe you.”

Will looked up from his suitcase. “And I don’t fucking well believe you.”

A lump the size of Vesuvius rose in Ed’s throat.

“She didn’t understand why you’d gone without speaking to her, but that’s what you do, isn’t it, Ed? Sneak off in the morning before they wake up. Why did you have to want her so much? She’s nothing like the ones you usually go for. Was it because she was mine, because you finally had a chance to get one up on me?”

Ed pushed his trembling hands into his pockets. “Is that what she thinks—it was some contest?”

Will shrugged. “You walked away. What’s she supposed to think?”

“But you’re leaving her?”

Will took a deep breath. “Because I know it’s not me she wants.”

Ed saw the tears in Will’s eyes, watched as they rolled down his cheeks. He wanted to hug his brother, but he was scared Will would push him away. *Let him try*, Ed thought, and pulled Will into his arms. After a moment, he felt Will return his hug.

“Look after her, Ed. If you hurt her, I’ll kill you.”

Chapter Forty

When Addie heard the doorbell ring it was five minutes past midnight and officially Christmas Eve. She lay on the couch watching the Christmas tree change color. She felt too sad to move. It was easier to wait for sleep to overwhelm her.

The bell rang again.

It couldn't be carol singers. Probably some drunk, but it rang again and again and eventually she stamped into the hall and flung open the door, ready to yell. Instead, she gasped.

Standing in front of her was a parcel taller than her, wrapped in Christmas paper featuring red-nosed reindeer throwing snowballs. The parcel coughed and the paper twitched where a tag was attached. Addie pulled it off.

"FREE TO A GOOD HOME"

OhGodohGodohGod. Please let this be him.

Addie unwrapped from the bottom upwards, fingers shaking, ripping away the paper faster and faster until she'd uncovered the man she wanted. She released a shaky breath and then smiled.

Ed's face lit up and Addie felt it kick-start her heart.

"I thought you didn't want me," he said.

Addie chewed her lip.

He pulled her into his arms and pressed his forehead to hers. "Only I realized I'm yours whether you want me or not."

She wrapped her arms around him and held tight. "I do want you."

"I've never felt this way about anyone before and I've never told anyone I loved them until now. Only Mum." He smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too," Addie whispered.

His eyes shone with unshed tears. "Say it again."

"I love you. I fell in love with you bit by bit. When you managed not to laugh after I fell off the treadmill. When you were so proud of that pizza. When you left the teddy bear. Everything you did for me made me like you more. It turned to love when you looked after me at the hotel and didn't do anything about your little problem. I—"

"Ah, well I need you to sort that out for me now and not so much of the little."

He kissed her and kept on kissing her, pulling her body tight to his. Addie's hands moved to his backside, urging him even closer. She couldn't breathe and she didn't care.

"Hey, can you get Santa to bring me one of those?" called a woman's drunken voice from the street.

"And me," someone else shouted.

Ed and Addie broke apart laughing. She pulled him into the house and closed the door.

A moment later she opened the door again and Ed went to collect his bag from the car while Addie scooped up the wrapping paper.

He dropped his bag on the hall floor, then closed and locked the door before he leaned back against it.

"If you knew how much trouble I had, wrapping myself in paper while standing on your doorstep with every passing drunk making a suggestion."

"What sort of suggestion?"

"That I'd missed a bit, that I *should* miss a bit. Was I naked? Could they check? And that was just the men."

Addie sniggered.

"Anyway, now you've unwrapped me, you can't send me back," Ed said.

"I could if I had the receipt."

"Will's holding it for safekeeping."

She flinched at the mention of Will's name.

"It's okay, Addie. We talked. Will understands. Well—no, he doesn't but he'll try. He promised to try."

Ed walked toward her and took hold of her hands. "Am I really what you want?" he asked in a whisper. "I mean, do you want to send me back? I guess I'm a little shop-soiled."

"Maybe I'd better finish unwrapping you and check," she said.

Ed smiled.

She lifted his sweater over his head and unbuttoned his shirt, pulling it from his shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. His stomach and chest were smooth and Addie slid her hands over the gentle contours, circling his nipples with her thumbs, trailing her nails across his firm abdomen. His skin fluttered, and under her palm pressed against his chest, she felt his heart beating as fast as hers. When her hands moved to his chinos, he drew in his breath. But in the middle of unzipping him she stopped and stepped back.

"I think I'll save the rest for Christmas morning."

"I don't think so," Ed growled. "I'll give you a hand." He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks.

"Are you one of those sorts of presents that need batteries?" Addie asked.

"Oh, that was a challenge if ever I heard one."

She felt the flush sweep up her neck, over her face.

"I don't have a bed fit to sleep in," she whispered.

"Who needs a bed and who said anything about sleep?" He took a step forward and Addie staggered back and hit the wall. Ed put his hands on the wall either side of her head. "Well?" he asked.

"Well what?" She could barely stand up, let alone think straight.

"Are you going to finish unwrapping your present or shall I start unwrapping mine?"

Ed flashed his electric smile and she melted. Addie was so nervous, she felt sick. "Ed," she whispered.

Uncertainty returned to his face and he winced. "Too fast? I can take this slow. I can do whatever you want."

Addie thought about that. "Can you do a back flip?"

"I could try, but then you'd have to take me to hospital."

She laughed.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered.

Desire rolled up from deep inside her and she sighed. "No—"

Ed put his finger on her lips. "Don't you dare. You are beautiful."

She slid her hands over his shoulders and down his back, loving the soft roll of his muscles and the feel of his taut skin under her fingers. Ed bent his head, cupped her jaw and kissed her. Addie's heart beat so hard she thought he must be able to hear it, feel it. His lips moved all over her face, nuzzling, nibbling, teasing until she caught them with *her* lips and then the moment was perfect. He was here. He was hers. She was his.

Their breath mingled as lips brushed lips. Ed tasted sweet and warm and minty. Their tongues touched, a first tentative sweep like shy lovers, then a more firm caress as they began to dance and play. Addie was lost. If the house had fallen around her, she couldn't have moved. She was almost afraid her joy-swollen heart would stop, she felt so happy.

Their kisses grew wetter and deeper. Angles changed, mouths fused as they groaned into each other's throats. Ed's hand dropped from her chin to her neck and caressed her there. The hairs on Addie's arms prickled and her legs trembled. White flashes illuminated the darkness behind her eyelids and her head felt heavy. Ed yanked his mouth away.

"Breathe," he gasped.

Addie gulped air into her lungs. Ed panted with her. He stepped closer again and she felt his leg pressing between hers, his erection hard against her belly. Her body tensed from her toes to her scalp. When she groaned into Ed's mouth, an echoing groan came back. Addie moved her arms to the front of his chest and slid them up between their bodies until she could reach his nipples. They hardened under the caress of her fingers and she pressed her face into his neck and nipped his skin.

Ed shuddered. "Oh shit. Do that again."

Her nipples tightened as she played with his and Addie smiled into his neck. She ran her teeth up and down his throat, nipping and then licking the places she nipped, and Ed whimpered. "I changed my mind. My knees are shaking. You have to stop."

"Sorry. Can't. You're my present. I can do what I like with you."

She lifted her head, reached for his neck, and as she threaded her fingers in his hair, she stroked his cheeks with her thumbs.

"You're the best present I've ever had," Ed said.

"You're the best present I'll ever get."

He ran his tongue along the edge of her lips and Addie opened to him. She loved him so much she wanted to scream it to the world, except Ed was her world. When their tongues met Addie moaned. The kiss sped straight to hard, fast and deep, their bodies plastered against each other. Ed ran his hands down the sides of her hips, and Addie clutched at his back. She could feel everything inside her drawing in, winding like a spring that wanted to be as tight as possible before the instant of release. Almost as though he knew what was happening, Ed held her closer and nudged harder between her thighs with his leg. Addie continued to twist in a mounting spiral, not wanting the feeling to stop. Then the pleasure of what was happening inside her body overrode the attempts of her brain to hold back and she came undone.

As she gasped, shook and trembled, Ed held her. He buried his face in her neck, and Addie panted in his arms. As her breathing eased, he pulled away a little and looked straight at her. "I love you."

Addie's heart jumped into her mouth and came out with words all on its own. "I love you."

They both smiled.

"In case you think I say that a lot, I don't," he said.

"You mean you won't tell me again?"

"You know that's not what I mean. I'm never going to stop saying it to you. It makes me so happy, I can't... Oh God, I love your sweet lips, your pixie ears, your long legs, your cute nose and I especially love the way you think bad things."

"What?" Addie's eyes opened wide.

"You're thinking you'd like to get me naked."

"Am I?"

Ed nodded. "And you're thinking you'd like to be naked too."

"I am?"

"Guess what I'm thinking," he said.

She put her mouth to his ear and Ed laughed. "Don't you dare! I have that particular activity scheduled for 2:15 a.m. Right, I'm going to count to ten and then I'm inside you wherever you are."

"I need the loo."

"Ten, nine, better be quick."

Addie squealed and fled down the hall.

She heard Ed counting outside the door. "Four, three."

"Stop it. I can't pee if you make me nervous," Addie shouted.

"Two and a half, two and a quarter, two."

Addie had stripped off and now stood trembling, her fingers clasp the door handle, unable to turn it.

"One and three quarters, one and a half, one and a quarter. Hurry up, my math is crap."

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Three quart—" The word died on Ed's lips.

Her heart thumped against her ribs.

"Oh, Addie," he sighed. "Forgive me if I drool."

She didn't feel shy anymore. Her nerves disappeared under Ed's wide-eyed gaze.

"Do you always take off all your clothes when you use the loo?" He gave her an eager look.

"Only on Christmas Eve."

"Damn."

Addie walked into the hall and pushed him back so he stood against the wall. She reached for the half-open zip on his chinos and pulled it the rest of the way down. As her fingers touched his erection, it nudged her hand and Ed's fists clenched at his sides. His cock felt hot and hard against her palm, even through his boxers. When she gently squeezed, Ed groaned. She pushed down his pants and he stepped out of them, never taking his gaze from her face. Addie eased his boxers over his hips and let them drop to the floor. The sight of his large, very erect penis stopped her moving, stopped her thinking.

"Now what?" Ed asked in a croaky voice.

Addie's mouth had gone dry and she licked her lips. Ed groaned and her gaze shot to his face.

She sighed. "I ordered the deluxe model but looks like the wrong one's been delivered. I got the super-doooper-deluxe version."

He laughed. His fingers wrapped around hers and he tugged her toward the lounge, reaching down to grab his chinos on the way. He pulled a foil packet from the pocket and dropped the trousers again in the doorway.

"One-handed! That was nifty," Addie said.

"There's lots of things I can do with one hand. Even more with two."

The room was dim, the only illumination came from the Christmas tree, which surged in alternating colors, and the orangey glow from the streetlight permeating the thin curtains. Ed lay back on the couch and pulled her on top of him. His hand curved

around her neck and he kissed her again, whisper-soft caresses that morphed into deep passionate consumption. His hands were all over her, squeezing her backside, parting her thighs so he could reach between her legs.

As he touched her with one finger, Addie reared up. Ed pulled her back and wrapped his arms around her. He licked the pulse at her throat and she trembled.

“Ooh,” Addie moaned. “What are you doing to me?”

“Trying to make this last, and struggling.”

Ed flipped her over with effortless grace, so that she lay on her back and he lay on his side pressed tight against her.

“You have to keep still or I’ll fall off the couch,” he whispered.

He smiled down at her, his beautiful face framed by his ruffled fair hair, and Addie’s breath caught in her throat. With exquisite slowness, Ed trailed a finger all the way from her nose, over her lips and chin, down between her breasts, over her rounded stomach and onto the folds between her legs.

The long sigh fluttering from his lips made Addie swallow hard.

“I want,” he gulped. “I want...”

“What?”

“I want to make you happy.”

“Ed.”

“I want this to be good. I don’t want to let you down.”

“Ed!”

“I want – what?”

“You’re thinking too much. This is just us. Me and you. We’ve never done this before. Nothing about it won’t make me happy. It can’t be anything but good between us. You won’t let me down.”

“I might if I come all over the couch.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not my couch.”

He stifled a laugh. Then his lips followed the path of his finger. He kissed his way down her body until he was lying half-on half-off the couch. He drew his finger up and down the wet folds of her sex then did the same with his hot tongue, and Addie’s back arched. Then his finger and tongue thrust deep, teasing sensitive nerves, and Addie felt her body respond, moisture flooding from her as nerves danced and sizzled. Ed’s tongue curled as he licked her and Addie pressed her fingers into his shoulders. When his finger nudged her clit and circled, Addie began to climb faster.

She lost track of what he was doing, lost herself in the sensations. He knew the way to drive her mad, knew when to change his touch, alter the rhythm. He drew out perfection like a master painter, adding strokes with a firm brush, making colors erupt behind her eyes until Addie couldn’t feel the couch, couldn’t feel anything but Ed. She

wanted him to do this forever and even as she thought it, knew she was about to shatter.

“Ed,” she gasped and came against his mouth.

Her thighs tightened along with her fists, her whole body caught in the grip of explosive pleasure. Her veins flooded with warmth and her muscles ebbed and flowed until she finally sagged into his embrace.

Then his lips were on hers and Addie could taste herself, taste Ed’s desperation and wanted him inside her. Her fingers wrapped around his cock and he whimpered.

Ed dragged his head up. “You don’t know how much I’ve wanted to feel you do that and how much it kills me to say if you tighten your fingers again, I’ve had it.”

“I want you, Ed.”

“And you can have me. One minute to get myself under control. Well, ten would be better but my balls would never forgive me.”

He held himself over her, knees either side of her hips and Addie looked down at his cock, the head glistening a faint blue then red in the reflection from the nearby Christmas tree. She stifled a laugh. Not very successfully.

“Well, that was what I needed. A laugh. It’s a wonder I haven’t shriveled to a pencil.”

Addie took his cock in her fingers and pushed it down between her legs. She felt the head press against her swollen folds and sighed as Ed shuddered.

“Addie. It can’t have escaped your notice that I don’t have the condom on. Be careful. I’m a little like one of those guns you only have to breathe on to make it fire a hail of bullets. Only needs one to strike home.”

She brushed herself with his glistening crest, so hard and yet velvety soft.

“Addie, are you listening?”

“Oh you feel so good.”

He let out a strangled growl. “So you do, but...”

She parted her folds and touched her clit with his cock head. Like a sparkler catching fire, flashes of heat jumped through her sex to scatter around her body. Ed gritted his teeth.

Addie reached up, pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. He collapsed against her, their bodies meshed, his cock trapped between her thighs. Her hips flexed and Ed gasped into her mouth as his cock rubbed against her.

“Addie, we—”

“I want to. I just finished my period two days ago. Please. I want to feel you, all of you.”

He closed his eyes, released a long groan and then stared straight at her. Addie felt his cock head nudge inside her, the broad head spreading her open, and it felt so magical she had to fight not to cry. His face taut in concentration, Ed sank into her as

her legs slid up over his hips, invading by slow degrees, until he was seated all the way inside. Her hands roamed his back, fingers trembling in the furrow of his spine as she traced a wavering line to his backside. She could feel every inch of him inside her and knew making love like this their first time was the right thing to do.

“You are the most perfect, fantastic, wonderful – oh God.” Ed gasped. “I felt that.”

She released a tremulous sigh as his cock jerked. Then squeezed him again with her pussy muscles.

“Arrggh. I’m never letting you go. I’m going to chain you to my bed. Arrggh.”

“You move too,” she blurted.

Ed’s forehead sagged to hers. “I can come inside you?”

She nodded as his hips began to rock against her.

“Okay, my Christmas angel?” he whispered.

She couldn’t speak, only nod, and then he pressed even deeper and Addie arched into him, her hips meeting his stroke for stroke in a dancer’s rhythm. They moved together, cried out together, reached together for that ultimate moment when movement would be impossible. Addie felt her nails digging into his back but couldn’t help herself. Ed’s hips drove down into her, withdrawing his cock to the very brink before powering back into her, faster and harder.

“Addie, Addie, Addie,” he gasped.

The rhythmic contractions inside her body fused into one long rolling wave of delight to send her soaring. The moment she froze in ecstasy, she felt Ed’s cock swell inside her, the pulses of his climax melding with hers.

Addie screamed. She couldn’t help it.

* * * * *

Will sat staring into the fire. Mollie, his mum’s Golden Retriever lay draped across his feet. The Christmas tree twinkled in the corner and on the table in front of him were an untouched glass of sherry and half a mince pie. His mum and his stepfather had gone to bed. His mum had known the moment Will arrived that something was wrong, but she hadn’t pushed.

He thought about Ed and Addie and the pain started up again in his chest. Ed couldn’t help loving her anymore than he could. She was special, Ed was right, though the word had sounded wrong when he’d said it. Addie was with Ed and not him because he’d messed everything up. Will blinked and rubbed his eyes. Although his heart told his brain something different, Will knew it was better this way, because if Addie wasn’t with Ed, he’d have lost her altogether. This way, they could eventually be friends. And relatives. Ed would marry her. Will let out a quiet sob.

The door opened and his mother tiptoed into the room in her pink dressing gown.

“Will?”

He wiped his eyes. She sat down on the couch beside him and pulled him into her arms. Mollie stood up and joined in, nuzzling between them.

"Is this about Addie?" she asked.

Will tensed.

"Ed told me you'd fallen in love with the same woman."

"He tried to give her up for me, but it's Ed she wants."

"Oh sweetheart!" She held him tighter.

And Will let it all come pouring out and as he spoke, he realized just how badly he'd behaved. How he'd muddled up his relationship with Addie, and worst of all, how he'd let her down so badly that Ed had to pick her up. If the situation had been reversed, wouldn't he have done the same? All these years of thinking he was the sensible, older brother and Ed had proved himself the better man. Will had never deserved Addie, but he'd finally rid himself of Vee.

"I told Ed I didn't want to work with him anymore."

She sighed. "You two make a good team. Ed needs you, Will."

"I don't know if I—"

"Yes, you can. This will be hard for Ed, too. And Addie. You can let it destroy you or you can be strong and move on." She took hold of his hand and squeezed it.

Will nodded and leaned back. "Maybe you could invite Ed and Addie for dinner tomorrow?"

His mum smiled.

"Addie doesn't like sprouts," he choked out.

"Neither does Ed."

She wiped the tear from his cheek.

"All the more for me then." Will gave a little smile.

* * * * *

When he awoke, Ed was confused for a moment. He could feel Addie in his arms, but he wasn't sure he could believe it. His fingers slid around until they touched a nipple. It hardened and he laughed, but she didn't wake up. Ed slipped out of Lisa's bed and went downstairs. They'd managed to find their way there at some point during the night. It got too cold to stay downstairs on the couch.

When he got back with two cups of tea, Addie began to stir. Ed put down the drinks and slipped under the duvet.

"I made you some tea." He nuzzled her neck. "Wake up."

She rolled into his arms.

"Open those beautiful eyes," he whispered.

Addie looked at him. "I found out why my mother hates me," she blurted.

Ed pulled her closer.

"My dad isn't who I thought he was. Mum was raped. She said I have the eyes of the man who raped her."

"Oh Christ." Ed pressed his face into her hair. "Addie." He was torn between fury and sadness. He held her while she cried, and let his tears join hers.

Addie moved her head back on the pillow and sighed. "Well, at least I know it's not something I've done. Well, not really."

Ed twisted a strand of her hair in his fingers.

"My brothers don't know and Mum says she won't ever talk about it again."

"Is that why you pretended you were going to the Lake District?"

"She doesn't want me. Every time she looks at me, it makes her remember what happened."

"Yet I feel a sudden urge to thank her," Ed said.

"Don't make me hurt you." Addie glowered at him.

"But she had you," Ed said. "And now you're all mine and I'm all yours."

"Forever."

One word and Ed turned on like a light.

He brought his hands down under her buttocks and pulled her into him. Ed crushed his lips against hers and as her hips opened he rocked against her, matching that action with his tongue as it surged into her mouth. After a moment he slid his lips across her cheek and down her neck.

"Oh, Ed," she muttered.

He felt himself grow even harder, felt his cock nudging into her. He slid lower, dropped his head to her breast, licked around her nipple and groaned deep in his throat. As he teased one nipple with his teeth, he twisted the other with his fingers. Addie kept saying his name, "Ed, Ed..." and his erection throbbed in response.

"You're not allowed out of this bed today," he murmured between slurps.

"Bathroom breaks?" Addie wriggled beneath him.

"I might allow a few."

"Food breaks?"

Ed pulled up his head. "Do you have any food? The shops are going to shut early."

"The freezer's full."

"Good, then we don't need to get out of bed."

He licked his way down to the screw at Addie's navel and sucked and she grabbed his head. Ed levered her hands away and slid lower.

"Open your legs," he whispered.

She wove her fingers through his hair as his head moved between her thighs. When he rubbed his rough cheeks against her thighs, she gasped.

Ed lifted his head. "Don't come," he ordered. "Addie, look at me."

She forced her eyes open.

"Wait." He held her hips, kept his knees either side of her body. "I'm hanging on here by a thread."

Addie reached down and twisted his nipples and he yelped.

"You're not the only one hanging on by a thread," she said.

Ed grinned and kissed his way back to driving her wild. This time he didn't stop and she came against his mouth, each contraction making her shout out until she slumped boneless beneath him.

"Did you come?" Ed asked and Addie hit him.

* * * * *

When Addie woke, she reached for Ed. The bed was empty next to her but still warm. She rolled over into the space he'd vacated and breathed him in. They'd spent virtually the whole of the previous day in bed or in the bath. Addie loved him so much it scared her. She closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

* * * * *

"Wake up. It's Christmas." Ed kissed her nose.

Addie turned to face him. "Where've you been?" Then she saw what he'd done and laughed.

"Happy Christmas," Ed yelled.

He had an armful of presents and wore a g-string made out of silver tinsel.

"Unwrap me quick, it tickles," he pleaded.

"No, I think I'll leave the best 'til last."

Ed dropped the presents on the bed. "No, me first. Please."

He sighed with relief when the tinsel had gone and snuggled under the duvet next to Addie.

"So what else did you get?" he asked.

Addie felt the first parcel. "Chocolates. Belgian. All yours."

Ed ripped off the paper. "And no Hugh to eat them."

"You remembered me telling you that?" she asked.

"I remember everything you've ever said to me."

"You didn't remember a cup of tea."

Ed pulled up a bottle of champagne from the side of the bed. "This is better."

Addie opened the present from Lisa. A new camera. Now Addie knew how guilty Lisa felt.

“Great,” Ed said. “We can have fun with that.”

The last parcel was from her mother.

“Ed, look,” Addie said. In her hands she held a pink wrap.

“No TV license?”

Addie gave a little smile.

“Maybe there’s hope then?” he said.

“Maybe.”

“These are from me,” Ed said, and lifted a pile of badly wrapped presents onto the bed. “I couldn’t find any tape so I had to use a stapler.”

Addie started to laugh as she unwrapped the de-icer and kept laughing when that was followed by a map book, a torch, an angel air freshener and a Mars bar.

“The garage was the only place open, but they did have this.” Ed handed her a square parcel, no better wrapped than the others. “But open this one first.”

Five different-colored bracelets that Ed had bought in Lincoln.

“I wanted to tell you then how I felt,” he said.

“You did, I wasn’t listening.”

Addie ripped off the paper of the last present. It was a book called *One Hundred Things You Have To Do Before You Die*.

He leaned up on his elbow. “I think we should work our way through all one hundred. Read out the first one.”

Addie opened the book. Inside, in big letters Ed had written something.

“Oh!” she gasped.

“You have to read it out,” he said.

“Marry me and let’s make babies.”

Ed’s face lit up. “I thought you’d never ask.”

About the Author

Barbara Elsborg lives in West Yorkshire in the north of England. She always wanted to be a spy, but having confessed to everyone without them even resorting to torture, she decided it was not for her. Vulcanology scorched her feet. A morbid fear of sharks put paid to marine biology. So instead, she spent several years successfully selling cyanide.

After dragging up two rotten, ungrateful children and frustrating her sexy, devoted, wonderful husband (who can now stop twisting her arm), she finally has time to conduct an affair with an electrifying, plugged-in male – her laptop.

Her books feature quirky heroines and bad boys, and she hopes they are as much fun to read as they are to write.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascafe.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by **Barbara Elsborg**

Anna in the Middle

Lucy in the Sky

Perfect Timing

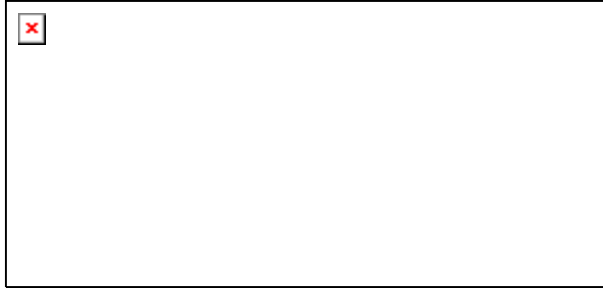
Power of Love

Something About Polly

Strangers

Susie's Choice

The Bad Widow



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer ebooks or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com