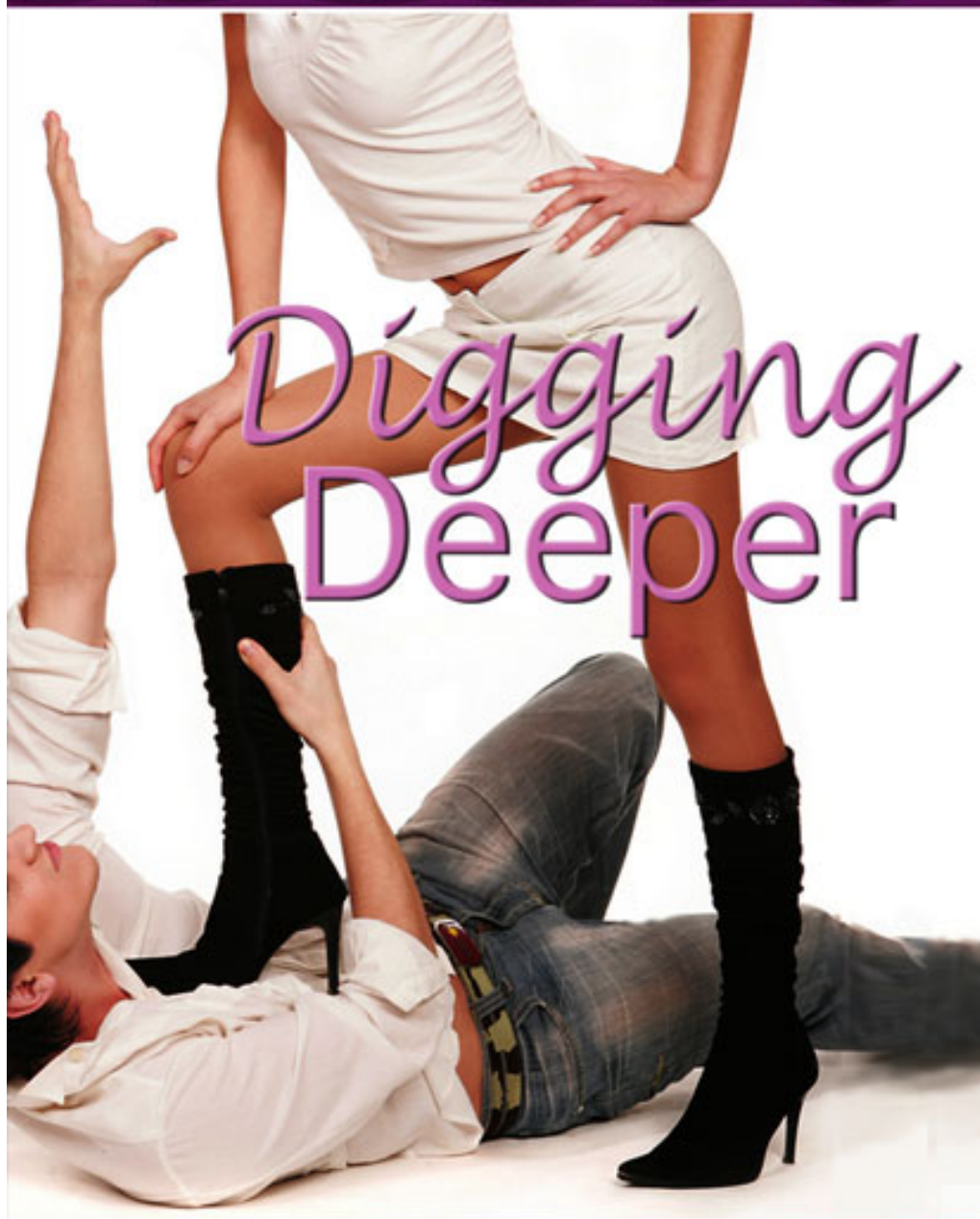


Cerridwen Press



Barbara Elsborg

Digging Deeper

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Archaeologist Beck isn't expecting much to come out of this summer's dig. While his colleague spends the summer in Italy, Beck draws the short straw supervising a group of archaeology students excavating on the grounds of Hartington Hall in Yorkshire. Little does Beck realize when he saves a redhead from the attentions of an amorous ram, that this accident-prone female will throw his ordered life into chaos.

The last thing Flick needs in her life is a digger, because some secrets are meant to stay buried. Very deep. But Beck is irresistible. She'd love to get him into bed, though after the incident at the swimming pool, the collapsing wall, the snake bite and the unexploded bomb—a hospital bed looks more likely. As their relationship lurches from one disaster to another, Beck has to delve deep to get to the bottom of this irrepressible redhead.

One thing is clear—you never know quite what you're going to find when you start digging.

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Digging Deeper

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Chapter One

Cursing under her breath, Flick dropped to her knees in front of a rose bush and leaned forward to check for greenfly. She'd be shocked if she found any. The damn things wouldn't dare land in this garden, but she'd had her orders. Perfect roses only. Flick gently turned a bud in her fingers and something cold and wet nuzzled up the back of her skirt. She shrieked and thrust out her hands as she lurched forward. Flick managed to save her face from kissing the soil but not the rose head she'd been inspecting. Flick looked back at her assailant and gave a nervous laugh.

"Where did you come from?"

"Baaaa."

"Ah, Baaamuda? Or maybe Baaarhain? Baaanstaple?" She was on a roll now. "Baaali? Baaatth?"

The sheep stared at her as though she were a complete idiot, then turned to the nearest bush and wrapped its lips around one of Celia Hartington's special white roses.

Flick sprang to her feet. "Nooooo. Naughty sheep. Shoo, shoo."

She flapped her arms to try to encourage it to gambol toward the field at the bottom of the garden, but her gesturing had the opposite effect and the animal took a few steps in her direction. Flick took several steps back.

"Go away," she pleaded.

Dark demon eyes looked at her in defiance, the mouth went "baaaaa" and another white rose disappeared. Flick winced and then glared at the culprit.

"Want to be shorn like a poodle? Shorn by a beginner? Or maybe by an old geezer with Parkinson's? Using dull shears?"

Another white rose vanished.

"No! Eat the bloody red ones, can't you?"

She stamped her foot, an ineffectual gesture considering she wore delicate strappy sandals and stood on grass. Furthermore, the sheep seemed to take it as a challenge. It banged its hoof on the grass and charged. Flick fled.

* * * * *

Alexander Beckett had moved the Yorkshire University Archaeology Department's minivan to the rear of Hartington Hall at Celia's request. She'd made her disappointment at the state of the vehicle quite clear. She wanted everyone to know an important dig was about to take place on her property and a rusty minivan looking as

though it had barely survived a ram-raid by a tank was not the image she'd been hoping for.

Earlier that morning in the university car park, the van had stood next to its twin; same age, make and color, same logo on the side, but there the resemblance ended. One vehicle deserved to be on the road, while the van Beck had drawn on a coin toss looked as though it needed to be buried in a junkyard. His colleague, Rich Foster, had smirked and commandeered the smarter vehicle, complete with the best of the archaeology department's field equipment and five flexible, female undergraduates. In Beck's view, Rich was now over-compensated for having to drive all the way to Italy.

As Beck strolled to the front of Hartington Hall he saw Celia standing with her hands on her generous hips, watching a drama unfold on her lawn. A tall, spiky-haired figure in a bright pink skirt appeared to be dancing with a sheep. The sheep took several steps forward and the redhead stepped back. A move to the side was copied too. Beck looked more closely and realized the sheep had something in its mouth. Was that a white rose? The tango, Beck thought and laughed. The redhead advanced and the sheep backed up. There was a bit of foot stamping from each of them. He grinned. The redhead's legs were very long and the skirt was very short.

"For goodness sakes. What does she think she's doing?" Celia crossed her arms. "Felicity, stop playing with the sheep."

The dance came to an abrupt halt as the four-legged lover decided to pursue his intended with more vigor. The redhead squealed as she sprinted around the lawn, changing direction each time the sheep looked as if he might be catching up.

"Is that really a rose in its mouth?" Beck asked.

"It appears to be one of my special roses." Celia waved her hand in the air. "Felicity, stop this at once."

Flick felt caught in some surreal nightmare, being chased by a manic sheep with a rose clenched between its teeth. Substitute gorgeous hunk for sheep and Flick would have stopped running, but with no gorgeous hunk in sight, she kept going. Adding to her distress, she'd spotted a peculiar gleam in this creature's eyes, which made her think romance was not foremost in its mind. But if she was wrong and it was, she needed to run faster.

She leaped over the rose bushes and shot to the left. The sheep followed. Its breath hit the back of her knees. She'd always thought of sheep as gentle, rather timid balls of fluff, but this one seemed to be under the misapprehension that it was a raging bull. Even worse, it had enough brains to sense her fear and enough cunning to act on it.

Somewhere in the periphery of her vision, Flick knew she had an audience. She could hear Lady C shouting and a man laughing. It didn't sound like Lady C's husband, Henry. Flick vaulted over a shrub and whizzed around a stone bird bath. The sheep went straight through the shrub and sent the stone bath flying off its pedestal. Flick heard more laughter, glanced toward the house and in that moment's lapse of

concentration, the sheep finally made contact. She cried out as it butted the back of her knees and sent her sprawling. Then it jumped on her back and stayed there.

Ouch.

"Get off, you fat lump," she gasped.

Flick heard clapping and looked up in indignation to see a man running down onto the lawn. He clapped harder and yelled at the sheep, which fled. Of course it did. He was a man.

"Are you all right?"

What sort of stupid question was that? Flick spat grass out of her mouth. She'd been flattened by a mad sheep, would no doubt sport a hoof-marked back for months, and he asked if she was all right. Idiot. Flick sat up and looked at him, and every emotion but one rushed out of her at supersonic speed. Hovering over her was the most delicious man she'd ever seen.

"Yes, fine, thank you," she whimpered.

He held out his hand. As their palms touched, a bolt flashed down her arm and through her body. Air rushed out of her lungs. He struggled to pull her upright. Not one of her muscles worked. He wasn't just dark-eyed and mouthwateringly handsome, but inches taller than her, a huge plus because she was a skyscraper. His hair was straight and dark, almost longer than hers, and he was absolutely, completely and utterly, gorgeous. On the downside, he didn't seem to be interested in her face, but stared at her hand in bewilderment, as though it was the weirdest thing he'd ever seen. Why, she wondered, then realized she still held on to him. Flick tried to let go and couldn't. Then she grasped it wasn't her, but him. He was holding on to her.

"So you're the reason I'm here," he said.

"What?" Flick croaked. "Are you the police?"

From the shocked look on his face and the way he loosened his grip a little, she knew she'd got that wrong.

"You found the fragment of Samian ware." He stared at her, his face wrinkling in curiosity. "How did you know what it was?"

Celia panted to their side. "Can't you do anything right, Felicity? I only asked you to cut a few roses, not terrorize our sheep."

Celia tugged at the man's elbow, and he finally released Flick's hand. She watched as Celia led him away. He turned and gave her a rueful grin. The face had almost stopped her heart, so what about the rest of him? Not fat, nor thin, just right. A creased white linen shirt hung outside his chinos at one side. Fabulous butt. Narrow hips. Flick lost herself in the moment. And was distracted. A second later, she'd fallen back on her knees and a persistent nose pushed its way between her legs.

After Beck escaped from Celia, he unloaded all his equipment and stacked it in one of the garages at the Hall. He needed the van empty so he could collect his five students

and take them to the house they'd share for the next month. He'd have liked to go and have a word with the redhead and take another look into her fabulous eyes. He especially wanted to ask her why she thought he was the police, but he didn't have time. Beck drove to Ilkley station, trying to work up some enthusiasm for the month-long dig.

Earlier that morning he and Rich had stood watching five pert bottoms climb into the Italy-bound minivan. His colleague's smile had been so wide, Beck thought he was in danger of splitting his face.

"Aren't you jealous?" he'd murmured in Beck's ear.

"No, because I want to keep my job, and you'll wear yourself out," Beck replied.

"And what a way to go. Cheer up. The delectable Dina's in your group."

That hadn't made Beck feel better. Dina was persistent and determined about entirely the wrong things.

After the details of the two first-year field trips had been posted on the department notice board, it seemed unlikely many would select Ilkley over Italy. Beck had watched Rich's list for the dig near Pisa grow longer and longer. Dina wrote and crossed her name out six times on each list. He reckoned if the sheets had stayed up one more day she'd be on her way to Italy. Just his luck.

Twenty students and two post-grads were taking the easy route to Pisa by air while Rich drove the equipment and the five handpicked female undergrads toward a month of copious sun, alcohol and sex. Oh, and the vague possibility of unearthing a worthwhile artifact between the sunbathing, boozing and bonking. Before he'd seen the redhead, all Beck had to look forward to was a month of decent Yorkshire beer. Now things looked a whole lot brighter, though the drive from York to Ilkley had gone a long way to cheering him up.

In this part of Yorkshire the landscape rivaled the best Italy could offer—miles of pale limestone walls running in crazy patterns over the land, climbing the sides of hills, following valleys, all linking together to create a mesmerizing patchwork quilt. Contrary to his expectations and the local weather forecast, it wasn't raining. In fact, no clouds marred the sky, and instead of a tedious three-day journey through France and Italy, Beck's involved less than an hour of easy driving.

The train pulled into the station and Beck spotted his lot at once. Four of them had rucksacks on their backs and the fifth dragged two huge, wheeled cases. That would be Dina. He rubbed his forehead in anticipation of the headache she'd cause. Only one female in the rucksack brigade, Jane, who was almost the exact opposite of Dina. Rounded where Dina was thin, pale where Dina was tanned, and bright where Dina was not. Matt, Ross and Pravit were typical male students; laid-back, scruffy and by the look of it, already drunk. He gave a heavy sigh. Beck's post-grad assistant, Isobel, would be joining them in a few days. He prayed he could survive this lot until she arrived to whip them into shape.

All the students were smiling. Beck hoped they were sharing a private joke and not brimming with excitement at the prospect of this dig yielding something to make the TV news. Though Beck had assured Stanley Hunter, the head of the archaeology department, that finds at Ilkley could turn out to be as important as at Castleford. Stanley's face had lit up like a firework. Beck had told his students the UK dig offered a unique opportunity for them to contribute to the understanding of Ilkley's Roman heritage. In fact, Beck thought Hartington land would reveal nothing more enticing than a few modern potshards, courtesy of Ikea.

Beck was skeptical about the discovery of the piece of Samian ware in one of the Hartington fields and suspected Giles had purchased the fragment of rich, red-brown pottery on eBay. Giles, son and heir of Celia and Henry, and Beck's best friend from university, had sent him the large fragment in a padded envelope. Beck had been unable to believe what he'd opened, nor Giles' stupidity in entrusting an eighteen hundred-year old treasure to a layer of bubble wrap and the vagaries of the Royal Mail. It had occurred to Beck that Giles, who'd requested Beck's attendance at his wedding that summer as best man, might have planted the piece to make sure Beck didn't swan off to dig in Europe. Still, it had worked.

A slip of paper enclosed with the pottery had said – "F-for-Felicity found this. She says it's Samian. So you can dig and be my best man."

F-for-Felicity was right. It was Samian. Now Beck had seen this Felicity, he worried Giles was up to his old tricks.

Beck got out of the van as the five students approached. Dina beamed more broadly when she saw him, and he tried to keep his face neutral and his eyes off her chest. She was about to spill out of her blue top. Designer sunglasses wobbled on her head and bright purple nail polish covered her toes and fingers. Matt and Ross, in addition to their rucksacks, were also carrying bags of the same design as Dina's cases. The queen had already chosen her servants.

Beck drove them to the supermarket before heading to the house. As he wandered up and down the aisles, he spotted a familiar pink-skirted figure in the frozen food section. She was twisting around, picking things up and putting them down. Her top was decorated in half-naked men and so tight that as she moved, it appeared as though they writhed all over her chest. Her red-streaked hair looked as wild as if she'd been electrocuted. She had danger written all over her and the sweetest heart-shaped face Beck had ever seen. He moved up behind her.

"Why don't you buy lamb chops and get your own back," he whispered, then smothered a smile as she barely rescued herself from a freefall into the frozen fish.

"We weren't introduced earlier. I'm Alexander Beckett. Everyone calls me Beck. I'm leading the dig at Hartington Hall."

Beck watched his hand hovering as his frantic brain tried to warn him of an impending electric shock. He found himself holding a bag of sprouts he hadn't meant to pick up.

"I'm Flick."

When he smiled back at her, Flick felt her grin widen. Then his gaze slid in the direction of her basket, and her stomach tied itself into an untidy pretzel. Almost everything in there was reduced. He'd think she was cheap. She was cheap.

"How do you eat your Jelly Babies?" Beck asked.

Flick followed his eyes to the only item in her basket without a reduced price sticker. "I like to suck them to pieces." The moment the words came out, she wanted them back.

He laughed and this time when he looked at her, Flick caught fire even though she stood shivering in the freezer section. Flames erupted from her ears. She was about to disappear in Ilkley's first case of spontaneous combustion. A puddle of water to a puff of smoke in seconds. She'd make the front page of the *Yorkshire Post* newspaper.

She hadn't been flirting about the Jelly Babies. It was the truth, but it sounded so suggestive, Flick wanted a huge hole to open up in the supermarket floor right where she stood. A sizzling thunderbolt would do, or a sudden rise in sea level. Where was global warming when you needed it?

"I like to lick them clean, then bite their heads off." Beck winked at her.

Flick gulped, then yelped when a shopping cart rammed her heels.

"Sorry," said a blonde in dark sunglasses.

Flick ducked the flamboyant hand wave thrown at her.

"Beck, I need your advice about what wine to buy," said the blonde.

Whiny voice too, Flick noted.

"I'm busy, Dina."

Flick wanted to laugh. As if that would put off a fuck-me girl in action. Dina stretched between Flick and Beck to reach something from the highest cabinet, her breasts angled in Beck's direction. The effect was somewhat spoiled when her hand came down holding a packet of Mr. Brain's frozen faggots.

"I'll see you at dinner tonight," Flick said to Beck.

She walked away with a smile on her face but when two guys passed and made loud baaing noises, her smile disappeared. She glanced back, saw them laughing with Beck and cringed with embarrassment. Flick guessed he'd told them all about her encounter with the sheep. He wasn't as nice as he looked.

Chapter Two

By the time she got home to Timble, Flick was fuming. Beck and his students might find her escapade with the sheep entertaining, but she could still feel the hoof prints. Since she'd be serving the hunk his evening meal in a few hours time, Flick would have ample opportunity to get her revenge.

"Flick, is that you?" Kirsten shouted down the stairs.

"No, it's Brad Pitt," Flick yelled back. "Is that a beautiful woman up there?"

"Absolutely. Hey, Brad! Take your clothes off and get your lovely bum up here. It's your lucky day."

Flick smiled and went down the hall into the kitchen. She swallowed the lump in her throat and imagined for a moment she'd come home to find her mum in there cooking. Her dad had only just fitted the new kitchen when he and her mum had been killed. Two years ago, while Flick's sister Stef was in the middle of her exams, some idiot had overtaken a lorry on the A59, the Harrogate to Skipton road, and plowed straight into their parents' car. They died at the scene.

Michael Knyfe had been a self-employed plasterer who'd taken great pride in the thousands of walls and ceilings he left smooth and polished, yet died leaving his affairs in an unimaginable mess. Flick was sure her mother had no idea how bad things were because her father always managed to cover the cracks so perfectly.

There turned out to be no pension, no life insurance, no any-sort-of-insurance. Tax returns were only half-complete. The filing system confounded Flick until she realized there was no system. In the end, after a lot of hard work, all she and Stef inherited were debts. The government wanted money and so did the bank and several suppliers. The Knyfe sisters hung on to the house in Timble by the slenderest of threads. The mortgage continued in Flick's name because she was the one with a job.

If Flick had been able to continue the career she had at the time of the accident, she'd have stayed solvent. Unfortunately, that hadn't been the case. Stef had added to her money problems by making it very clear she didn't see why she should leave university with a millstone of debt around her neck when her sister hadn't. So in order to maintain the house, pay the mortgage and support Stef, Flick not only had to work herself into a premature grave, she'd been forced to take in lodgers.

Kirsten was the first to apply for a room in the house. She had a job in Leeds with a big law firm and was now part way through her training contract. The two of them had hit it off at once. Flick's other housemate was Josh. Having Josh there was like having your mother, father and older brother living with you but rolled into one person. Josh worked at the headquarters of a grocery chain doing a job that remained a mystery despite his attempts to explain it. Every time they'd asked and he'd begun to describe

the intricacies of investigating interlinked variables in the operation of post-processual consumer decision-making, their eyes would glaze over and he'd give up. All Flick understood was he did something with computers and enjoyed it.

She had no idea why he didn't buy a place of his own, not that she wanted to get rid of him. He was organized, practical and sensible, and had saved her and Kirsten from more disasters and flesh-eating spiders than Flick cared to remember. It was Josh who discovered why the washing machine ate the wires out of their bras, Josh who could drill holes in walls without hitting water, Josh who always managed to get broken corks out of wine bottles and Josh who gave Kirsten a lift to work and back every day. Most important of all was that he obsessed more about the bathroom being clean than they did, so it was the one room in the house that always gleamed. As men go, he was almost indispensable.

"You lied. You said you were Brad Pitt." Kirsten waddled into the kitchen walking on her heels with her toes in the air.

"You led me to believe you were a beautiful woman and you're a monster penguin." Flick looked at Kirsten's feet. "A penguin with no taste. Silver nail polish?"

The monster penguin went on the attack. "Oh my goodness, what did you do to your hair?" Kirsten frowned. "Did you cut it yourself again?"

"No."

"Flick!"

"I might have hacked at a few bits. Does it look okay?"

"Only if you were going for the I've-just-been-ravished look."

"The most popular style of the year." Flick smiled. "The illusion is complete."

First thing that morning while Kirsten had still been in bed with boyfriend Pierce, Flick had crawled into her room and borrowed her hair straighteners. When she hadn't been able to get them to flatten a wayward lock, she'd grabbed the nail scissors and got carried away. She really needed to go to the hairdresser's but she couldn't afford it.

"Will you sort it out for me before we go?" Flick dragged her fingers through the tangled mess. "I want to look nice."

"Who for? Henry Hartington?"

"Possibly."

"Ah, not Henry. Who?"

"Lady C."

"Like I believe that." Kirsten clicked Flick's head with her finger and thumb.

"Ouch, all right, I give in. I met the best man this afternoon."

"The archaeology professor? What's he like? Beard, beer-belly and bad breath? Knobbly knees? Sandals?"

"Nope, you lucky, lucky bridesmaid. He has the face and body of a god. Gorgeous backside. Eyelashes I would kill for. Eyes I could swim in. Taller than me."

"And?"

"Mind of a man." Flick gave a dramatic sigh.

"There's always something lets them down. What did he do?"

Flick told her and was disappointed when Kirsten laughed.

"He didn't need to tell his bloody students." Flick groaned, remembering his amused grin. "I thought he was nice."

"Well, he saved you from the sheep and it is a funny story."

"Only because the sheep didn't stick its nose up your bum."

"So make up your mind, you wavering magnet. Do you want to attract him or repel him?"

"Yes," said Flick.

As she reclined in the bath, popping bubbles in the foam with the beak of her broken wind-up penguin, Flick wished she could wash away her problems and emerge as a new person. If only she could surge from the suds with a respectable job, a faithful boyfriend, no debts and food in the fridge—well, food in the fridge that was hers. Unbitten nails should be on the list, and because she wanted to be kind to animals, even though they were never kind to her, she'd also like her penguin to be able to swim again. She let it go and it sank to the bottom of the tub. All wishful thinking.

The respectable job had been hers, until she'd lost it. After three years studying hard for a history degree in Birmingham, she'd been selected from a starting field of two hundred as assistant to the marketing director of Grinstead's, a medical equipment manufacturer based in Leeds. She'd loved it. It was there she'd met Marcus who worked for Yorkshire Television. He'd approached Gordon Lowe, her boss, about making a documentary on Grinstead's, something to do with the survival of family firms into the twenty-first century. The program had never aired but Flick had found herself a boyfriend.

She'd lost her job even before she lost Marcus and now there was no chance of ever surging up the corporate ladder because she'd been dismissed for theft. It made Flick feel sick when she thought about it so she tried not to. She'd been accused and found guilty without being given the chance to defend herself or find out what had really happened. Now she was stuck in the basement of a building without stairs and no bloody ladder in sight.

Forty thousand pounds had appeared like magic in her bank account. Flick rang the bank, but they said it wasn't a mistake. Before she could even speak to her boss, the whole thing had blown up in her face. Flick gave back the money but it wasn't enough. Another hundred and forty thousand was missing. The finance department investigated and it all pointed to her. Apparently.

Flick had moved from the theory of mistake, to one of being set up but she didn't know by whom or why. Grinstead's offered to let the matter drop if she repaid the rest

because they didn't want the bad publicity. Flick wouldn't and couldn't pay. In any case, letting the matter drop would not give her back her job. Her letters asking them to investigate further came back unanswered. She'd turned up at the office day after day and no one would speak to her. She'd gone to the managing director's house and he'd called the police. She didn't know what else she could do, but she'd been saving every penny for months. The longer Grinstead's delayed, the more chance she had of paying lawyers to fight them, though it hurt having to spend money defending herself when she'd done nothing.

Flick had not told her housemates or sister. Far too humiliating, especially with Kirsten training to be a lawyer. Flick had used the lie of redundancy, but she hadn't realized how difficult it would be to get another job. She couldn't ask Grinstead's for a reference. Filling in application forms for jobs that matched her qualifications was fraught with problems and the poor response unsurprising.

In the end, with Stef demanding new clothes and spouting the words "compulsory textbooks", two words guaranteed to hit Flick's guilt spot, she had given up looking for jobs she'd like and taken anything she could get. At her last count Flick had seven jobs. Six of them low-paid menial work with odd hours, and one that happened to pay more than all the others put together. While Kirsten and Josh thought she worked in a gas station on the Leeds ring road, Flick danced around a pole in Polecats, a city center night club.

Why tell anyone when she knew what their reaction would be? Kirsten and Josh would be horrified and Marcus would have asked her for free admittance. But she hadn't had to tell Marcus because the miserable bastard of a boyfriend had suddenly announced he was jetting off to Australia, a trip combining business and pleasure.

When Flick turned up at the airport to bid him a surprise farewell, she wasn't sure who was the more surprised of the three of them—her, Marcus or the busty blonde he had his arm around. When Flick saw them kiss, anger swamped hope, sat on its head and knifed it to death. She made sure her face showed nothing as she walked over.

Flick spoke before Marcus could. "I came to say goodbye. Have a lovely time."

"Flick? What...er...thanks. Er...this is Briony, my research assistant." Marcus kept swallowing, his nervous habit, not that Flick needed any more evidence of his lies.

She turned to the woman. "You are obviously a special person, Briony. Not many people could cope with Marcus' problem. Has it flared up yet?"

She turned and walked off feeling somewhat lighter in spirit. She heard Marcus behind her.

"Flick."

She kept walking, but Marcus grabbed her and pulled her around. Over his shoulder Flick saw Briony glaring.

"I'll ring you when I get back," he said.

Flick jerked away. "Don't bother coming back on my account."

"Don't be like that." Marcus tried to take hold of her hand.

"If you touch me again, I'll tell everyone at Yorkshire Television how you liked to wear my underwear when you were on camera."

Worked like a charm.

For some considerable time after that final meeting, Flick had thought it very big of her not to have informed airport security that Marcus had a thousand pounds' worth of cocaine stuffed up his backside. The irony was, he probably did.

The week before he'd announced he was off to Oz, Marcus had told her he loved her. She'd experienced such a flood of emotion, she almost cried. Flick didn't cry. Apart from her mum and dad, Marcus was the only person who'd ever said he loved her. But he'd lied, because if he loved her he wouldn't have wanted to go so far away and he wouldn't have gone without her. If he loved her, he'd have asked her to wait or go with him. She'd have found a way. If he loved her, he would have told her he was taking Briony. If Flick loved him, she'd have understood.

The breakup changed Flick, broke something inside her. One moment she'd been the most important person in the world to another human being and the next discarded. The physical pain that came with that knowledge had been so bad, she'd thrown up.

Miserable Bastard still emailed her, as if there was a possibility of a happy reunion when he returned. Flick deleted the messages without reading them. She wouldn't take Marcus back if he came as a free gift in a pack of cereal. In fact, Flick hoped a shark ate him, or one particular bit of him, preferably a great white with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth.

* * * * *

Earlier that day, Beck had checked out the rental house and been relieved to find it clean and spacious. The family who owned it had gone to America for three months and been happy to accept a short-term let to bolster the mortgage. Beck had already moved into one of the smaller rooms with a single bed. He'd not missed the way Dina looked at him, nor the accidental brushes against his body. Rich might intend to sleep his way through the year group but Beck wanted to keep his job.

Almost before he'd come to a halt in the drive, four of the students scrambled to get out of the van. The moment Beck unlocked the front door, they raced upstairs to stake their claim to a bed. Only Jane lingered. Dina shrieked.

"Better go choose your room," Beck said.

"No point. I'll be in the smallest. I don't mind."

"You might end up sharing with Dina."

A look of horror flashed across her face before she dashed upstairs.

The three-storey Edwardian house had six bedrooms. Since Beck had to keep a room free for Isobel, two would have to share. When Matt and Ross discovered a Wii and a stack of games in the wardrobe of the room with twin beds, the decision was

easy. Pravit and Jane took rooms in the roof space. Dina stood proprietarily in the doorway of the master bedroom, the only room with an en suite, though the rooms in the attic had washbasins. Beck had thought about saving the largest room for Isobel, but he suspected she wouldn't be bothered where she slept, whereas giving Dina a bathroom of her own would probably prevent the others strangling her on the first day. Beck smiled when he saw Matt and Ross struggle upstairs with her suitcases.

Remembering all too well what he'd been like when he was nineteen, Beck sat them down in the living room and had a chat about responsible behavior, how he expected them to look after the house and themselves. Then he handed over keys. Beck guessed that had someone sat him and Giles down and had the same chat, it would have made no difference to what they got up to. That didn't mean the chat shouldn't happen.

Beck and Giles met on their first day at Cambridge. Within hours, Giles had introduced Beck to the dubious delights of alphabet shagging—sleeping with girls whose names ran from A to Z. For the difficult letters, like Q, U, X and Y, middle names were deemed acceptable. Their first summer vacation had been more of an education to Beck than the previous nine months of university. Beck winced when he thought about it. As he cast his eyes over the group in front of him, he felt too young to play parent but he did feel responsible for their welfare, so he plowed on. Judging by the looks on their faces when he'd finished talking, he'd made his point.

He hoped his best man's speech went down better. Maybe he ought to write it.

Dina tried to look as though she was listening to what Beck said but her mind swirled with thoughts of the redhead in the supermarket. Dina had been furious when she'd seen the Object of her Obsession talking to Competition. One glance had been enough to take it all in. Long legs. Short skirt. Tight top. Weird hair. Beck's face. Dina hadn't turned down a month in Italy to have someone cheat her out of Professor Beckett. Eliminate all competition was number three in the list of tips in her book *Helpful Hints For Single Girls*. The first thing she'd packed. Jane, the only other female in the group, might be cleverer but she was fat, boring and not worth worrying about. What Dina hadn't anticipated, was that Beck might know someone who lived here.

None of the boys from her year group were worth a second glance. After all, they were just boys. Matt was funny but too short, Ross was the right height but only he thought he was funny, and Pravit was a dork. Of course she knew all three of them wanted to sleep with her, but she was already taken, or at least soon would be.

Dina had expected a night in watching TV with Beck by her side so she could work on her seduction technique, but once she realized he was going to a dinner party and the redhead would be there too, she decided she might as well go clubbing in Leeds with the others. She put on her best outfit and applied her "you-know-you-want-me" makeup. She'd just have to tease Beck with what could be his.

"Show your man your best assets." Sleek, silver and very short, her dress left little to the imagination. She stepped in front of the mirror and jutted out her bum, giving a

little twitch. Perfect. Dina wriggled her painted toes inside her high heels, then turned and checked over her shoulder, giving herself a coy smile. All she wore underneath the dress was a mini thong. Beck would have to be made of stone not to fancy her. The boys would drool. They could each have one dance. They'd make excellent guard dogs in case anyone pestered her.

Chapter Three

Once Flick finished her bath, she wrapped herself in a towel and sat in the kitchen so Kirsten could rescue her hair.

"Pierce can't make it to lunch tomorrow, so Mum wondered if you'd like to come instead," Kirsten said.

"So I'm the booby prize?" Flick pretended to be annoyed and Kirsten yanked on her hair.

"You're not second choice. Mum wanted me to ask you and Josh, but he's not back until tomorrow night."

"Weeeelll..."

"I'll tell her you can't come."

"That was me wavering," Flick said. "Keep trying."

Kirsten snapped the scissors near Flick's ear. "Mum said she'll do lots of parsnips."

Flick's mouth watered. "Mmm."

"And roast potatoes," Kirsten teased.

"Shall I bring mint sauce?"

"Mum'll make some. Though why you want mint sauce with beef, I do not know."

"I like mint sauce with everything."

Kirsten pulled Flick's hair through the straighteners. "I know. Even ice cream, you freak."

Flick licked her lips. "By the way, Stef rang this morning. She's back in Cambridge."

"Did she have a good time in Aruba with Drew?"

"Wonderful."

How could she not? Her younger sister Stef had just completed the second year of her Land Economy course at Cambridge University. Friends with the polo crowd, although unable to ride herself, she'd accepted an invitation to spend two weeks at the home of an American friend's parents.

"So is Drew her boyfriend?" Kirsten asked.

"No idea."

Too many men in her sister's life to keep track. Stef tended to chew her guys around for a while, eat the tasty bits and spit out what remained. Drew had paid for Stef's ticket and made it clear she wouldn't have to bother changing any currency, though that hadn't stopped her asking Flick to send money just in case and, of course, Flick had.

Plus she had Stef's credit card bill to look forward to. Her sister's idea of being careful with money was like a juggler choosing to play with knives instead of fire.

"How much money did you give her?" Kirsten asked.

How did Kirsten know what she'd been thinking? "Three hundred pounds."

"And did she run out?" Kirsten picked up the scissors again.

"Not once she found she could get cash on the credit card."

"Eeek. You have to stop her doing that. You can't afford it."

"I know." Flick sighed.

"What is it with you two? You let her help herself to your favorite clothes and you're always sending her money. You put on the martyr robe the moment Stef's name comes up."

"She's my sister. I'm all she's got," Flick snapped and then winced. "Sorry."

* * * * *

Beck drove the minivan down the hill through the centre of Ilkley, on over the river to the other side of the valley and up to Hartington Hall. He still had trouble believing Giles was getting married. Five months ago, all in one breath, Giles announced he planned to move back to West Yorkshire, marry Willow, wanted Beck as his best man and did he know a girl whose name began with X so he could finish the alphabet shagging game? Beck hoped that last part was a joke.

He and Giles had rooms on the same staircase in college and shared a house in the second year. In their third year, they'd opted again for college accommodation but spent less time together. Beck chose to study while Giles chose to sleep with Harriet, Irina, Kate, Penelope and Zoe, and unearthed a few more drinking societies to join. Beck deserved his First class degree, while Giles did not deserve his Second class one.

The summer after finals, they'd ended up going on holiday to Portugal where Giles continued the game. V for Veronica had no boyfriend, fell for Giles and did everything she could to make sure they stayed attached. When Giles dumped V for an elusive E for Eloise, Veronica had slapped Beck on the face as if it were his fault. Beck had no idea how Giles got away with it. Now he was marrying Willow Shadwell and Beck couldn't help but wonder if Giles had given up on the game when he couldn't find an X and not because he was marrying a W.

While Giles chased the money and went into banking, believing beautiful girls would follow, Beck had eschewed the money, though not necessarily the girls, and gone to Oxford to do a PhD, partly because he couldn't think of anything better to do and partly because he couldn't face the prospect of having to find a real job. He strung out his research as long as he could and strung out a girlfriend longer than he should. The breakup had been messy. He'd run away to Yorkshire to take up a post as a university lecturer and to his surprise, he liked it.

Archaeology had been his passion since he was a small boy. Armed with a metal detector, a ninth birthday present, he'd dug holes all over the lawn which had led to his father smacking him for the first and only time. Beck had also starred in his own archaeology video, aged twelve, when he persuaded his brother to film him digging up their deceased guinea pig. They'd both thrown up over the maggoty remains.

Beck returned from childhood holidays with his suitcase devoid of clothes, but full of pottery fragments, teeth of unknown origin and pieces of metal he spent the following weeks and months trying to identify. His tolerant parents even forked out for excess baggage until his room was so full of yet-to-be-identified treasures, they feared the floor would give way and send him tumbling into the lounge. Finally, his dad built him a shed next to his at the bottom of the garden.

The obsession with fossils and dinosaurs didn't fade as Beck grew older, and he still dreamed of discovering an undisturbed treasure. Although he'd never admit it, he'd fallen a little in love with the idea of being mistaken for a real-life Indiana Jones.

Beck didn't expect every student who enrolled to study archaeology at Yorkshire University to have the same level of interest as him, but there seemed to be a widening gap between what they said on their application form and what they believed. He'd begun to wonder if they'd all downloaded the same sentence.

"I have a passion for the past and a burning desire to make my own individual contribution to the understanding of human development."

It should have been the truth but Beck suspected the burning desire related to three years of digs in the sun, during which they could consume copious amounts of alcohol, have lots of passionate sex, and if they could be bothered to look, make that unique, once in a lifetime discovery to bring them fame and a vast fortune. Very few would become anything like Indiana Jones, though Beck's hat and whip still hung in the shed.

Giles opened the front door of Hartington Hall and grinned at Beck. "Workmen round the back."

"Very funny."

"Are you on your own? I said you could bring Isobel."

Beck followed Giles through the paneled hall. "She's not coming up until later in the week."

Hartington Hall was stuffed with antiques. Old paintings and clocks lined every wall. As much as Beck loved old things, his home was modern and minimalist—according to his mother—sterile and boring.

"Well, the chief bridesmaid is a K, Kirsten, though she's not here yet, plus she has a boyfriend."

"Since when did that stop you?" Beck retorted without thinking. He added quietly, "Are you sure you're ready to get married?"

Giles pulled up short and turned to glare. "Are you crazy? You're my best man. You're supposed to be supporting me, not trying to talk me out of it. Talking of duties, I hope you've arranged something spectacular for my stag night. I don't care where we go but there has to be naked women. Lots of them."

"There's a sculpture exhibition on at the art gallery."

"And because I'm not sure whether or not that was a joke, I insist the naked women are alive," Giles said. "And if one of them has a name beginning with X, so much the better." He rubbed his hands together.

"I had hoped you weren't playing that game anymore."

Giles winked. He turned to push open the door of the drawing room and Beck caught his arm. "I met Felicity today." He watched Giles' face.

"Flick? I've already got an F. Do you need one?"

Beck raised his eyebrows.

Giles laughed. "I'm joking."

"Is she one of the bridesmaids?" Beck asked.

"No, she works a few days a week for my mother. She's serving the meal tonight."

That explained her cryptic comment, Beck thought.

Giles pushed open the door and ushered him inside. "Brace yourself."

"Oh look, here's Professor Beckett," Celia called as they walked in.

"She makes me sound old," Beck muttered under his breath.

"You're over thirty. You are old," Giles whispered.

Beck made his way across the room toward Celia's proffered cheek. She turned the other and then turned again for the third peck. Beck was getting dizzy.

Celia waited until she had everyone's attention before she spoke. "This is Giles' frightfully clever friend from Cambridge. Got a First. Giles just missed his. Alexander is the youngest ever professor of archaeology at Yorkshire University. He's the best man and he's still single."

Not quite what he had on his CV. Plus Giles had not just missed a First. Beck kissed Willow on each cheek and shook hands with her parents, Kitty and Barry, and then with the three identikit bridesmaids whose names he instantly forgot, and finally with Henry Hartington, already red-cheeked and drunk. To Beck's relief, Giles' grandmother was asleep. On a previous occasion, Celia had introduced him as Doctor Beckett and Gertrude had latched on like a leech and subjected him to a detailed description of her malfunctioning digestive system. There had been a number of benefits in gaining his professorship.

"Alexander is supervising my dig," Celia announced.

"Are you having the garden done?" Kitty asked. "Barry and I could do with some advice about our rockery."

"An archaeological dig," Celia said, glaring at a laughing Giles. "Apparently we're sitting on a significant site. Quite possibly the origins of Ilkley's Roman settlement. We found a very interesting piece of pottery and Alexander believes there could be the remains of an important villa in my garden."

Beck tried to keep a straight face. In a minute, Julius Caesar would have lived there.

"You're starting the excavation on Monday with a group of experts, isn't that right?" She finally drew breath with a pause long enough for someone else to speak.

"Yes, a group from the university."

Beck didn't add that they were all undergraduates whose dig experience probably amounted to little more than playing in a sandpit. On second thoughts, he doubted Dina had managed even that. She'd have been too busy marrying Barbie to Ken. A black cloud puffed up in his head. The chances of anything worthwhile coming out of this month were about as high as him winning the lottery, and since he never bought a ticket, he could write the report for his head of department right now.

"Roman villa, eh?" Barry scratched his head. "I thought there were only forts in this area. As I recall the first one was built in the 80s AD, replaced in the 120s and again in 160s. That one burnt down between 196-7 and a stone structure replaced it."

That shut Celia up and left Beck with an unpleasant sinking feeling in his stomach. A local expert. The cloud in his head started to rain.

"Barry is the president of our little history group," Kitty said. "No one knows more about West Yorkshire than him."

Beck forced the smile onto his face. "Fantastic." He glanced at Giles trying to turn a snigger into a cough.

"I'll be glad to run you through my extensive files," Barry said. "And I've four thousand three hundred and twenty-seven slides. I've written an article or two for some reputable historical publications including *Having Fun in your Back Garden*."

"I'll have one of my associates contact you." Half of Beck's mind wondering what *Having Fun in your Back Garden* was about and the other half considering a way of persuading Isobel to talk to Barry. "I'm sure your experience and knowledge will be really useful." Beck registered the disappointed expression on the man's face. "You're right about the forts." The smile returned. "But there's been no systematic excavation of the civilian settlement so who knows what Celia has in her back garden. Could be a dwelling or maybe a shrine or a mansio." Or more likely a Victorian pig-pen.

Barry beamed. "Have you visited Manor House Museum? They have—"

"Daddy. Bor—ing." Willow took Beck's arm and steered him toward the giggling bridesmaids. Beck took one look at the three eying him as if he was the last chocolate in the world and wanted to go back to Barry. All three women were thin and angular. All had long blonde hair. He tried to remember their names. Airy, Fairy and Mary. Willow introduced them again. Aisling, Genevieve and Marina. Beck turned to the one by his side, opened his mouth and closed it. Nope, he'd forgotten.

Giles came up at his other elbow. "I'd like to remind you of the one huge benefit of marrying an archaeologist."

"What's that?" the three chorused.

Beck wanted to kill Giles. He'd heard him use this line so many times.

"The older you get, the more interest he'll show in you." Giles sniggered. "Particularly when you're dead and buried."

"Christ, Giles, you make it sound like necrophilia," Beck said.

"Well, you are fascinated by dead things, admit it."

Beck was more fascinated by the redhead he'd met that afternoon, but he wanted to know about the relationship between her and Giles. He really hoped they weren't sleeping together.

"So tell me, Alexander, how are your parents?"

Beck jumped. Celia had snuck up behind him.

"Er...er," he stammered. He couldn't remember her ever having met his parents.

"I hope they're both well." Celia smiled and nodded, encouraging him to answer.

Beck's mother drove his father insane. She was addicted to eBay, buying and selling. The contents of the house changed so much that every time his father came home from work, he double checked he was at the right address. In addition, his dad was going deaf and wouldn't admit it, so everyone around him had to shout. His mother had a permanently sore throat.

Beck realized Celia was still looking at him, waiting for an answer.

"They're absolutely fine, thanks," he said.

"I expect your mother is looking forward to you trotting down the aisle," she whispered loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Not really." Yes, desperately.

"No one in mind, then?" Celia pressed on.

"No." Not for marriage though he had a vision of that redhead in his bed.

"So do you think this will be like a mini Pompeii?" Celia changed the subject.

"Well..." Beck blustered and this time he was relieved to be pounced on by the brides-trolls who wanted to discuss Indiana Jones. After Beck realized one of them thought the Temple of Doom was an actual place, he briefly lost the power of speech. He pleaded a need for the bathroom and escaped.

He found Giles in the dining room with his tongue down Willow's throat.

"Still got your tonsils, Willow?" Beck asked and the two sprang apart.

"You're supposed to be entertaining the bridesmaids," Giles said. "That's what the best man does. It's a perk of the job."

"Can't I talk to you for a bit?"

"Willow and I are busy."

"You're going to have the rest of your lives to examine each other's organs. I need rescuing now."

"I'll go and get you both a drink." Willow smiled, and planted another kiss on her fiancé's lips, before sashaying out of the room. They both watched her go.

"I can't believe I'm so lucky." Giles drooled.

"Me neither," Beck said, staring at his friend.

"The W-for-Willow is as good as it gets." Giles grinned. "It was exhausting taking a different girl to bed all the time. If it hadn't been for the game, I'd have forgotten their names by the time I woke up."

"As I recall, you still didn't always remember their names."

"Well, I don't have to bother about that now. Life is great. I like coming home without having to pick up my dinner on the way. If I'd known how good it was to have a resident angel who fills the fridge with food and alcohol and is happy to iron my shirts on the front and back, I'd have settled down long ago."

Beck doubted that and knew Giles saw the disbelief in his face.

"Willow is fun and she really cares about me. She's almost tamed me. She even earns a decent salary."

"What do you mean, 'almost'?"

Giles shrugged. Beck wanted to ask him about Flick, but couldn't push the words out of his mouth. He didn't want to hear she was one of Giles' alphabet shags.

"So what is my mother spouting off about now?"

"She's told the entire room she has Pompeii in the back garden."

"You mean we don't?" Giles flashed Beck a look of mock surprise.

"One piece of pottery does not mean we're going to find the whole dinner set and the shop that sold it."

"I know for a fact there's a septic tank."

That was one thing Beck didn't want to find. He took out his Dictaphone and made a note.

Chapter Four

"Flick! Hurry up. We're going to be late," Kirsten yelled through the bathroom door.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming."

Flick put the final touches to her makeup and stepped back to judge the overall effect. She grinned at her reflection in the mirror and opened the door.

Kirsten's jaw dropped, and then she laughed. "Lady C will have a heart attack."

"Henry might," Flick said. "But it will be her fault. She was the one who insisted I had to dress as a maid."

Lady C was a pretentious prig, but a rich pretentious prig, and Flick was desperate enough to do almost anything for cash. She would have waited on tables dressed as an elephant if they paid her for it.

The two of them hurried out to the car. Flick was driving Kirsten over to Hartington Hall and Pierce would pick her up. Pierce was probably delighted by that arrangement—no financial outlay on the evening apart from fuel and he still got to take Kirsten to bed. Little wonder Flick didn't like him. He had far too much in common with Marcus.

"Where's your apron?" Kirsten asked.

"Lady C's providing it. It will complete the look beautifully, don't you think?"

Flick wore the only black skirt in her wardrobe. Hardly her fault it was both too short and too tight. The same could be said for her white shirt, and her less-well-endowed sister's pushup bra which left Flick's cleavage straining the buttons of the shirt. She carried a pair of black high heels to put on when she got there, and had emblazoned her lips with bright red gloss. Though her streaked hair was neater, it was still wild and sexy. Flick looked as tarty as she could manage without painting her nails in the same shade of red she'd used for her lips.

In fact, one nail was painted red. A beautifully filed, perfect nail. The other nine were almost wider than they were long because of her razor-sharp occlusion. Flick thought it an impressive feat of willpower that enabled her to keep biting her nails year after year despite constant, wearing criticism. One of her few lasting achievements.

"You look gorgeous," she told Kirsten. In a slinky black dress with simple silver necklace and stud earrings, Kirsten looked as sophisticated as Flick did cheap. "I take it back about the nail varnish."

"I can't believe I live with you," Kirsten said.

"You lucky thing."

Kirsten laughed. "You are going to be in so much trouble. Lady C will kill you, provided you don't kill her husband first."

* * * * *

Flick dropped Kirsten off at the front door of the Hall, drove round to the slaves' entrance at the rear and pulled up next to the caterers' white van. *Cuisine D'Or by Nik and Nita* was written on the side in flowery letters. Flick walked into the kitchen and sniffed, expecting to smell something delicious. Nothing was cooking. Correction, Nik was simmering. He and Nita stood either side of the wooden table glaring at each other. By the look on their faces, one of them was about to be inserted head first into the bright red oven.

"Er, hi," Flick said. "What's the problem?"

"He is."

"She is." They spluttered simultaneously.

"Have you forgotten something? Can I go and get it?" Flick asked.

"His brains."

"Her brains." More concurrent offerings.

"Bitch," from him.

"Bastard," from her.

"Bollocks." Flick groaned.

Nik moved to pick up a knife and Nita grabbed a frying pan. Flick thought about stepping between them, but she wasn't paid enough.

"Look, guys, this is a really special evening, so can't whatever domestic you're having wait until you get home? Please cook something."

For a moment, nothing happened and then to Flick's immense relief they sprang into action. She leaned against the fridge and watched. Shouting instructions at each other Gordon Ramsay style, they made cooking look easy as they chopped, sliced, stirred, fried and occasionally flung trays into the oven. Flick was mesmerized by the chopping. They might each have had four hands. How could they move a knife so fast?

The cooks continued to shoot hateful glances at each other through the steam and occasionally through the flames rising from the sizzling food. Heads of lettuce flew back and forth across the kitchen like basketballs. When Flick intercepted one heading for a pile of plates, Nik clapped.

As she left the kitchen in search of Lady C, Flick found her heading down the hallway.

"You're late."

"Good evening," Flick said, at her most polite. "I was here on time. I've been supervising in the kitchen."

Judging by the suspicious look on Celia's face, Flick knew she didn't believe her. Celia's eyes widened and her nostrils flared as she took in her outfit.

"What on earth are you wearing? What did I tell you this afternoon?"

"Black skirt, white blouse."

Celia clenched her teeth. "Didn't you have anything longer?"

"Sorry, they shrank in the wash." If the washing machine didn't do it, then the tumble drier did. Not her fault. "Are you ready for me to serve drinks?"

Celia hadn't finished. "I asked you to dress appropriately. I don't call this appropriate—a skirt up to your bottom and a shirt three sizes too small. I shall be reviewing your wages." She pushed a stiff white pinafore into Flick's hand.

* * * * *

When Kirsten walked into the drawing room she looked around for Willow but her gaze fell on the man talking to Giles. He had to be Beck. Tall, dark and handsome like every guy Flick fell for. And probably a swine, like every guy Flick fell for. She'd not mentioned Marcus since he'd flown off to Oz, so Kirsten and Josh had decided something bad had happened.

Willow rushed up and hugged her.

"Come and meet Beck." She led her across the room. "Beck, this is Kirsten, my best friend from school and my chief bridesmaid."

"Pleased to meet you," Beck said.

Kirsten shook his hand. "Hello. I've heard a lot about you."

"If you've been talking to Giles, everything is a lie. If you've been talking to my mother, everything is still a lie."

Kirsten laughed. "Actually I've been talking to someone who described you as a born-again shepherd."

Beck's eyes widened. "You know Flick?"

"I live with her. A word of warning. She wasn't impressed in the supermarket when your students came up the aisle baaing."

Beck looked puzzled for a moment. "That had nothing to do with her. It was some weird beer they'd found. Sheep Dip or Black Sheep or something."

"Oops. Flick thought you were laughing at her. She may be plotting something."

Celia held the door for Flick who carried a tray loaded with champagne flutes. Flick was tempted to pretend to drop them but fearing she might actually drop them, changed her mind. She delayed heading in Beck's direction until he and Kirsten were the only ones without drinks.

"Cider?" Flick asked with a bright smile.

"Celia will kill you," Kirsten whispered. "It's Veuve Clicquot."

The moment Beck laughed, Flick rejected ideas about tipping up his drink or dropping food in his lap in favor of dropping herself there instead.

"Beck was just telling me about some beer in the supermarket called Sheep Dip." Kirsten raised her eyebrows.

"Sounds delightful," Flick said.

"They weren't baaing at you," she whispered.

"An attack by a malevolent sheep is no laughing matter," Beck said. "I'd hate you to think I thought it funny."

"I've got hoof prints to prove it wasn't."

Beck winced. "So tell me why you thought I was the police?"

Flick was struggling to come up with a good lie when Henry tapped his glass. Bless him.

"A toast, now we all have a drink," Henry said. "To Giles and Willow, the future Mr. and Mrs. Giles Hartington. To their forthcoming wedding."

"To their wedding," everyone chorused.

Giles kissed Willow on the lips and she snuggled against him.

"Love you, sugarlips," he mouthed.

"Love you back, fuzzycheeks," she returned.

Beck and Flick both caught each other rolling their eyes and grinned.

Flick walked across the room to top up Henry's champagne. If it hadn't been for the fact Henry had insisted his wife give her a job, Flick knew she was the last person Lady C would employ. She thrust Flick's complete unsuitability down her throat at every opportunity. She was clumsy, cheeky and always dressed in strange clothes and her attitude "inappropriate". When Lady C sacked her, a weekly occurrence, Henry always smoothed things over.

Henry was the only person Flick had confided in about Grinstead's. If it wasn't for the fact that he had a tendency to stare at her in a very un-father-like way, she would have adopted him as her dad.

"You're not doing me any good at all dressed in that outfit, Felicity," Henry said.

"You know that's not true. I give you a reason to get up in the morning, Melchi Dael," she whispered.

"You give me a reason to get up at all times of the day," he whispered back. "And the only woman I can't procure for myself is you."

Flick laughed. She'd just called Henry by the name of a demon who was the prince of pimps, able to provide a man with any woman of his choice. The first time they'd met, Henry had spent the whole time staring at her chest, clearly hoping her buttons would pop undone. She'd called him a randy devil. That marked the start of their game.

He'd offered her fifty pounds if she could come up with the name of a devil he didn't know. So far she'd failed.

When Flick went into the kitchen to get the canapés, the two chefs had stopped speaking though they were working – banging utensils in a aggressive manner, tuning up for an innovative percussion performance. Nik slammed the fridge door shut. Nita clattered a pan onto the table. Nik responded by kicking the oven, though he spent the next few minutes hopping around on one foot. Flick escaped with the canapés.

They looked so delicious she pushed two in her mouth on the way to the drawing room. She offered the tray to Kirsten first to make up for serving her the champagne last.

"You've got caviar on your mouth," Kirsten whispered.

Flick ran her tongue over her lips and heard Henry utter a low groan. He slumped on the couch looking pale. Flick hoped she hadn't overdone it, but if Celia did dock her wages, Henry would make them up again.

She offered the tray to Lady C who was talking to Willow's mother about final arrangements for the wedding. Flick knew Celia had organized the whole thing. She was such an overwhelming wave of womanhood, she swept everything before her. Kirsten said Willow had attempted a few brief protests, but she'd given way under Celia's erosive power. Celia had made a generous offer for Henry to pay for the lot. Barry insisted he paid and in the end Giles said the cost would be split three ways.

Flick hoped Stef married someone rich.

Willow chatted about her hens' night. Flick knew Kirsten had struggled to think of something different they could do, an activity that didn't involve men taking off their clothes. In a moment of inspiration, having forced Josh and Flick to brainstorm when they were both drunk, Josh had come up with skiing. There was a large indoor slope with artificial snow at Castleford. The rest of the hen party had approved, providing dancing with near naked men followed. Typical.

Flick carried the canapés to Beck and Giles.

"Do I look like a policeman?" Beck asked.

She should have known he was the persistent sort. Flick wobbled her lower lip. "I'm wanted for murder."

"Have I missed something?" Giles looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

She held the tray with one hand and popped a large prawn between her lips with the other.

"Didn't you have time to do your other nails?" asked Giles.

"Plenty of time but I reserve special treatment for this one. It suffered a serious trauma when I was five. Hammer blow. I'm still trying to get it to forgive me." Flick spread out her hand, face down. "It has no competition. Look at the others. It's a masterpiece."

"You could stop biting the rest," Beck said.

"But I don't want them to feel neglected and anyway, they like the feel of my teeth." She smiled when she saw his Adam's apple move up and down.

"Felicity, I'm not paying you to talk," Celia hissed in her ear.

Flick walked across to the bridesmaids, but didn't miss the comment that followed her departure.

"Her legs," Beck whispered. "I can almost see... Oh God."

Flick did a complete circuit of the room with the canapés before Giles beckoned her back.

"Don't neglect us, Miss Knyfe or I'll have to report you to my mother."

Flick offered him the tray.

"Knyfe?" Beck laughed. "Don't tell me that's your name? Flick Knyfe?"

"Felicity Xanthe Knyfe," Flick said.

"I didn't know you had a middle name. How do you spell it?" Giles asked.

"X-a-n-t-h-e. Why?"

Giles smiled. "Just curious. You're the first person I've met with a name beginning with X."

Flick glanced at Beck as he gave a curious groan.

"Xanthe was my Dad's idea, though calling my sister Carving was a mistake."

Giles chuckled. "I can see now why my father looks forward to you coming."

Flick wasn't sure if she really heard him add "and so would I." She hoped not. She popped the last canapé into her mouth as Giles reached for it.

Flick leaned against the kitchen door not daring to ask again how long it would be before the meal was ready. Last time Nik had almost speared her with a cucumber. Lady C behaved as though the delay was her fault. Henry had told Flick to open another bottle of champagne, but only he, Giles and the bridesmaids seemed to be drinking. Beck had declined because he was driving. Every time Flick walked into the room, he oozed another pint of testosterone. She felt breathless with lust. Her heart rate jumped into overdrive with just a glimpse of him. She needed Kirsten to find out if he had a girlfriend.

"Five minutes," Nik snapped. "Get their bums on the fucking chairs. They're having soufflés so I want them all fucking sitting down waiting when they come out the oven."

Flick rushed to usher everyone through to the dining room.

Somehow she managed to serve everyone miniature cheese soufflés accompanied by pear and hazelnut salad, before the soufflés collapsed. She even got out of the room without dropping a plate or planting a kiss on Beck's lips. He had Kirsten sitting on one side of him, which was good, and the bridesmaid with the biggest breasts on the other, which was bad. Flick stomped off in a grump.

By the time she reached the kitchen the two chefs had returned to hurling insults at each other. Flick had no idea what catastrophe could have occurred in her absence but instructions had to be relayed through her. She took out the cursing to save time.

Her stomach rumbled as she served Beck a chicken breast, stuffed with wild mushrooms, wrapped in bacon. He looked up at her.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"No." Her stomach rumbled in protest. Flick didn't blame it. She was always hungry.

Celia's mother, Gertrude, reached out and grabbed her arm as she passed. "Tell them the vegetables are undercooked."

"Of course."

One message she wouldn't be passing on. The knives were far too sharp. When Flick pushed open the kitchen door, the mood had changed again. Nik and Nita appeared to be most of the way through one of Henry's bottles of claret. They were attached to each other at various points along their length from the lips down. Flick beat a hasty retreat to the stairs, sat on the bottom step with her elbows on her knees and thought about the last time she'd been kissed. Months ago by Miserable Bastard. The night he'd dumped her. Marcus had been an energetic kisser, though sometimes overenthusiastic to the point of leaving her with bruised lips. Only so many times you could say you'd had an allergic reaction to lipstick, though she'd rather have that sort of kiss than none at all.

Flick sat fiddling with one of her earrings, a loose strand of bright red beads she'd threaded herself, thinking about how pleasant it would be to wring Marcus' neck, when the jewelry came apart in her fingers. One red bead remained in her hand while the others bounced down the staircase and across the hall. Flick bent over to pick them up and felt fingers slide under her skirt.

"Henry Hartington, keep your lecherous hands to yourself." Flick squirmed away.

"Not my dad," Giles said, "though interesting you might think it was."

"Sorry." Flick realized what she'd said. "No, I'm not sorry. Do you mind?" She tried to get past and he blocked her way.

"Not at all." His grin and glazed eyes told Flick he was drunk. That and the two empty bottles she'd picked up between him and Willow. "F-for-Felicity. Can't have too many Fs. But it's the X factor that's done it. Xanthe. I never thought I'd find an X. Give us a kiss, X-for-Xanthe."

"No, Giles."

He stuck out his bottom lip. "Please. Just a little kiss."

"No."

"No meaning yes?"

"No meaning no."

He wrapped his arms around her and as she struggled to push him away, Beck and Willow walked out of the dining room. Flick shoved Giles hard in the middle of the chest. He laughed and kissed her.

"Foxy lady," he slurred and slipped past her into the cloakroom.

He hadn't seen Willow who stood staring like a frozen owl. Beck ushered her back the way they'd come. Flick slammed her hand to her head and groaned. That had not looked good. Why did things like that always happen to her? Sally Greene at work had got the wrong end of the stick about Flick's relationship with Gordon, her boss. Sally fancied him and thought Flick did too. There was a difference between being friendly and flirting. Good thing looks couldn't kill. Sally really hated her. Could Sally...? Flick shook her head.

She was about to risk re-entering the kitchen when Beck came out of the dining room and flew straight at her. He caught hold of her elbow and pushed her against the wall. An electric jolt of red-hot lust zinged through Flick's body.

"What the hell do you do think you're playing at?"

Ice-cold fear swept the heat away.

"I know what Giles can be like, but he's getting married in a couple of weeks' time, for fuck's sake. His fiancée is sitting in there weeping." Beck glared at her, his eyes fiery. "Can't you stop this cheap flirting?"

Flick wrenched her arm out of his grip and fled to the kitchen. She moaned and came straight back out. Nik and Nita posed horizontal on the kitchen table. Rather, Nita lay on the table with her bare legs wrapped around Nik's waist. His trousers slumped around his ankles and that was all Flick wanted to see. When she came back out of the kitchen, Beck still stood there with a face like a collapsed soufflé. If it had been anyone else, she'd have made some joke about what was cooking in the kitchen. Instead, she turned her back, leaned against the wall and tried to steady her breathing.

Beck was livid with her but when he'd touched her, he hadn't wanted to let her go. Just like before, it was as though they'd been welded together. He'd looked into her eyes, wanting to see the same thing he felt, a flashflood of desire that sent his pulse rate soaring, but the only thing he could see was fear. He'd shouted at her and yet he knew exactly what Giles was like. Damn, he was an idiot.

He leaned against the wall and waited for Giles to come out of the cloakroom. No way did he intend to leave the pair alone together. What the hell had Giles been playing at? He was drunk, but not that drunk. Beck wanted him back with Willow and away from Flick. She'd flown back out of the kitchen thinking Beck would have gone so she clearly wanted to talk to Giles.

Christ, what if they were already an item? Giles was cunning enough. That fucking alphabet game. Giles had jumped in a little too quickly for Beck's peace of mind when Flick revealed her middle name. He had a strong suspicion Giles knew full well how to spell Xanthe and he didn't find that knowledge at all comforting.

"What the fuck was that about?" Beck demanded when Giles emerged.

"What?" Giles' puzzlement seemed genuine.

"You and her." Beck turned to glare at Flick's back. "What's going on?"

"Lighten up, Beck." Giles pushed past him back into the dining room.

When Flick came in to clear the plates, she kept her gaze down. Beck had presumed her guilty without knowing all the facts. The story of her life. She carried in the desserts, individual cheesecakes topped with delicate sugar strand cages. Eleven of them looked fantastic. Sad to say there had been a little accident with Beck's between the kitchen and the dining room. He glanced up at her when she slammed the plate in front of him.

"Have you spat on it, too?" he asked.

Flick put her mouth to Beck's ear. "No. Like to guess again? You know, for a guy who makes a living digging up things with extreme care and attention, you're mighty quick to jump to conclusions."

She stalked off with Kirsten in pursuit.

"What's the hell's the matter?" Kirsten asked as Flick slumped against the wall outside the room.

"Giles tried to kiss me and Beck thinks I'm a slut."

"He's drunk."

"No, he's driving."

"Not Beck, you idiot. Giles is the one who's pissed. Now stop frowning and start smiling or Lady C will dock your wages."

Flick produced a smile she suspected would only attract a short-sighted chimpanzee.

"Much better," Kirsten said. "By the way, he doesn't have a wife or girlfriend or boyfriend."

Flick bared more of her teeth.

"Keep doing that and you won't be filling the girlfriend position," Kirsten said.

Flick didn't think there was a snowflake in hell's chance of filling any position with Beck, though several sprang to mind. She imagined the only position he'd like her to fill was six foot underground. She doubted he'd be digging her up.

By the time she'd laid out the cheese and biscuits, the kitchen was tidy, the dishwasher humming and the chefs almost ready to leave. Nik had one hand attached to Nita's hip and a satisfied smirk on his face. Flick was jealous of the simmering affection they'd flambéed up between them. She took the coffee into the drawing room along with two plates of petit fours, skillfully rearranged to disguise the fact that she'd stuffed five in her mouth and then went to ask Celia if she could go.

Flick had lost her sparkle and Beck knew it was his fault. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Celia hand her an envelope and caught something about services no longer being required. His heart slumped into his stomach. Why had Celia sacked her? Did she know there was something going on between Flick and Giles?

"Are you listening?" Kirsten asked.

"Sorry." Beck tried to tune back in.

"It's my birthday next Saturday and I'm having a party with a James Bond theme. I've invited Giles and Willow. I wondered if you'd like to come."

"Right." Beck watched Flick's mouth tighten as she listened to Celia.

"Do you think you will?"

"Uh?"

"Bring anyone?"

"Maybe, I'll let you know. You're not going home together?" Beck's gaze followed Flick out of the room.

"She's off to work."

Beck looked at his watch. "What, now?"

"She's always working. She does a late shift at a gas station a couple of nights a week. My boyfriend is picking me up. Flick doesn't have a boyfriend."

That wasn't very subtle, Beck thought but then his answer wasn't subtle either.

"I'm not surprised."

* * * * *

Beck woke several times that night. Once when the clubbers came back, again when one of them threw up in the bathroom and the final time when someone got into bed with him. Beck shot to his feet, switched on the light and looked down at sloe-eyed Dina.

"Wrong bed," he said in a firm voice.

"Sorry." She rolled over, hugging his pillow.

"You have your own bed, Dina."

Three annoyed huffs later, she got to her feet and wandered out. Beck breathed a sigh of relief. He closed the door and wedged a chair under the handle. Back under the sheet, he felt grateful he'd gone to bed in his Calvin Klein shorts. He wondered why he was quite so opposed to the idea of sleeping with Dina, apart from the fact that he wasn't supposed to take his students to bed. She was pretty and keen, but didn't interest him in the slightest.

He found the maid from hell far more enticing, only Beck had a feeling she was more trouble than he could cope with.

Chapter Five

Gerry, the manager of Polecats, gave an approving smile as Flick threw herself into her routine with uncharacteristic passion. For this set she wore her python outfit—silver serpent necklace, mock-snakeskin thong with matching boots and an eye-mask. Gerry grinned as she hung upside down, wrapped herself around the pole and slithered down. For a tall girl, Flick had nicely proportioned boobs. They suited Gerry's personal taste. He'd never been one for the pneumatic look favored by so many of his punters.

Flick alternated her routines between cat, snake and cowgirl. Gerry liked the snake best. She was a good dancer, supple and athletic, though most nights her performances never strayed beyond controlled and deliberate. Tonight, something was different. She'd worked the audience, left them open-mouthed and drooling into their overpriced cocktails. Gerry licked his lips.

He wished Flick would come in more often but she refused to do more than two nights a week and no more than five or six dances a night. Unlike his other girls, she wouldn't collect tips after her set which was how the dancers made the bulk of their money. When she'd auditioned, Flick made him an offer—he could have whatever they threw on the platform if he paid her more per dance than the rest. It made her the cheapest dancer he had, though she didn't know it. Much as he liked her, business was business.

The other thing Flick wouldn't do was lap dance. Despite his continual requests, she'd only work the pole. Gerry knew she wanted to keep her distance from the punters, but if any of them had tried to touch her or any other of his girls for that matter, they'd receive an instant and very intimate introduction to the pavement outside.

Gerry adjusted his pants. Flick was on fire tonight. She'd even turned him on and he'd begun to think he was becoming immune to women's bodies. When you worked alongside semi-naked or nude women every night of the week, you began to take them for granted. Gerry found half the time when he was talking to them, he didn't even notice whether or not they wore clothes, but he liked Flick. He liked her body, but he liked her mind more. She made him laugh.

By the time Flick finished her final routine her limbs felt leaden. Two thirty in the morning and the place was still hopping. She wiped off her makeup in the dressing room, changed into her little black skirt and white blouse, and went to get her money.

"You were hot tonight, princess," Gerry said.

"So those were flames coming out of your ears."

"When are you going to come home and meet my mum?"

"When you go and meet mine."

"I thought your mum was dead?"

"Sad to say that's true."

"Baby, you're breaking my heart."

Flick laughed. "I wasn't aware you had one."

Gerry clutched theatrically at his chest. "Now I need CPR."

"What's that? Constant Penis Rubbing?"

He gave her a sly wink. "Was that an offer, Miss Knyfe?"

"You know I don't work with inferior material, Gerry."

He threw his hands up in defeat, but beamed.

* * * * *

The digital clock perched on the end of the dressing table read 3:21 by the time Flick finally crawled into bed, and less than two hours later she rolled back out again. When she agreed to do the extra stint at the gym, she'd decided not to go to bed after her shift at Polecats, and instead put her mind to making a list of anyone who could have set her up for the theft. Sheer exhaustion changed her mind. Now she sat behind the reception desk in the leisure club, wishing she hadn't slept at all because she was sure it had made her feel worse.

Only two of them worked the early shift. They took it in turns to man the desk or clean the equipment. It was Flick's turn for the stool and she perched there determined to smile and be helpful, even if it killed her.

"Towel please."

She handed over a towel and swiped the membership card of one of the three super-fit individuals she'd seen exercising outside while they waited for the gym to open. Those who turned up before dawn cracked were grim-faced, toned and in her opinion, completely insane. Though the quietest time of the day offered the perfect opportunity for undisturbed domination of the equipment, despite the rules about hogging the machines, it was hardly worth losing sleep. On the other hand, early mornings also offered the unfit and embarrassed a chance to exercise out of sight of people they knew. Though after a couple of weeks, they almost always gave up.

These quiet early mornings were not a good time for Flick. Far too much time to think about her life and how it had all gone wrong. Minutes passed so slowly she might have thought she'd died and gone to her own private hell if it hadn't been for the draught of cold air that shot her way every time the door of the cardio gym opened.

Flick lived in constant dread of Kirsten or Josh finding out about Polecats. She couldn't tell them she danced out of financial desperation so they'd assume she craved the attention, or the feeling of sexual power. In fact Flick had been shocked by how

much some of the dancers hated men. Shocked too how quickly she'd lost her fear of taking off her clothes. The feeling of being utterly exposed and humiliated lasted one dance before Flick switched off that part of her mind. Compared to the humiliation of the accusation of theft, the pole dancing was nothing.

It really wasn't that big a deal. She danced. Men watched. She went home. Only Flick knew her friends wouldn't see it like that, a boyfriend wouldn't see it like that, not the sort of boyfriend she wanted anyway. Now she'd seen Beck's reaction to Giles' grope, she knew a pole-dancing girlfriend was not what Professor Beckett was looking for.

* * * * *

By the time Flick returned home, Pierce had gone and Kirsten was getting ready to go for lunch at her parents'. Flick changed into her best going-out gear—her green skirt, mid-thigh length on the left, calf-length on the right, a fluorescent pink top and blue plastic sandals decorated with goldfish. She couldn't remember the last time she'd bought something new. It wasn't by choice she trawled the local charity shops. Faced with cast-off woolen skirts, button-to-the-neck polyester blouses or over-bright trendy gear bought by mistake and only worn once if at all, Flick found herself the owner of some unusual items of clothing, not all of which were revolting.

The phone rang and Kirsten yelled for her to get it.

"Buckingham Palace. How may I help you?" Flick said in as posh a voice as she could manage.

"Hi, Xanthe."

Her antennae twitched. "Hello, Giles."

"I'm ringing to apologize about last night."

"Oh, okay. So have you told Beck it wasn't me, it was you?" she asked and then cursed herself for being obvious.

"Meet me tonight in Headingley for a drink. Eight o'clock. The Cock and Bull. Bring your birth certificate."

"What? Get stuffed." Flick slammed the phone down.

"Who was it?" Kirsten asked as she walked in.

"Wrong number."

"Hurry up then."

On the way to the car Flick stopped in front of a clump of feathery purple foliage. "These are pretty. Do you know what they're called?"

Kirsten peered over her shoulder. "Rosebay Willowherb."

"Ohh, what a great name. Do you think your mum would like them?" Flick snapped several stems.

"They'll definitely bring a smile to her face." Kirsten grinned. "Now get in or we'll be late."

Flick moaned as she sank on to the seat. "God, I'm exhausted."

"How much sleep did you get last night?"

"Not enough."

"Me neither. I wish I'd hidden the condoms."

"Eughh." She valued Kirsten too much as a friend to lose her over Pierce, but when Kirsten did start to see the light, Flick intended to stake her out in the sun and tape her eyes open. And if necessary, she'd smother her with honey and threaten her with an army of ants until she admitted that Pierce was not "the one".

Flick didn't like Pierce. He arrived on time, sent flowers and told Kirsten she looked nice but there was something too organized about him, as though he'd decided a lawyer and an accountant were a perfect balance. The same flowers arrived on the same day every month. He was never spontaneous.

"Maybe you should drop the gas station," Kirsten suggested.

"No. Can't. Need the money."

"Why don't you look for a proper job? You wouldn't have to work such crazy hours."

"Maybe I like things this way." Flick warned by her tone she did not wish to continue on that track. As usual, Kirsten missed it.

"Do you want me to help with your CV? I mean, I can't understand why you don't even get any interviews."

"I'm considering my options." *Gagging you, being one of them.*

Kirsten sighed. "Go on then, ask me."

"What?"

"If he's coming to my party."

"Who?"

Kirsten laughed. "Mr. Phwoar."

"You needn't have bothered. He thinks I'm a tart who only appeals to lower life forms—sheep and Giles Hartington."

"Well, maybe he likes tarts."

Flick turned from the road to glare at her. "Gee, thanks."

"I liked him," Kirsten said.

"You've already got a boyfriend." Unfortunately. Flick waited long enough to let Kirsten think she'd won before she asked, "So is he coming?"

"I knew you fancied him." Kirsten grinned.

"Answer the question."

"He said he'd probably come."

Flick did her chimpanzee smile.

“And if you do that, he’ll leave again.”

Chapter Six

Dina had set her alarm for 8:15, the mere thought of getting up before midday on a Sunday little short of miraculous. An even greater miracle she sprang out of bed when it went off. By 9:00 she was dressed, her hair straightened, makeup in place, ready to cook breakfast for Beck. *"Cook for your man to find a way to his heart."* That didn't come until Chapter Five but Dina couldn't see it mattered in what order you did things, so long as you got the result. The boys were still asleep. Their snores could be heard all over the house, accompanied by a few muffled farts. Dina wrinkled her nose.

She almost threw up in disgust when she saw Jane sitting in the garden reading an archaeology book. Then, realizing it would impress Beck, Dina rushed upstairs to get her own copy of the incredibly expensive and incredibly heavy core textbook *Urban Archaeology Fieldwork in the Twenty-first Century*. She sat next to Jane.

"Oh, you managed to get hold of a second-hand copy." Dina looked at Jane's well-thumbed version.

"No, it no longer looks new because I've opened it a few times."

Dina rolled her eyes and turned to the first page. With a bit of luck, Beck would wake up soon, see her and Jane reading together and then she could offer to make him breakfast. How impressive was that? *"Show your man you're interested in the things that interest him."*

She hoped Beck came soon. Her eyes had begun to glaze over and she'd read only a paragraph.

* * * * *

By the time Beck emerged from his room it was almost noon. He'd been awake for hours working on his book, which was not as he'd led his colleagues to believe, yet another study of Thermoluminescence, but instead a chilling tale of a serial killer who collected gall bladders from his victims. Now Beck had his professorship, the need to use every available moment to produce an endless stream of theories that interested virtually no one, had thankfully passed. At last he had time to write something exciting and was currently weaving a complicated psychological tale with lots of clues and red herrings. He wanted the identity of the killer to be entirely unexpected.

The moment he appeared in the garden, Dina jumped to her feet and rushed toward him.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

Beck could have sworn she fluttered her eyelashes. "Only if you're making one for yourself. Thanks." He sat next to Jane.

Dina returned with a mug. "Like any breakfast? Toast? Cereal?"

"No thanks. Tea's fine. You two are keen," Beck said with a smile as Dina made a big point of opening her book in the middle. At a rough guess, that would have put her some five hundred years beyond the period they were studying.

"Do you think we're going to find anything on this dig?" Jane asked in a shy voice.

Beck hesitated. It was never a good idea to be negative at the start of a dig, it could jinx the whole thing. "I have a good feeling about this site. We'll have a discussion this afternoon about how we're going to tackle it and then have a drive around and look at the whole area. The large-scale map might—"

"I'll get it," Dina interrupted and dashed into the house. A moment later she was back, red-faced and flustered. "Where is it?"

"On the floor in my room, by the window."

She hurried off again. It was like having a puppy, Beck thought, only this one had an ulterior motive.

Dina glanced around Beck's bedroom. She needed as much information about him as she could get. "*Know your man*" took a whole chapter in her book. His room was tidy. That was so impressive. He'd put his clothes away. Fabulous. He'd made the bed. Brilliant. She sighed. This got better by the minute. A tidy guy. She didn't like housework. He'd do it for her.

The map was on the floor on top of neat piles of booklets and sheets about the dig. She spotted Versace aftershave—good taste, and a Manchester United sticker on his bag—well, he couldn't be perfect. A Dictaphone lay next to his laptop. Dina had heard him speaking into it a few times, vague mutterings relating to the dig. She hesitated and then picked it up, rewound it a short way and pressed play. Beck's voice was quite clear.

"Septic tank. Outfit for Saturday. Check effect if liver ruptures. Price for gall bladders in China? What use for a bear's penis?"

Dina shuddered and switched it off. What the hell was that about?

* * * * *

Although Flick, stuffed with Sunday lunch, had intended to have a sleep that afternoon, when she saw the length of the grass she winced. She'd toyed for a while with the idea of getting a goat, until Josh pointed out you couldn't be sure they'd be satisfied with the grass. Left unattended they'd probably devour every flower and half the patio furniture before they started on the house. Given Flick's abysmal record with animals, she'd end up with the only woman-eating goat in the country and wake to find herself minus a hand. So no goat, or sheep, because apart from the incident at Hartington Hall, a farmer had once told her they had a tendency to commit suicide by thinking themselves dead when they were bored. How sad was that?

Usually when Josh heard her dragging the mower out of the shed, he offered to do the lawn for her. Flick would protest, Josh would argue and she'd give way. But Josh was out and Kirsten was cleaning her room, so unless she could attract the attention of a passing rambler, Flick was on her own.

She almost dislocated her shoulder pulling on the cord to start the engine. After five minutes of frantic tugging she had to lie down on the grass. Flick looked up at the clouds and wondered if Josh could mow by moonlight. Or had she at last found a use for the strappy contraption that attached a torch to your head? Bought by her for her father, for a Christmas they would never share and still sitting in its shrink wrapping in the garage. Flick thought about what her Dad would have said if he'd seen her mowing the lawn in the dark and smiled.

"Are you dead?" Kirsten shouted from an upstairs window.

"Almost."

"There's a button you have to press to prime the engine."

That's what she'd forgotten. "Come and show me?"

"I'm not falling for that," Kirsten called back.

Moments later the air was full of the most irritating sound of the summer. The mower dragged Flick around the lawn. She started going round the edge and then set off diagonally. A few reasonably straight lines became intermingled with several more that weren't. When she switched off the machine to empty the grass box, Kirsten gave a loud cough.

"Can't we have those nice neat lines like Josh makes?"

"I thought if I just did the highest bits, I wouldn't have to do the whole thing."

"Think again," Kirsten shouted.

Flick stared at the lawn and sighed. It looked a little like her hair before Kirsten sorted it out.

The exact moment she finished, Josh appeared on the patio carrying two glasses of wine.

"Trying to make me redundant?" he asked.

"Josh, if I get married I want you living in the spare room," Flick said. "In fact why don't I marry you? Save this entire hassle of searching for a soul mate. I mean, you're tall, fair and handsome. I can give way on the dark because you have your own teeth. What more do I need?"

Josh laughed and handed her a glass. "Pasta for dinner?"

"Why am I still looking?" Flick dropped to one knee. "Josh, will you marry me?"

"No. You ask me every week and the answer is always the same. Talking of soul mates, Kirsten's Mr. Perfect has arrived."

Flick didn't miss the tightening of Josh's mouth. She dropped into the chair beside him and sipped the cold wine.

"Has he? He never offered to give me a hand with the lawn. The bastard probably whisked Kirsten straight upstairs."

Josh muttered something that sounded like a growl.

The fact that Josh couldn't stand to be in the same room as Pierce convinced Flick the guy was a loser. Pierce telling Kirsten she looked lovely came after he'd told her what to wear, right down to her shoes. He'd so undermined her confidence, Kirsten's first thought was now whether Pierce would approve, rather than whether she liked it herself. He also had a habit of correcting whatever Kirsten said, which drove Flick wild. Kirsten worshipped Pierce so that should have been it, but it wasn't.

"Did you have a good weekend?" Flick asked.

"Fine."

"Parents still speaking to you?"

"Yes, but not to each other. As usual."

"Going out with Sadie tonight?"

"No."

Flick leaned forward and stared into his eyes. "So, do you want to whisk me upstairs?" It had been so long since anyone had held her, a tiny bit of her hoped he might say yes.

"No." Josh smiled. "But thank you for asking."

"You're welcome." Flick sat back.

"Been weeding as well?"

"No, why?"

"There's a gap in the front garden. I've been meaning to pull up that clump of Rosebay Willowherb for ages."

Flick winced. "It's a weed?"

"A flowering weed."

"Ah, well it's now sitting in a pot on Kirsten's mother's window sill."

He laughed. "So what else has happened while I've been gone?"

"Start cooking and I'll tell you a story about a sheep."

Chapter Seven

When Beck walked into the kitchen at 7:30 on Monday morning the house was silent. He'd scheduled everyone to be up and ready to leave by 8:00 and suspected they were all still in bed. Last night they'd walked down to the pub. Beck had said he wasn't going to go but when Dina announced she'd stay with him, he'd changed his mind. Of course Dina changed her mind, too. Beck had drunk a couple of beers, but Dina and the three boys never had an empty glass in front of them. No wonder students were broke, the amount they spent on alcohol. The boys had drunk themselves stupid. Literally, in the case of Ross who'd tried to kiss Dina and in return received a pair of bruised bollocks. Ross walked back to the house bent over like a coat hook. Beck had difficulty not laughing.

He switched on the kettle and pulled a mug from the cupboard. He jumped when the door opened but Jane came in. Dina had made another attempt to get into his room last night, managing to move the chest of drawers he'd used as a barricade. She was stronger than she looked.

Jane smiled. "Good morning."

"Good morning. I suppose it would be foolish of me to think the others are outside waiting by the van. We might as well have some toast."

They managed to leave the house at 8:30, but Beck had to turn round twice, once for tablets for Dina's headache and the second time for hayfever pills for Matt, though it didn't escape Beck's notice Matt also emerged with an iPod. Only Jane seemed to show anything remotely resembling enthusiasm. The guys all looked as though he was dragging them to the depths of hell. Dina's enthusiasm was for entirely the wrong thing. She stayed much too close, staring into his eyes and hanging on his every word without listening to a bloody thing he said. His own pet leech in full makeup.

Celia stood waiting when Beck pulled up at the rear of the hall. He'd already scouted out the site, so he knew where they needed to stake out the plot, but he guessed Celia would want to inspect the group she'd allowed onto her land. She looked distinctly unhappy at the sight of what crawled from the vehicle.

All but one looked as though they'd spent the last three days sleeping rough at a pop festival. Dina was immaculate in brilliant white shorts and a white cropped top that exposed a line of tanned flesh. Beck had spotted knotted strands at the back of her neck, which led him to suspect she wore a bikini. She had a bulging backpack on her shoulder and brand new Timberland boots on her feet and if it hadn't have been for her footwear, she could have been off for a day at the beach. The others, as instructed, wore old jeans, tatty t-shirts and well-used footwear. Jane was the only one with a hat. She also sported a t-shirt that read "Archaeologists do it in holes". Beck liked her style.

Spending the first day of a dig with the majority of your workers nursing a hangover was not uncommon. In fact, Beck couldn't think of an occasion when that hadn't happened. So he'd devoted part of yesterday to explaining in precise detail what he wanted them to achieve by the end of the first day. He wasn't being too ambitious. He had a lot of experience of first days and understood how desperate they were to dig a hole in the ground, but the correct preparation was essential. You had to treat each site as though you might uncover a treasure the British Museum would go ape-shit to own, otherwise you got sloppy and it was easy to lose or damage vital evidence.

Now they stood on the site, the five in front of him, Beck lowered his expectations. Matt had his eyes closed. Ross looked as though he was about to throw up. Pravit was throwing up and the walk from the Hall to the field, which was no distance at all, and had so exhausted Dina she dropped down on the grass. On top of a towel, Beck noticed.

"So, now that we're here, give me your opinions on the benefits of vertical as opposed to horizontal digging," Beck said.

And waited. The only one with their gaze anywhere other than the ground or in Dina's case eyes closed, was Jane. She stared at him, desperate he ask her. Her hand twitched as though she'd like to shoot it up in the air. He knew she should be the last one to ask, just as he'd always been the last.

Beck turned to Matt. "What do you think?"

"Horizontal," Matt muttered.

Probably because he needed to lie down. "Why is that?"

"We can cover more ground, so we know we're digging in the right place," Matt said.

"We're looking for Roman artifacts. Anything interesting is probably going to be deeper," Jane pointed out.

"Oh, yeah," Matt said. "Vertical then."

Beck forced back the snippy comment trying to slide though his gritted teeth and gave up.

"Right, after we've set up, you can spend the next couple of hours playing with the magnetometers and the other equipment. I want measurements of soil resistivity. Two of you work with probes and then compare your results. You can choose whether to mark the site off before or after you do the survey."

He knew what he'd rather they did, but they had to find things out for themselves. The site needed to be laid out in accurate grids, turf removed with care, tent set up, diagrams drawn, jobs allocated, decisions made over where to start, and so forth. Beck was there to supervise and monitor but he didn't need to watch them every moment of the day. He intended to get on with writing his book.

* * * * *

Flick drove to the back of Hartington Hall and parked next to a rusty minivan. She thought of Beck and sighed. Two minutes before nine. Celia was desperate for her to be late so she could give her a lecture about unreliability, fecklessness and Flick's lack of moral fiber, spicing the criticism with a raft of other denigrating comments. Any excuse to insult her, but Flick was never late. She knocked as the clock inside struck the hour.

Henry opened the door and beamed. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Pharzuph."

"Ah, the angel of lust and fornication. Well chosen."

Flick scowled. "Damn it, Henry, do you spend all day checking the devil's family tree?"

She'd scoured the Internet for the names of unusual devils, but not yet caught him out. He was a very clever man. She had no idea why he'd married such a horrible woman.

"You mustn't keep writing me love letters," Flick teased as he handed her the familiar sheet of scented paper covered in Celia's flowery writing.

"You're not going to love me when you see what she wants you to do."

Flick ran her eyes down the list of jobs their regular help declined. Handwashing a week's worth of crystal glassware, polishing the silver and dusting the Royal Doulton figurines and animals. In Flick's house everything went into the washing machine or dishwasher, including the ornaments. It made life much easier, though so far she'd melted a salad spinner, warped a spatula into an art exhibit and had a bit of an accident with Stef's Armani jumper. While Flick worked she was also expected to look after Lady C's mother, Gertrude. In many ways the worst job of all.

Top of the list was the silver. Flick groaned. Her least favorite chores, in part because Celia insisted her mother counted each piece Flick cleaned, presumably so she couldn't help herself to a candlestick or two. Flick had long since given up being offended by Lady C, but spending time with her poisonous mother was like being attached to a machine that drained all your energy until you lost the will to live.

"When did the archaeologists arrive?" Flick asked.

"Just before you. Celia is out there telling them how to dig a hole."

Flick thought about Beck, felt a shot of desire sweep through her and squashed it by smiling at Henry. If she didn't want more of Beck's black looks, the best thing she could do was avoid him.

Gertrude was already in the dining room, sitting with a tray of tea and toast. As usual the *Times* newspaper lay open on the table in front of her. Flick had never seen her read a word of it.

"How are you, Mrs. Merriman?" she asked in a loud voice.

"I'm ninety-two years old. How do you think I am?" Gertrude said.

You're eighty-four, you old bat. How could anyone be more erroneously named? Mrs. Misery would be more like it. Her mouth turned down in a permanent half-circle. A smile would have cracked her face and let her jaw fall off.

"You don't look a day over eighty-five." Flick kept her voice loud, wondering if this morning's problem would be a lump, cough, spot or worse.

"You might think it is, but I don't."

Flick wondered what she'd thought she'd said. Gertrude was deaf when she wanted to be.

"I can feel a draught." Gertrude gave Flick an accusing look.

Flick looked around but she'd closed the door. No matter where the woman sat, there was always a bloody draught and always Flick's fault. There were no open windows, no open doors. The house was already like an oven with the morning sun streaming through the windows.

"Oh dear, have you had a bad start to the day?" Flick cursed as she realized she'd asked a question. She pulled on a pair of cotton gloves and began to lift the silverware onto the table.

"I was up half the night coughing. The sleeping tablet didn't work, so I read for a bit and then I took another half a tablet. Then I remembered I hadn't taken my water tablet so I had to come all the way downstairs. The dogs heard the stair-lift and started to bark and that made me jump. I twisted something in my side and the pain is unbearable, I think part of my intestine is wrapped around my liver. I had such a job finding a comfortable way to lie in bed. It's sickening. Everything happens to me."

Flick began to apply the polish as Gertrude went on and on. When she'd first started as house-slave, Flick had encouraged her to talk because she thought she was lonely, but now Flick was perpetually bombarded with intricate details of every medical complaint Gertrude had ever had or thought she'd had, plus those of the rest of the family. Flick knew all about Henry's constipation, Celia's leaky waterworks and Giles' warts. In addition, Gertrude's continual whining criticism of all the work Flick did in the house had destroyed any interest in trying to engage her in conversation. That hadn't stopped Gertrude, whose memory for unpleasant, mind-churning details of her bodily functions was boundless, though she seemed unable to remember she'd already told Flick the exact same thing the week before.

"And then I had explosive diarrhea," Gertrude said in triumph.

When she paused, Flick realized she was expected to say something. She forced out some noncommittal grunt hoping it sounded sympathetic.

"I blame that rubbish those caterers produced on Saturday night. Celia served up leftovers for lunch yesterday. It went right through me."

Flick groaned. Celia didn't pay her enough.

"You need to do that one again," Gertrude said. "There's a smudge on the blade."

There were other ways to put smudges on blades, Flick thought as she picked up the knife.

When Flick went into the drawing room to start dusting Lady C's huge collection of porcelain animals, the talking medical encyclopedia followed, wheeling her walking frame at an impressive speed across the parquet floor. Gertrude had been in the middle of explaining her wayward blood pressure and Flick knew she wasn't going to stop until she'd finished. As Gertrude morphed into her nasal drip story, Flick rearranged the Royal Doulton in a more interesting way.

"Felicity," Celia called.

"We're in here," Gertrude screeched.

Celia stared in open-mouthed horror at her porcelain collection, her face changing from pink, to red and then deep purple. Flick wondered if she could make Celia pop.

"What have you done?" Celia gasped.

"Dusted them."

"But you've moved them. They're...doing things."

"Doing what?" Flick tried to sound innocent.

"My 'Prancing Arab Palomino' looks as if it's about to...to mount my 'Watering Hole Leopard'. And look at the pigs."

Flick turned to the compromising tableau she'd created and bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself laughing.

"Sorry. Shall I rearrange them?" she asked.

"No, leave them. I'll do it later. I need you to help me take tea down to the archaeologists."

When they reached the kitchen Celia handed Flick the apron she'd worn on Saturday night.

"Put this on."

Flick wore a short green skirt and a white top covered in pink elephants. She didn't think she would pass for a maid, but she tied the apron round her waist without a word and followed Celia down the path to the far end of the estate. Flick struggled with a heavy tray of cups, saucers, milk, sugar and biscuits while Celia carried a large stainless steel jug.

* * * * *

Beck, Matt and Ross struggled to erect the tent in the sweltering heat. There was only the faintest of breezes. Beck had just received a text from Rich. They'd crossed the Italian border and it was raining. Almost enough to make Beck smile.

"Don't put that end in there, for God's sake," Beck yelled. "Those two pieces don't go together."

"I can't get it out now," Matt whined.

Beck swore under his breath. He'd have done it quicker on his own.

"Ross, keep your hand on it. Press harder."

"I am. It's hurting. I can't push any harder."

"Screw it in quickly," Beck said.

"Like this?" Matt asked.

"Yes." Beck gritted his teeth. "Faster, before I have to let go and it comes out again. Go on, screw faster or I'll have—" Beck thought he heard a familiar snigger.

"Alexander darling, we've brought you some tea. I know you told me you can cater for yourselves but until you set everything up I thought you'd appreciate a little refreshment."

"Thanks, Celia. That's great," Beck called from under the green canvas.

"Ohh tea," someone yelled.

Matt and Ross left before Beck could tell them not to.

"Pour it out, Felicity," Celia said.

When Beck heard her name, he let go of the pole he held and came out from under the sagging awning. The tent collapsed behind him.

Flick kept her eyes away from Beck. She didn't need any more pangs of lust disabling her. She hadn't been sure if they'd want tea, it was so hot, but everyone took a cup including Celia. The plate of biscuits disappeared in seconds. Flick realized Celia intended to stand and chat for a while and wondered whether she was supposed to go back. When she saw Beck edge away from Celia and move in her direction, she wished she'd been quicker. She stepped to one side, hoping he was heading for someone else, but he stopped next to her.

She cursed her traitorous heart for bounding like an excited puppy.

"I thought you'd lost your job," Beck said in a quiet voice.

"Lady C fires me almost every week."

"I didn't say anything to Celia about you and Giles."

Flick morphed into a pissed-off hyena. Hackles up, she growled her response. "He was drunk. I was trying to push him away not drag him into bed. Anyway that's not why I was fired."

Beck winced. "I didn't want you to think I'd said something to Celia. I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions."

Flick looked at him in surprise.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked.

"Yes." YesYesYesYes.

"So why were you fired?"

"Skirt too short. Top too tight. Mouth too big."

As Flick watched him laugh, she caught sight of the blonde from the supermarket racing up to plant herself between them.

"Thank you for the tea," she said in a simpering voice. "Mrs. Hartington is lucky to have good staff. My mother finds domestic help very hard to come by. Have you worked here since you left school?"

"Dina!" Beck snapped.

"Promise to say nothing," Flick said, in an accent she hoped sounded East-European. "I taken from home in Transylvania when I eleven and sold to that woman and husband. I am slave. She treat me so cruel but her husband he love me, you know what I mean?"

Dina looked alarmed.

"Perhaps I come work for your mother? Your father rich?"

Dina backed away and Beck turned red in a struggle not to laugh.

"What a lovely girl," Flick said to him, back in her usual accent. "More tea?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks."

"You're very honored, you know," Flick whispered. "These are the second-best cups."

"Not the best?"

"Those never leave the house. They're reserved for paid-up members of the Conservative Party or for Prince Charles if he should ever drop in. Though probably not if he's accompanied by Camilla."

"Didn't you get a drink?" Beck asked.

"I only allowed chipped mug," Flick said back in her odd accent.

Beck laughed.

"So tell me, why is Princess Dina glaring at me?" Flick asked.

He looked toward the blonde who smiled a little too late.

"She appears to have a crush on me."

"It must be wonderful to have such a beautiful stick insect as a pet."

Flick looked at Dina and tried to imagine her and Beck together. Then shook the image from her head. She glanced at the field behind her. Ribbons of tape stretched in all directions and the tent lay in a crumbled heap.

"So how's it going?" Flick tried to appear interested and intelligent, instead of incandescent with lust.

"Awful, not a straight line in sight, but it's no worse than I expected," Beck said.

"It might help if they all started from the same point. They're never going to meet in the middle."

"I know. They think they measured so accurately that they will."

Flick smiled. "So you're going to let them carry on and then make them do it all over again?"

"Yep."

"Isn't that a bit cruel?"

He shrugged. "It's the only way they'll learn."

"You're into S&M then?"

"I could be."

His response was so quick, Flick's face went hot.

"Felicity, stop bothering Professor Beckett and take everything back to the house," Celia said. "He has important work to do and I'm not paying you to chat."

"Yes, I have a prancing horse to dust," Flick said. "Can I stop by later and see how you're getting on?"

"Please do and bring more biscuits." He gave her a warm smile and Flick fell deeper.

Chapter Eight

Flick didn't get a chance to go back to the dig. Lady C kept her working with a never-ending list of jobs because the Hall had to be perfect for the wedding. Celia breezed in as she finished cleaning the windows in the conservatory.

"Did your radar detect I was about to exhale?" Flick muttered.

"Felicity, I need you to take the dogs for a walk before you leave. Henry called to say he's gone to a meeting in Leeds and won't be back until late."

"Okay."

It wasn't really okay. Flick struggled with all animals, not just sheep. It was as though they took one look and were determined to demonstrate their superior position in the evolutionary scale. She never reached out to pat puppies or tickle cats because any such action resulted in her next having to reach for the antiseptic. She'd always looked on dogs in particular as sets of sharp teeth mounted on four legs. Or three legs in the case of Butch, the dog who'd stood patiently on the stand at Otley show, wagging his stubby tail as a long line of youngsters queued to stroke him, only to bite seven-year-old Flick the moment she came within reach.

The Hartington dogs were two young and willful Irish Wolfhounds called Paris and Hilton—named by Giles without either of his parents realizing where he'd had the inspiration. They were the size of small horses and had tails that raised bruises when they wagged in her vicinity. Flick walked the other way whenever she saw them bounding toward her.

"Keep them on their leads and don't interfere with the dig," Celia said as Flick tiptoed into their yard.

Flick had no intention of letting them run free because she knew full well they wouldn't come back when she called, but even attaching their leads proved a challenge. She was afraid of them despite Henry's constant reassurance that they were as soft as him. The dogs had been lying quietly in the yard but transformed to hyperactive maniacs the moment they saw the familiar strips of leather. As Flick tussled with Paris' collar, Hilton pushed her head up her skirt. Flick clamped her knees together and tried to ignore the snuffling nose pressing between her thighs. What was it with these creatures?

Several minutes later, soaked with perspiration and dog slobber, Flick had both animals in harness, raring to go. She took a lead in each hand and hoped they both wanted to go in the same direction otherwise she wasn't going to stay in one piece for long.

Flick had not intended to go toward the dig but the dogs had other ideas. She tried digging her heels into the ground but only succeeded in performing a few yards of grass skiing as each dog tried to race ahead of the other. She shouted and they took it for encouragement so she shut up. It was definitely a case of them taking her for the walk and not the other way round.

As she came within sight of the large green tent, Flick felt a moment of concern. She didn't want Beck to think she was desperately interested in him, even though she was both desperate and interested. She tugged hard to pull the dogs back, but one leash slipped from her grasp. Hilton sprang free with Paris doubling her efforts to follow. Flick yelled at Hilton and the dog clearly translated her shouts into, "go faster toward that interesting maze", sending Paris the same message. Flick found herself heading straight toward the lines of yellow tape.

Beck emerged from the tent as Hilton tore through the site. Paris broke free to follow her but not before dragging Flick first to her knees, then her stomach as the lead slithered through her fingers. Flick lay prone on the ground watching as Beck grabbed Paris and someone else grabbed Hilton. The dogs had tape wrapped all over them and looked as though they'd crossed several finishing lines.

Both hooligans sat wagging their tails while they were unwrapped and meekly walked to heel as they were led away from the dig. Then a shadow fell over her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Beck stood with his arms crossed, a glare on his face.

"Sorry." Flick sat up and unwrapped a piece of tape from her ankle. Blood trickled from a cut on her knee and she clamped her hand over it. "I'm sorry. I couldn't hold them. They –"

"We've lost almost an entire day's work."

Beck looked magnificent when he was angry. He seemed taller and darker, but maybe that was because she sat on the ground and he loomed over her like the Grim Reaper. Since her knees went weak whenever she was near him, perhaps sitting down was a good thing. God, if she fancied someone who shouted at her, she must have it bad.

"Sorry," she repeated. "I couldn't help it."

"Just get those damn dogs out of here."

Flick stood up and walked over to a girl holding both leads in one hand. Making it look easy. Aarrgh. Once Flick had the leads she pulled but the dogs refused to move. She pleaded, shouted, tried to bribe them with promises of forbidden treats like peeing on Lady C's lawn or a whole packet of doggy chocolate buttons, but they ignored her. She could feel several pairs of eyes watching, not least from inside the house, where no doubt Gertrude had viewed the entire proceedings through her binoculars. Finally, to Flick's intense relief, Paris decided to move and Hilton followed.

"I wonder if she cut herself on something interesting," Jane said. "Can I start in that square?"

"Cut?" Beck watched Flick's retreating back.

"She cut her knee. You didn't notice the blood?"

No, he hadn't. He'd been too angry. Shit.

"What sort of dogs were they?" Dina emerged from behind the tent. "They were huge. You're so brave, Beck."

As Beck watched, the dogs abruptly changed direction and dragged Flick away from the house toward the woods. He'd been too hasty. Again. She hadn't deliberately wrecked the site.

"Can we redo it tomorrow?" Dina asked.

"It ought to be finished today." Beck thought it was a good thing Isobel hadn't arrived. She'd hardly be impressed they'd only managed to erect the tent. But when he heard the murmurings of discontent from the troops, Beck capitulated.

"Sod it, get all the equipment locked up and we'll go to the pub."

Beck left them to it and went after Flick. As he neared the bottom end of the wood where she'd entered, he saw her running out of the top, both dogs chasing her. At least they were heading for the house and not the dig, though there was nothing left to wreck except the tent. Beck turned back and went to get the last of his gear.

* * * * *

"Down, Paris. Down, Hilton," Giles commanded as the dogs bounded toward him across the gravel.

Both dogs dropped as if they'd been shot. Flick wanted to shoot them. Then Giles. She bent over gasping, trying to get her breath back.

He grinned. "Been for a run?"

"Sod off, Giles," Flick panted.

"What happened to your leg?"

Flick looked down. A trail of blood ran from her knee to her ankle. "Nothing."

"Come inside and let me rub you down with a wet towel."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Can't I persuade you to come for that drink?"

"No. You'd have a better time with these two bitches."

Flick handed Giles the leads and walked off.

Chapter Nine

Flick poked her head out of the kitchen when she heard the door slam and saw Kirsten stamp upstairs.

"Bad day?" Flick whispered to Josh.

"Yes," Kirsten screamed. "And it's your bloody fault."

"What have I done now?" Flick kept her voice low.

"You shrank my shirt," Kirsten yelled from her room.

Josh pushed Flick into the kitchen.

"Has she suddenly developed batlike hearing?" Flick asked.

"She's just excellent at anticipating."

Kirsten stormed in, a shirt clasped in her hand. "Right. Look at the shirt I'm wearing. See how it reveals a line of flesh at my midriff?"

"Very sexy, isn't it Josh?" Flick said.

He bit his lip.

"I'm a lawyer. I'm not supposed to look sexy. I got hauled into HR today because a partner complained I was showing my stomach. And it's the same flipping guy who addresses all his comments directly to a woman's breasts, the hypocrite."

Kirsten unfastened the shirt she wore. "Hold this." She thrust it toward Josh then yanked on the other shirt. "Now look," she demanded, fastening the buttons. "Same make, same size. One borrowed and washed by Flick last week. The other never touched by Flick."

"Ooops," Flick said. "Sorry."

"How do you manage it? Everything you touch, you shrink."

"Not quite everything," Flick said. "I'll have you know some things get much bigger."

Josh guffawed. Kirsten glared at him and he put his cross face back on again. Then Kirsten laughed.

"You're hopeless, Flick."

"I'm sorry. God, you have no idea how many times I've said that today."

"What else have you done?" Josh asked.

"How long have you got?"

"I'll cook. You talk," Kirsten said.

As she told them what had happened, Flick felt the chance of anything positive growing between her and Beck, shrink back to nothing. She picked listlessly at her burger.

"Okay, I accept you've blown it with Beck," Kirsten said, "but we have to get you out of this funk. Find you a man."

"That's so the pair of you don't feel guilty when you go out with Pierce and Sadie and leave me on my own." Flick stabbed her burger.

"No," said Kirsten at the same time that Josh said, "Yes."

Kirsten helped herself to more salad. "You need to get out more."

"I'm never here as it is."

"You know what I mean. Not work. You need to go on dates. Doesn't she, Josh."

Flick glanced at Josh whose lips were pressed even more tightly together. He knew when to keep quiet.

"You could try enrolling for a college class again," Kirsten said. "I brought the booklet home. It's around somewhere. They start next month."

Flick groaned. Last year, she and Kirsten had signed up for every taster evening class at Ilkley College with the idea that they could check out the talent before paying. They'd come to the conclusion the only men they were likely to meet had signed up to get away from their wives for the night. Even "The Art of Drystone Walling" was full of women.

"There are no suitable men left in the entire world," Flick said. "They're all taken."

She began to clear the kitchen table and load the dishwasher.

Kirsten tsked. "You're too lazy to look. You want some hunk to appear out of thin air and sweep you off to his chateau in France."

"A penthouse in Leeds would do," Flick said. "But you're right. I want to be picked, not do the picking. I never make the right choice."

Even before Marcus there had been a succession of disappointments, guys who had started out with such promise and they'd all let her down, every one of them shallow as a puddle.

"I mean, think about the guys I've dated." Flick chewed her nail. "Ben took me to that swingers' party and dumped me when I refused to go in. Mike was thirty-three years old, still living with his parents and had to ring them to tell them he was going to be late, and Julian made up some lie about it not being me it was him. Although when I found the leather gear in the wardrobe I knew he was right. People who hide whips in secret places need to be avoided, unless they're called Indiana Jones. And we all know Marcus had to go to the other side of the world to get away from me. Apart from the fact that they were all tall, dark and handsome bastards, the only common factor is me. So clearly I must be doing something wrong."

"You must meet lots of guys in all your jobs," Kirsten said. "I mean the ones at the gym and the lido are already half-naked. You have a head start. You know what they're

like under their clothes." She wiped the table down and Josh lifted his glass out of the way.

"Is that what women are looking for?" he asked. "Someone with a good body?"

"Preferably the body of a god," Kirsten said.

Josh paused with his fork part way to his mouth with the last roast potato.

"Only not too muscular. More a sort of a Ralph Lauren or Calvin Klein god," Kirsten added.

The potato dropped back on his plate.

"How about money? Do you think women want a guy to be rich?" Josh asked.

"Having money is nice, but not essential," Kirsten said. "There has to be a physical attraction."

"Right, so good-looking is essential," Josh muttered. "How about intelligent? A gentleman?" He followed Kirsten through to the lounge.

"Forceful," Kirsten suggested.

"Take me, Gilbert," Flick shrieked, throwing herself over the back of the couch.

"No, strike forceful," Kirsten said. "Strong, sort of masterful plus he has to be successful in what he does. I don't want someone whining all the time." She slumped on the chair facing the couch.

"And hair," Flick added. "Hair is most important. It has to be on his head and not his back and it needs to go top of the list." She wriggled around to a sitting position.

Josh looked at them carefully and Flick chuckled.

"Venus moment?" he asked.

"Yes, Marvin," Flick said.

"Be serious for a minute and describe your ideal man," Josh asked.

Flick took a deep breath. "I want someone who likes walking on a beach in the winter as well as lying on one in the summer. A guy who'll read *The Time Traveler's Wife* and cry but who'd queue in the rain for the next *Predator* movie. Someone who'll watch *CSI* without fainting but needs me to take a splinter out of his finger. Plus he has to be excellent in bed."

"Watching *CSI* without fainting is going a bit far," Josh said and sat next to her.

"Yep, you're right." Flick struck her forehead in mock dismay. "I'd forgotten the one time you watched it, you threw up in the loo."

"That was a dodgy curry," Josh said in indignation.

"Ignore everything we've said. If the sex is fabulous, anything else is a bonus." Flick sidled closer to Josh. "Sadie must think you're awesome in bed."

That earned her a swipe from a cushion. "Ha bloody ha."

"So describe your ideal woman," Kirsten said.

Flick watched as Josh stared straight at Kirsten. "Kind eyes, dark hair, good-hearted, a sort of gentle, squashy person."

"Squashy?" Kirsten repeated. "What does that mean?"

"Soft. I like soft," he blustered. "Not bony."

"So Sadie is not a twenty-one-year-old blonde pencil with breasts like Easter eggs?" Flick asked.

"No."

"We'll see if you're lying on Saturday, when we meet her." Kirsten raised her eyebrows.

Josh continued to gaze at Kirsten who was too busy scouring the personal ads in the paper to notice. Flick felt as though she'd opened her eyes for first time. Josh fancied Kirsten. She couldn't believe she'd not realized before.

"See, a whole page of men wanting women, women wanting women, men wanting men, women wanting men, men wanting two women, oooh men wanting three women," Kirsten said.

"Where?" Josh reached for the paper.

"Well, I might have made that last one up." Kirsten giggled.

"You already have three women," Flick said. "Numbers One and Two cook and clean for you, and we're nice to you. Three presumably does the other more personal things, like cut your toe nails. What more could you possibly need?"

"Don't answer that, Josh," Kirsten said.

"His bed's not big enough." Flick smiled. "Or strong enough."

"Buy me a new one, landlady."

"That would be encouraging you to fulfill your deviant sexual fantasies," Flick teased.

She saw him glance again at Kirsten who was running her finger down the ads. Flick wondered what she could do.

"Look here's one. Good-looking farmer. GSOH. 30. Loves countryside and outdoor pursuits." Kirsten stopped reading.

"No," Flick said in a firm voice. "I'm not good with animals and how could I be interested in a farmer who has to tell me he loves the countryside? Plus, outdoor pursuits could mean anything. Naked cross-country running or snorkeling in boggy ditches. If these people are describing themselves truthfully, how come they haven't found 'the one'? What are they not saying? They wear plastic in bed? They can only have an orgasm if they call you Mummy?"

Josh laughed so hard he started to choke and Kirsten had to slap him on the back.

"You have to invite lots of guys from work to my party," Kirsten told Josh.

"There's no one from my office Flick would like."

"Hey, I'm not desperate," she protested. "I really don't mind being here on my own."

Kirsten leaped to her feet as a car pulled up outside. "That will be Pierce."

When she'd gone, Flick put her finger in her mouth and pretended to gag. Josh rolled his eyes. Pierce hardly acknowledged Josh, sneered at Flick's haphazard life and constantly picked fault with Kirsten—reasons enough to dislike him—but now Flick realized he had the woman Josh wanted, she was surprised Josh hadn't run him over with his car.

"What are you wearing that old thing for? It doesn't suit you."

Flick and Josh glanced at each other as Pierce's voice carried from the hall.

When the pair walked into the lounge, Flick felt Josh tense. Pierce ignored them. Flick knew he hadn't forgiven her for last weekend. He'd turned up shouting at Kirsten to sew the button back on his tux. Because she was in the middle of getting ready, Flick had done it. Until they'd got to the hotel for the meal and Pierce had donned his jacket, neither he nor Kirsten had realized Flick had used a green plastic button shaped like a frog and secured it with such strong thread, it couldn't be pulled off or cut off with a dinner knife. According to Kirsten, Pierce spent the evening with his arms crossed.

"Why are you wearing that revolting white shirt?" Flick asked Pierce. "It really doesn't suit you. Lime green would be much better."

He sneered.

"Do you give lessons in lip curling?" She laughed.

"Lost another job yet, Flick?" Pierce asked. "We could do with someone to clean our toilet."

"Sorry, but since you have it coming out both ends I couldn't cope with the pressure. Anyway with hair like yours I thought you were the resident toilet brush."

"Glass of wine?" Kirsten blurted.

Pierce turned on her again. "Don't pour it like that, Kirsten." He took the bottle from her and tilted the glass. "See? Now what can you tell me about this wine?"

He put the bottle behind his back. Kirsten stared at him, her eyes widening in discomfort.

"You've just drunk it, darling." Pierce looked at the three empty glasses on the coffee table. "Describe it."

"It was nice, er fruity," Kirsten mumbled and Pierce snorted.

Flick thought he had an aggravating laugh, a cross between an unhappy hyena and a donkey with a sore throat. She could have made another cutting comment to Pierce, but she wanted Kirsten to see him for the control freak he was. Maybe he had that narcissistic personality disorder and really believed he was Mr. Wonderful. Sadly, there was no cure, so Flick would have to help her friend dump him because it was becoming too painful to watch Kirsten collapsing from the brain down. Flick could almost see her self-esteem surging down her legs and pouring out through her silver toenails.

"Er," Kirsten muttered, "buttery?"

Pierce tsked.

Flick could see Josh biting his tongue. She guessed the temptation to tell Pierce to go find a sharp stick to sit on was itching to burst out of his mouth. But it was Flick who cracked.

"Oh fuck off, Pierce. It's four quid a bottle from Tesco and it's red. Enough said."

Pierce looked at her smugly. "Hardy's Stamp."

"You've just read the label," Flick said. "Don't come here and drink our wine and moan. If you don't like it, bring your own."

"Just because it's in your house, doesn't mean it's yours. When did you last buy a bottle of wine?" Pierce glared. "You're happy enough to drink someone else's but Kirsten says you never buy any. Let's go upstairs, sweetheart, and leave these two sad twats to play with each other."

Flick put her hand on Josh's knee to keep him sitting next to her as the pair left the lounge.

"He's not worth it," she said.

"He doesn't deserve Kirsten."

"True. So did you make Sadie up?"

Josh glanced at her but didn't answer the question. "Kirsten has the most fantastic eyes. Did you see her when she tried to get him to shut up? They blazed. And when he upset her, she looked so hurt. And when he was getting at you, I swear they turned darker." He sighed. "Don't worry about the wine, Flick. I bet Kirsten didn't say it in the way Pierce suggested."

"So you made Sadie up," Flick asked, undeflected.

He swallowed. "No, she exists. She works with me. She's just not my girlfriend."

"Why did you do it?"

"So Kirsten didn't think I was a complete loser. I suppose to see if she'd be jealous. It's a relief you know how I feel."

"How do you feel, Josh?"

"I love her." He gave a shy smile. "She's the most beautiful woman in the world. She makes me happy every time I see her. She's cute and kind and silly and fun and squashy and I want to spend the rest of my life looking after her."

A lump surged into Flick's throat. "Why don't you tell her?"

"I can't. She's going out with Pierce. She likes me as I am. A friend. Everything will change if she thinks I fancy her. Don't say anything, please."

"Take a risk, Josh. You're expecting the worst and that's crazy. You're pretending you don't want her and she doesn't want you so you won't be disappointed. Take a chance for once and tell her."

"What if she doesn't like me like that?"

"You're not giving her the opportunity to think of you 'like that' if you don't say anything."

He looked distraught. "I can't. I'm afraid."

Flick wasn't surprised. He'd obviously bottled this up for months. "Okay, but dump Sadie. That is something you can do. Then at least you're available."

"Right."

"Do it now and be gentle. Think about it, Kirsten will feel sorry for you. She'll want to give you a hug." Flick winked.

"Sadie's toast."

The phone rang. "Your turn," Flick said.

Josh picked up the receiver. A moment later, he grabbed the list, looked for the next response and checked his watch.

"Could you spell that?" he asked. "No, could you spell your name?"

Flick smiled. They'd all become so cheesed off with unwanted cold calls, largely some poor sod from Mumbai pretending to be Debbie or Alison from down the road, that they'd created a list of responses to use in turn. They timed how long it took before the person at the other end put down the phone with a monthly prize for the longest and shortest times.

"Where is the company exactly?" Josh asked. "And how long has it been in operation?" He smiled at Flick. "I think it sounds fabulous. I am lucky to have a mobile phone, don't you think? Do you have a mobile phone?...How long have you had one?...Do all your family have one?" Josh paused to let the telemarketer pose another question which he ignored. "What are you wearing?"

He put the phone down. "She hung up."

"You need to practice your seduction technique."

The phone rang again and Josh snatched at it. "What are you wear...Oh hi, Mum...I was just asking Flick what she was wearing to Kirsten's party."

"Nothing at all," Flick yelled loud enough for his mother to hear.

"No, Mum, she didn't mean that. Yes, she's a very nice girl."

* * * * *

Flick left the house at eleven dressed in her jeans and Josh's black shirt, her face smeared with camouflage makeup left over from Halloween. Unfortunately, it had started to go off, so it smelled rather weird and there were several lumps she hadn't been able to rub in. The overall effect was less marine commando and more disease-ridden plague victim. To think Grinstead's had thought her capable of subterfuge. Ha!

She stopped her mind wandering down that path. Flick had been disappointed to learn ostriches don't really bury their heads in the sand because she thought it was a

brilliant idea. She parked at the bottom of the lane well away from Hartington Hall. All she needed now was to be caught by the police and her day would be perfect.

The moon provided enough light to work by, but laying out the field with a grid of tape took longer than she'd expected. She fastened together the ripped ends with neat knots and stretched the yellow plastic between the metal pegs, measuring carefully so the distances were exact and all the squares true. Tucking a spare strip of the thick yellow tape in her back pocket, Flick moved up and down the field, feeling the tape fluttering behind her in the breeze.

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Henry went to close the curtains in the bedroom and froze. There was something in his field and it wasn't a person. It moved on all fours and had a long pale tail. Too big to be a cat. He pressed his nose against the glass. He'd heard rumors about the beast of Ilkley Moor but had always dismissed them as superstitious rubbish. In any case Ilkley Moor lay the other side of the valley. Just then, whatever prowled his land, reared up on its hind legs and Henry dragged the curtains across the window and staggered back to slump on the bed.

"Whatever's the matter?" Celia looked up from one of her romance paperbacks and glared.

"Nothing." If he told Celia she'd make him go out with the shotgun and he'd rather jump in bed, even though it was with her, and pull the covers over his head.

Flick stood up to stretch her aching back and surveyed her handiwork. She hoped it met with Beck's approval. Not that he'd ever know she'd done it. She crept back to her car, jealous of what they'd be doing for the next few weeks because even though most of their time would be spent sifting through piles of dirt, there was a chance of uncovering something exciting.

The weird thing was that Paris and Hilton were the reason Flick found the Samian fragment that brought Beck to the Hall. Paris had grabbed the squeaky mouse attached to Flick's key ring, wrenched the keys from her fingers and bolted off with Hilton in pursuit. Flick had caught Paris digging a hole for her treasure and the red pottery simply lay there in the soil.

Flick had known instantly it was Samian and understood the significance. She'd given it to Henry, but not thought much more about it other than wishing she could dig up the field in case a few valuable coins awaited discovery. When she'd found out Yorkshire University students were coming to do a summer dig, Flick wondered if Henry regretted she'd spotted it.

She'd always thought the artifact side of her history course at Birmingham had been more interesting than discussions on things like how the English Civil War affected pig breeding. Handling real historical pieces made Flick feel she was as close as she could get to an understanding of how people had lived and fought and loved. A truth lay in

physical remnants of a bygone age that was impossible to feel from words. But Flick did everything so fast, she wasn't sure she had the patience for archaeology.

By the time she got home, Josh and Kirsten were asleep and the house looked neat and tidy. Flick knew she was lucky. They paid their rent directly into her bank account, settled their share of the bills without query, didn't fight over who ate whose food and they were good company. When she remembered the house she'd shared in Birmingham, Flick shuddered. The roof leaked and mold gradually developed everywhere as water pouring in met the rising damp halfway up the stairs. Flick often had to dry her duvet with a hair drier before she could go to bed.

She'd shared with three guys who'd devised a juvenile game called "Find the dead mouse". One of them, Flick suspected Justin, the one with gills and the room in the basement, had discovered a desiccated mouse in the shed and had hidden it in Pete's trainer. Once it was found, it was hidden again. Flick hadn't thought she was part of the game until she discovered the mouse at the bottom of her tub of margarine. The boys paid for that disgusting prank. Big-time.

Flick bent over the sink to wash her face and wondered what Beck would say tomorrow when he saw the field. Might he guess it was her? Maybe if he spoke to her again, he'd smile and not scowl.

Chapter Ten

Dina was desperate. She'd steamed through her book of little hints and was running out of time to seduce Beck before Isobel arrived. Last night she'd kept topping up his wineglass over dinner and then slid into his bed while he'd been in the bathroom cleaning his teeth. Make it impossible for him to say no. But when he'd seen her, he wouldn't even come into the room. This morning she'd emerged for breakfast wearing her see-through top and he hadn't even blinked. Matt, on the other hand, had tipped his milk all over his bacon and eggs. He'd still eaten them.

When they reached the dig and found it had all been taped out again, Dina had been tempted to claim the credit. No one admitted doing it, and she half-opened her mouth before deciding she didn't want to get caught in a lie and instead tried to look coy without actually saying anything. She hoped she fooled Beck.

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Beck dreaded being in the house. He felt relatively safe from Dina while they were out in the field but he'd had enough of the fluttering eyelashes, strategic brushing of limbs against his and the see-through clothes. He hadn't missed the constipated cat look on Dina's face when he asked who'd returned to tape out the dig. He thought she was the least likely to have gone back on her own at night, and if she had, she'd have made damn sure he knew it was her. She was making life uncomfortable for everyone. He decided as soon as Isobel arrived he'd take Giles up on his offer and move into the gatehouse with him and Willow.

It was another morning of slow progress. Matt and Ross nursed hangovers and worked at the speed of comatose koalas. Dina spent thirty minutes doing her exercises and then cried for another fifteen when she broke a fingernail. Beck was tempted to shoot her and put her out of her misery. When he went to fetch a spade from the van, he returned to find Matt and Ross asleep in the tent and Dina lying in the sun in her bikini, reading a book. Beck thought it was unlikely that *Their Last Sizzling Summer* would add to her knowledge of Roman artifacts.

Eventually he cajoled them all into working. He'd just settled into writing chapter seven, where his hero discovered his girlfriend was the latest victim of the serial killer, when he heard screaming.

"Oh God, I've been bitten. Oh God, help me, help me."

Beck rushed out of the tent. Matt danced around, howling and clutching his hand to his chest. There were adders on the moor so Beck kept his eyes peeled as he ran over.

"Where is it?" he asked.

The rest of the group tiptoed around, scouring the ground.

"Stand still everyone. Which way did it go?" Beck had no fondness for snakes but he didn't want anyone to step on it.

"It's still there."

Beck registered a large worm but was looking for an anaconda. His gaze moved on, scanned the surrounding area and then moved back to the worm.

"Where did it bite you?" He took hold of Matt's trembling arm.

Matt was almost hyperventilating. "I-I..."

"Calm down. Breathe slowly. In. Out. You're going to be fine. Now, where did it bite you?"

"Didn't...actually...bite," Matt gulped. "Sort...of...slithered on me."

"It's a worm." Jane looked down. "Worms don't bite."

"I'm...helminthophobic," Matt mumbled.

"What? What the hell does that mean?" Beck yelled. "You were supposed to tell me all your medical stuff."

"Acute fear of worms," Matt gasped.

Ross and Dina burst out laughing. Beck turned and glared. "Dina, perhaps you'd like to pick up the worm and throw it well away from Matt."

"I'm not touching it. I must be hell-minty-phobic too," she said.

"Helminthophobic," Matt whispered.

"Whatever." Dina walked off.

As Pravit picked it up, Matt gagged. Beck took him into the tent, sat him down and talked to him quietly for a few minutes until he was calm again. He wondered how Matt thought he'd survive archaeology with an acute fear of worms.

This was the slowest group Beck had ever led. He now understood why Matt had done so little. He'd watched him using a teaspoon to move minute quantities of soil and put his caution down to thoroughness, not sheer terror. Dina was so determined not to get her nails dirty she'd taken to wearing a pair of washing up gloves, but they were far too large and fell off when she reached down. Ross had dug a bigger hole than any of the others but if there had been anything significant to find, it was likely buried in the mound of earth he'd excavated and in more pieces than previously.

Only Pravit and Jane worked in the way Beck hoped for, both methodical and careful. Having loosened the dirt in their sector with trowels, they used brushes to sweep it aside. Jane had found the rusty screw that cut Flick's knee and was about to bag and catalogue it until Beck had told her not to bother. He hoped Flick was up to date with her tetanus, and made a mental note to ask her as his gaze wandered up the manicured lawns to the hall. When would he see her again?

They'd found nothing of interest so far, and although it came as no surprise to Beck, he knew the team had expected to uncover a terracotta army in the first hour, possibly

the first day, and if not by then, certainly on the second day. So had Celia, and she kept popping down to check on their progress. Beck hoped Flick would reappear, with or without biscuits, though preferably not with the dogs, but there had been no sign of her. He'd really blown it. She wasn't listed in the telephone directory. He wondered if Giles knew her number. Yet even as he thought it, he didn't want Flick to be in Giles' little book.

By the middle of the afternoon, everyone had wilted. It was a blazing hot day and tempers were frayed. Ross had showered Dina in dirt with his enthusiastic digging style, the result of which was a hissy fit that lasted ages, and that was from Ross after Dina thumped him. Every few minutes Pravit made a circuit around everyone's patch before returning to his own, collecting worms in a bucket and Beck was impressed with his kindness until he came over to ask if they had any retail value. Matt caught sight of the wriggling mass and threw up in the hole he'd just dug. Beck made Pravit dump the worms in the wood.

As Beck wrote in the tent, he could hear the grumbles.

"I wish I'd gone to Italy," Dina said. "I could have been in the pool."

"This isn't a holiday," Jane pointed out.

"No, but it's a waste of time," Matt said. "We haven't even found anything worth washing yet."

"Do you include yourself in that?" Dina asked.

Then she squealed. Beck didn't want to guess what Matt had done. He came out of the tent and they all tried to look busy doing nothing.

"How would you like to go swimming?" he asked.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh, yes, yes." Dina jumped up and down.

"He said swimming, not shopping," Jane said.

Beck noticed Jane's reluctance, but by the time they got back to the house to pick up their costumes and towels, Pravit had talked her around and they all gathered by the van.

* * * * *

Flick looked longingly at the water and passed a handful of change to the small boy in front of her kiosk. The ice-cream she'd given him already dripped down his hand and he'd smeared his chest with raspberry sauce. Hopefully his mother wouldn't think he'd been stabbed, although by the time he'd decided what he wanted, Flick had longed to do just that. Now she had a huge queue and she could see Roger, the lido manager, walking in her direction.

"Sorry you've had to wait," Roger apologized. "Speed up, Felicity. It's too hot to keep people standing around."

"I need nuts," the man in front of her complained.

"Sorry." Flick took the ice-cream from his hand. She could feel Roger glaring at her.

* * * * *

Jane had bought her costume especially for this dig. She normally took a size sixteen but it had been far too tight and cut so high on the leg it made her look deformed. She'd kept trying larger and larger sizes and eventually settled on a size twenty-two. It was crazy and she'd never ever tell anyone, but it had fit like a dream. The straps weren't trying to drag her shoulders down to her knees. The slinky material covered all of her bottom and the top of her thighs. It made her look taller and slimmer. The first thing she'd done when she got home was cut off the label and throw it in the dustbin. No one would ever know.

Once she saw Dina in her tiny pink bikini, Jane's confidence fizzled and evaporated with a pop. Dina had worn a different costume every day and they grew smaller and tighter. She used every break on the dig to top up her tan and each time she stripped off, Ross and Matt got immediate erections, something they treated as a competitive sport. Dina stood looking at Beck as though she wanted to eat him. The fact that he'd resisted all Dina's moves made Jane admire him all the more.

Jane pulled her large blue sarong more tightly around her.

"Let's all jump in together," Dina said.

Jane watched Dina elbow Pravit out of the way so she could stand next to Beck. She reluctantly pulled off her sarong, joined the line and jumped first.

Cold didn't begin to describe the temperature of the water. Jane expected it to be chilly but she came up gasping, wondering why the surface hadn't iced over. It seemed Dina had abandoned her plans to grab hold of Beck because she'd shot out of the water like a bullet, followed by a shivering Matt.

Jane wanted to get out too but she'd expected to perform that maneuver out of sight of the others when she'd swum across the pool. As she swam she'd become aware that her costume seemed to be moving down her body. Jane struggled to the side clutching the straps at her neck with one hand and tucked her feet on the ledge, pressing her chest against the wall of the pool.

"Come and swim." Pravit bobbed at her back. "Let's go down to the shallow end."

"Later. I'm er...exercising," Jane said, relieved when he swam over to Ross.

What could she do? She needed her towel.

* * * * *

Flick served her last customer and closed up the kiosk. She'd completely run out of ice-creams so there was nothing to return to the central freezer. Trevor, the lido manager's son, had collected the money so she'd done for the day. Flick gazed at the water but decided not to go in. More important to paint her room.

As she walked past the pool she saw an unhappy face looking up at her. She recognized the girl as one of Beck's team and bent down.

"Are you okay?"

"No. I'm freezing." Her teeth chattered.

"Get out then."

"I can't. My costume's stretching. It's getting bigger and bigger. If I climb out it'll stay behind in the pool. I don't know what to do."

The girl sounded close to wailing point.

"Where's your towel?"

"It's the green one over there with the big pile of bags."

"Hang on." Flick ran over, grabbed the towel and rushed back. She bent down, trying to help her get out of the water, when someone caught hold of the other end of the towel. Flick looked up in surprise.

"Let go," the blonde pencil snarled.

"No," Flick snapped. "You let go."

"Dina, don't," came the plaintive voice from the edge of the pool.

Right in the middle of the tug-of-war, Dina did let go. Flick flew backward, colliding with someone as she toppled into the water. Flick went straight down with the weight of another person on top of her. She scraped her arm on the bottom, kicked her way to the surface and emerged to find herself face-to-face with Beck.

"You. I might have guessed," he sputtered in fury.

As Beck hoisted himself out, Flick realized she wasn't the only one dressed and her heart sank. She levered herself on to the side and stood up.

"Sorry," she said, as he stood glaring.

At the edge of her vision, Flick saw Roger approaching at warp speed. Trevor had wasted no time in running to tell his father. Beck held up his wallet and water dripped out. Then he took out his mobile phone. Water dripped out of that, too and Flick began to wish she'd drowned.

"I'm terribly sorry about this, sir. We've plenty of towels inside. If your phone is damaged we'll put in an insurance claim."

"It was an accident," Flick said.

"Excuse me a moment, sir." Roger took Flick by the shoulder and pulled her to one side.

"What a lovely shirt, Roger. Is it new?"

"I've had enough. Don't bother coming back."

Flick removed his hand from her shoulder. "Look, I didn't do it delib—"

"I don't care," Roger snapped at her. "You can't just knock people into the pool."

She closed her eyes for a moment, tired of people blaming her when it wasn't her fault. Flick glanced to check no one stood in the way and then pushed Roger in. A collective roar of astonishment surged from the crowd and then a trickle of laughter. She waited until he came to the surface and said, "But that wasn't an accident, Roger. I did it deliberately and for the record, I resign."

"I sacked you first," he yelled.

Flick seethed. Trevor had been angling for her job for weeks, ever since he'd gotten fed up with pushing shopping carts at the supermarket. She sloshed through the parking lot, shaking with indignation. Beck could have said something. He surely didn't think she'd pushed him in on purpose, then thrown herself in too, somehow managing to get underneath him, so she hit the bottom and not him. But he'd just stood there like a stupid lemon.

When she reached her car, Flick stripped to her underwear and dropped her wet clothes into the passenger foot well, turning to glare at the guys in a passing car who sent her two piercing wolf-whistles.

Why did it have to be Beck she'd knocked in? What did life have against her? *Oh look, Flick, here's the man of your dreams. Now let's see how many ways you can find to make him hate you. Oh yes, dozens.*

Chapter Eleven

Flick drove over to Hartington Hall at Henry's request. It was Celia's birthday and she'd made a last minute decision to go to York. Flick was in charge of Gertrude. What joy!

"I hope it's not too much of an imposition," Henry said. "Gertrude specifically asked for you."

"No, it's fine, Baresches." Flick smiled, thinking sticking her tongue in a mousetrap held more appeal.

"Ah, the very best procurer of women in hell." He laughed. "If only it were true."

"I think you should up the stakes to this game. I'll never catch you out."

"Don't give in. I thought you had staying power. Now, Gertrude will have a nap after lunch so if you want to sunbathe naked in the garden, feel free. Or maybe you'd like to go down to the dig?"

Flick tried not to blush.

"Take the monitor with you so you can hear her."

"How's the dig going?"

"Since there have been no screams of excitement or otherwise, I presume they haven't found a sausage." He gave Flick a lustful grin. "Speaking of sausages, I seem to have lost mine. Would you like to look for it?"

"Only if you let me fry it for you, Henry."

"Saucy."

"I'd let you choose the sauce," Flick said.

He chuckled. "Don't worry about the dogs. If they give you any more trouble, play with their balls."

Flick winced. "I thought they were bitches?"

Henry roared with laughter. "I mean their red and green footballs."

"Ah."

"Right, I'm off to work. If you need me, give me a ring and I'll come like a shot, especially if you go for the naked sunbathing."

Flick chose not to respond to that.

She found Gertrude sitting in the kitchen.

"I don't need babysitting," she said in a gruff voice.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hartington just want to be sure you're safe."

Gertrude snorted. "My daughter isn't worried about me. My blood pressure rocketed this morning and she wouldn't get out of the bath to recheck it. It might be her birthday, but it was also the day I went through hell giving birth to her. The memory of it still haunts me. The doctor said he'd never had to put in so many stitches. Celia ripped me apart."

Flick saw why Celia had fled to York.

"I had the most terrible night," Gertrude whined.

"Are you feeling any better now?" Flick flinched as she asked a question.

"When I gave birth, you idiot, not last night, but since you ask, my rash is worse." Gertrude looked glum. "It's spreading. I'll show you. You can put some cream on for me."

Gertrude ate a huge lunch, and settled down to watch the three millionth rerun of *Diagnosis Murder*. By the time she fell asleep, no doubt dreaming of Dick Van Dyke ministering to her suffering, Flick felt as though she'd been stuck for hours in a lift with a group of hypochondriacs. How could one woman have so much wrong with her? Plus Flick was going to have a word with Lady C about the cream. Having to touch Gertrude's body lay way outside her job description. Flick didn't care if it was Celia's birthday, she could rub her own mother's sore bits.

Lady C's cards were displayed on the mantelpiece. Only three. One to "My Wonderful and Amazing Daughter", another to "My Very Special Loving Wife," and one from Giles "To The World's Greatest Mum." Proof, as far as Flick was concerned, that the family had a sense of humor or maybe they hadn't read them first. Still, at least they had a mother they could send cards to.

While she stood in the kitchen making herself a cup of tea, Flick saw Beck drive off in the minivan. Much as she wanted to fling herself into his arms, she knew she had to keep well away from him. They were like a lit match and dry grass—an accident waiting to happen. He was too quick to jump to conclusions and Flick was the sort of person who constantly needed second chances. She had to forget about him.

Now he'd gone, it was safe to go down to the dig. Flick hung the monitor around her neck and double-checked Gertrude's was switched on.

Only two students were working. The stick insect lay under three tiny triangles of material reading a magazine and the other two guys lethargically kicked a football to each other. Flick looked around. There didn't seem to have been much progress.

"Hi," she called to the one who'd nearly lost her costume in the pool. "How's it going?"

"Fine."

"Found anything?"

"Few potshards and a toy car."

"Can I look?" Flick asked.

"Yep, come on over."

Flick picked her way across the taped squares and crouched to watch as they carefully brushed away soil.

"My name's Jane by the way. That's Pravit." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Thanks for yesterday. I'm really sorry about you losing your job. If it would help, I could go and tell the man it wasn't your fault."

"No, don't bother. He was looking for an excuse to sack me and I was looking for an excuse to push him in the pool." Flick hesitated. "Does Beck still think I knocked him in deliberately?"

"I don't know. He was really pissed off. He had to drive into Leeds to get another phone. When he came back, he was still in a mood."

No change there then, Flick thought. She peered at the pieces of pottery Jane had placed on the tray.

"Are those all bits of the same thing?"

"I'd like to think so, then there would be chance of sticking them back together." Jane sighed.

"The devil's jigsaw. You could spend ages working on it and find the last piece missing," Flick said.

"It always is." Jane laughed. "It's the same law that says the most interesting thing you'll find on a dig will be under the pile of soil and rocks you've dug up."

"Or in another field altogether," Pravit added.

"So are archaeologists sad and perpetually disappointed?" Flick thought of Beck's face.

"Not if you enjoy guessing," Pravit said. "Anyway, you think we're digging here to find a few potshards and a toy car? We're looking for a new bog man clutching an undamaged Ming vase. So we're actually very cheerful, optimistic sort of people."

"Or mad," Flick teased.

"Yeah," Jane and Pravit chorused.

"So do you both want a career in archaeology?"

"Not that mad," Pravit said.

"I'm going to do a PhD," Jane said. "I plan to find something special – the biggest, most complete, most magnificent specimen ever discovered. Preferably a new dinosaur, the first tree climbing carnivore. I'll write a paper on it and throw in a load of hypothetical twaddle, write a textbook the size of a box of cereal and make sure every student has to buy one so I can retire on the proceeds aged twenty-seven."

Flick laughed. "Great plan. I studied history but maybe I should have chosen archaeology. Can I have a go?"

"No," snapped Miss Beautiful who'd snuck up behind her. "This is an official site. We can't have amateurs wading in and destroying valuable historical evidence."

"You'd better not touch anything then, Dina," Jane said. "Oh wait, you haven't touched anything yet, not unless Beck's watching. Talking of your beloved, you'd better put on your rubber gloves because he's back."

Flick saw Beck striding down the field and fled in the opposite direction. She didn't need another mouthful from him. With her luck, she'd already trodden on some important find and snapped it into a three-dimensional puzzle.

When Beck realized Flick had left the moment she saw him, his heart sank. He'd wrecked his chances with her and she was the most intriguing if most annoying woman he'd met in ages, maybe more than ages. She was still not too far away for him to apologize, yet again, but as he moved after her, Dina appeared at his side.

"Can you come and look at this? I really think I've found something interesting."

Beck forced his reluctant feet to follow her. Dina bent over her square and he tried to ignore her nicely toned buttocks.

"I didn't want to go any further until you seen it," she said.

"You've already broken it," Beck commented.

"I haven't."

Beck pulled the piece of pottery from the ground and picked up a matching piece from the riddle, then married the two clean edges together. Dina looked mortified.

"Don't worry. It's a piece of Wedgwood," he said. "Not sure of the design. Green leaves, I think."

"Can I look it up?"

He bit back his groan. "Circa 1970, Dina. Forget it."

They only needed the milk jug and they'd have a full set. He wandered over to check on Matt and Ross. Ross had exposed half a grey disk and energetically brushed away the surrounding soil.

"This is awesome. First thing I've found," Ross said. "It looks pretty complete. I never knew the Romans used Frisbees."

"I think they called it a discus," Beck said in a dry tone.

"You mean I've found a discus?" he asked in excitement.

"No, it's a piece of clay pigeon. They're fired up in the air for guns to shoot at," Beck explained.

"So I've found a Roman shooting target."

Beck stared at him in horror and Ross laughed.

"It's okay. I know they didn't invent guns until the First World War."

Beck groaned in disbelief and then rolled his eyes when he caught the look on Ross' face.

Flick had vanished so Beck retreated to the tent to work on his plot. Was introducing a bear's penis too tacky? He couldn't concentrate. All he could think about

was Flick. Disaster seemed to follow her around, but she was so sexy. He imagined himself kissing those cupid lips and then it wasn't a bear's penis he was thinking of at all. Shit.

* * * * *

When the doorbell rang, Flick got to her feet.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" Gertrude said.

Flick bit back the obvious and hurried to the door. When she opened it, George Clooney stood in front of her. Well, not exactly George Clooney but his younger brother – even better.

"Mrs. Hartington?"

An American. Flick had to fight really hard not to ask if he was George's brother.

"No, I'm the granny-sitter. They're out."

"Jared Collins. I did ring to say I was coming."

"Don't you like to be spontaneous?" Flick grinned.

He gazed at her and Flick thought what beautiful eyes he had.

"I'm with 'Big Erections'."

Her eyes widened.

"Marquees. I didn't pick the name," he added.

"Right."

"Mr. Hartington seemed to think there might be some shallow pipe work in the field where he wants the wedding marquee, so I arranged to come and check with a metal detector."

"Who is it?" Gertrude demanded, having reached the door using her walking frame.

"This gentleman has come to look at the field that's going to be used for the wedding," Flick shouted.

"What bedding?"

"Wedding," Flick yelled. "He's come about the marquee."

"Go and help him find it then." Gertrude turned to go.

"She's a deaf old bat," Flick muttered.

"I heard that," the deaf old bat called from the other side of the hall.

Flick picked up the monitor and hung it round her neck.

"Come on, I'll show you where to put your big erection." Flick was rewarded with furious blushing. This guy was definitely in the wrong job.

"I'll get my equipment out of the van."

He emerged with a canvas bag and a huge metal detector.

"Whereabouts are you from?" Flick asked.

"London."

"And before that?"

"Boulder, Colorado. Have you ever been to the States?"

"I've never been to London."

Jared laughed. "You're joking, right?"

Actually, she wasn't. Flick walked him down to the field. "This is it. Can I watch?"

"You can help if you like. Follow with the bag of markers and when I tell you, stick a yellow flag in the grass."

Flick tagged behind him as he swung the head of the detector over the ground. He had a lovely bum. She was so busy admiring him from behind that she walked straight into his back when he stopped.

"Sorry," she said.

"No problem. Stick a flag in by my left foot."

Flick bent at his feet. "Anything else you want me to do while I'm down here?"

He went bright red. Really, it was too easy.

Chapter Twelve

Eventually Jared switched off the machine. Flick looked around the field at the dozen or so yellow flags fluttering in the breeze.

"What now?" she asked.

"I check each of those sites to see if I can work out what's there and how far down it is. This machine is so sensitive it can pick out a single coin, but I'm looking for continuous lines. The pressure from the marquee could damage old pipe work, and I guess the bride and groom don't want to suddenly shoot up in the air on a spout of water."

Flick had an entertaining image of Giles and Willow propelled into the air by a fountain.

Jared droned on. "Judging from the random positioning of the flags that's unlikely. There are no lines across the field, just isolated sites. I'll check them out anyway. Of course, if we were really lucky, we could find a pile of coins, or if we're not so lucky, an unexploded bomb."

Flick smiled at the unexpected joke.

"Do I get a share if it's pirate treasure?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not. We have to report all—"

Her interest in him dwindled. "Jared, it was a joke. What would pirate treasure be doing this far inland?" He might look like George Clooney, but he didn't have his sense of humor.

"Oh. Right."

"What are the rules if we do find something?" she asked.

"Anything over three hundred years old and at least ten percent gold or silver belongs to your Queen and we have to report it."

"What if it's two hundred and ninety-nine years old or less than ten percent gold or silver?"

"Then, that's okay." Jared smiled at her. "She doesn't want it."

"What if we said it was nine-point-five percent gold and it was really ten percent," Flick whispered.

He looked worried. "No, we couldn't do that."

"We'd probably get sent to the Tower of London and put in the dungeon. Well, I would. You'd be hung, drawn and quartered."

Finally, he gave her a broad grin. "Ah, you Brits have such a wacky sense of humor. Well, since we're unlikely to find anything, I think we'll be okay." Jared took a couple of

trowels from the canvas bag. "Why don't you check what's down here. You only need to look directly under the flag. This machine has pinpoint accuracy. It uses a pulse induction eddy current technique."

"Ohh, a pulsing technique sounds fun."

To her dismay, Jared missed the point and thought she was actually interested.

"It's quite simple really. A pulsed current generates a magnetic field around the coil which induces time-varying currents in any nearby metal object and that in turn generates another magnetic field."

Flick had been lost after the word "pulsed".

"These magnetic fields induce voltage in the receive coil and when they're amplified indicate the position of a metal object," he continued.

She tried to look fascinated and gave up. "Wow, so where do I dig?"

Flick had expected whatever it was to be near the surface but reached about half an arm's length down into the ground before the trowel met resistance. She felt a shiver of excitement trickle along her spine and moved a little more earth with the tool. Too slow, so she switched to her fingers, wanting to find out what it was before Jared came back from the other side of the field. Please don't be a tin can or a hub cap. One surface at least was smooth. She pushed her fingers deeper and froze.

Oops. Flick's heart began to beat faster. She felt certain she'd depressed something. That couldn't be good. Keeping her fingers very still, she used her other hand to shift more soil. Flick didn't like the feel of this at all. Jared might have joked about an unexploded bomb but that was exactly what Flick thought she had under her hand.

"Jared," Flick called.

He strolled back.

"You know that joke you made?"

"You've found treasure?" He dropped down by her side.

"No, not treasure. I've just pushed a button or moved a switch or something. I think maybe it's a hand grenade or a bomb."

Jared's face lost color so fast Flick thought he might faint. Instead, he retreated so rapidly, it looked like he was on his way to the next county.

"I think you'd better call someone," Flick said.

"Get away from it."

"Er...I'd like to, but I don't think that's a good idea. If I move my fingers something might happen."

Jared went even paler and edged further away.

"Before you set off on a marathon, please get help," Flick said.

As he bolted, she pressed her forehead against the pile of earth she'd removed. She was on her knees with her arm bent at an awkward angle beneath her and her backside sticking up in the air. It would be difficult to be less elegant.

* * * * *

Beck had watched from the entrance to the tent as the two figures wandered up and down in the field next to the dig. He'd intended to rewrite the first murder scene in his book, but he hadn't typed a word. He could hear Flick laughing and felt unaccountably annoyed. When the man stood behind her and put his arms around her to demonstrate how to use the metal detector, Beck bristled. He went back into the tent to rummage for his binoculars. Who could think of writing at a time like this?

"Seen something interesting?" Pravit asked as Beck focused on Flick.

"Rare bird," Beck said.

What the hell was she up to? He lurched as he saw the guy barreling down the field toward him. There had to be something wrong if Flick was involved.

"She's got her hand on an unexploded bomb," the man yelled and Beck's heart went into free fall.

Dina screamed. Matt and Ross reached for their mobile phones.

"No calls," Beck snapped. "All of you go straight up to the house and stay there. Jane, you phone the emergency services. All of them."

He started running toward Flick.

"What are you doing?" the guy called. "Man, we have to keep away from there. We need to get the army or something. I have to call my boss. I'm gonna be in so much trouble for letting her help. He'll kill me."

Beck jumped over the gate and sprinted across the field. He gulped for breath as he reached her side. "You okay?"

"Just dandy. I thought I'd give a worm a bit of a tickle."

Beck crouched next to her. Flick's body largely obscured the hole she'd dug.

"Tell me exactly what you saw and what you did."

Flick repeated it all. Beck was torn. The likelihood of this being a grenade or a bomb was very small. As far as he knew, Ilkley had not been subject to any air raids but there remained the possibility stray ordinance had been lost or jettisoned from aircraft. Plus the grounds of the Hall could have been used for army maneuvers. Ilkley Moor had been. Beck needed to assume the worst, especially because this was Calamity Flick.

"Can you keep your finger where it is?" he asked.

"If the alternative is losing it and a chunk of my head then I think the answer to that is yes, absolutely, at the moment," she snapped.

"I'm trying to help."

"Sorry." Flick rubbed her forehead in the dirt. "You don't need to stay. There's no point two of us losing limbs."

Beck took hold of her free hand and squeezed her fingers. "I'm staying."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Does trouble follow you or do you follow trouble?"

"Sorry about the pool," she said. "It was an accident."

"Jane said it wasn't your fault, but that was all she'd tell me. What were you doing?"

"Don't tell Jane I told you, but she and her costume were parting company. It was an emergency. She needed a towel, only Miss Itsy-Bitsy-Teeny-Weenie had other ideas. You happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. A bit like now really. In fact, a bit like every time I've met you."

Beck laughed. "I had noticed life is never boring when you're around."

"Oh God, I can hear it ticking." Flick gasped. "You have to go. I think I'm destined to kill you. Maybe if you're not here, I won't die either."

"Shhh." Beck lowered his head to hers and he heard it, too. Faint but definitely ticking.

"I'm not going to leave you," he said. "But if the ticking stops, forget about keeping your finger on anything. Just get up and run."

"I really want you to leave." Flick cast him a miserable glance. "You're so gorgeous, I'd hate for anything to happen to you."

"I— What?" Beck asked.

She hesitated then looked straight at him. "You take my breath away."

Beck's own breath caught in his throat. He wanted to give the right reply, but what was he supposed to say to that?

"What a pity you're so hideous," he said at last.

Flick gave a little laugh. "A guy with a sense of humor, just as I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die."

Flick moaned.

"So have you got your breath back? I'm trained in CPR." Beck smiled at her.

She lifted her head and nodded. "My fingers are going numb because I'm pressing so hard. But I'm beginning to wonder if I'm actually pressing anything at all. Maybe I haven't touched a button or a switch. Do bombs have buttons or switches? Or is that just in films?"

Several sirens began to sound and the noise grew louder by the second.

"Everything is going to be fine," Beck said. "Don't move. Keep your hand exactly where it is."

"I bet that's what you tell all the girls."

"Usually I like some movement."

Flick grinned.

* * * * *

Henry couldn't get into his drive for all the vehicles—several police cars, two fire engines, an ambulance, four army vehicles, a taxi that no one admitted calling and a guy on a moped delivering pizzas. Henry was relieved to see Hartington Hall still appeared to be in one piece. He abandoned his car and walked up the sweep of gravel to the house only to be stopped by a police constable who appeared to be just out of diapers.

"Sorry sir, you're not allowed past this point."

"I live here," Henry said. "What on earth's going on?"

"This is a potentially dangerous situation. A large unexploded bomb. The whole place could go up. I'll have to ask you to keep behind the line."

"What line?"

The policeman gestured in front of him. "Er...this imaginary line."

"Bollocks," Henry said. When he spotted more police heading toward him, he slipped to the back door.

Gertrude stood at the window of the drawing room with binoculars around her neck.

"What's happened?" he shouted in her ear.

"Flick is trapped under a bomb."

Henry grabbed the binoculars and almost strangled Gertrude he tried to focus on the field.

Although Beck protested, the men from the bomb disposal squad forcibly removed him to a safe distance. Flick watched them dragging him away, wondering if she'd ever see him again. If she did, she'd be embarrassed by what she'd said. If she didn't, it would be because she was dead. Embarrassed or dead? What a dilemma.

Body armor had been draped around her though saving her liver and stomach wasn't much use if she didn't have arms and legs. Or a head. She had a feeling the helmet and face guard they'd put on her were unlikely to offer much protection when she lay directly over the bomb. And it was a bomb, Flick decided, because that was just her luck. How could she think it could be anything else?

Only one man remained with her. A sergeant named George and every few minutes he asked her if she was all right and she always said fine.

"You all right?" George asked.

"Fine," Flick said.

It reminded her of the time she'd spent in hospital after she'd been knocked down by the local vicar speeding to evensong on his bike. The men and women in the ward spent their time competing over how ill they were, but the moment the doctors appeared and asked how they were, they always said "fine" and it had made Flick laugh. She'd been covered in bruises from head to foot and both shoulders had been

dislocated because she'd tried to grab the handlebars as the bike hit her, but when the doctors had come to the foot of her bed, she'd said the same thing. "I'm fine."

George was encased in protective gear but could move freely. For the last fifteen minutes he'd carefully dug a hole nowhere near her. Flick hadn't liked to say anything. She wondered if perhaps he was very short-sighted or if there might be some more worrying reason why he wasn't actually trying to get to the thing she had her finger on.

"Still all right?" George asked.

"Still fine," Flick said.

As the hole he was making suddenly merged with the one she'd dug, Flick realized what he'd done. He couldn't get at the bomb without moving her and moving her might be the last thing he ever did. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing for her. No trial. No going to prison for theft. No proving her innocence.

"I want to live," she blurted.

George's fingers touched her arm and he gave her a little squeeze.

"All right?" he asked.

"Fine," Flick answered.

Slowly he began to move soil away from around her hand. Flick wondered if she could ask him to hurry because she needed to pee.

* * * * *

"What was Flick doing down there?" Henry asked.

"Some chap came and wanted to know where the marquee was going to go," Gertrude said.

"Did she take the monitor with her?"

"Yes. She always wears it when she's watching me. Can't even open my bowels in private."

Henry groaned. If he talked like this when he was her age he wanted Giles to shoot him. He quite liked the Inuit idea of sending their old folks out on ice floes. He wondered if Fewston reservoir ever froze over.

"So why aren't you wearing your monitor?" Henry asked.

"It was annoying me. It's over there."

Henry went over to the fireplace and picked it up from next to the clock.

"Are you all right?" he said into it.

"Fine," said a man's voice. "Oh no, the ticking's stopped."

"Is there anybody there?" Henry tried.

"You said that without moving your lips and your voice has gone deep."

"Is there anybody there?" Henry repeated.

* * * * *

George's eyes were wide open.

"It's the monitor round my neck," Flick said.

George fumbled for a moment and then switched it off. The ticking stopped. Flick's eyes met his. He turned it back on and the ticking started once more.

"I think that's one mystery solved," George said. "But don't move yet."

They lay face down, helmet to helmet. Flick realized she could hear a different sound now. As he shifted more soil, the sound became clearer. The strains of a rather tinny rendition of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" rose out of the ground. Flick closed her eyes. *Fuck, shit and bollocks.*

"You can take your finger away," George said.

"Are you sure?" *Please let it be a bomb. Just not a live one.*

"Quite sure."

Flick moved her hand and sat up. Her arm shook and she pulled it to her chest, massaging her fingers. The sergeant carried on digging until he'd revealed what Flick had been glued to for the last hour.

"Have you defused it?" she asked. "Maybe it's a bomb in disguise."

"Not really necessary to defuse a singing reindeer."

Flick stared in horror at a grubby plastic wall plaque featuring Rudolph's face and a bulbous red nose. The strains of the Christmas song were now clearly audible.

"Can we pretend it was a bomb?" She glanced toward the house and the hoards of people standing behind yellow tape. It looked as if the whole of Ilkley was there. "Haven't you got something you could use to blow it up? Just a little explosion? Even firework-sized? Could we scream and fall on the floor?"

"Too late." George motioned with his head toward the monitor, which was transmitting the song back to its mate. "Don't feel too bad. Better safe than sorry. Come on, let's get you checked out."

"I'm fine," she muttered for the hundredth time.

What terrible luck, Flick thought. If only it had been a bomb.

* * * * *

Beck paced up and down, his stomach churning, his heart pounding. He heard Henry laughing behind him and spun round.

"What's so funny?" Beck demanded.

"Willow bought Giles a present last Christmas, one we couldn't shut up."

Henry held up the monitor and Beck heard the strains of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer".

"It drove us all mad. Anything set it off—movement, sound, light. Couldn't get the bloody batteries out. Giles got rid of it. I think we just found out what he did with it." Henry chortled.

One by one those around them started to laugh until a collective roar of merriment rose into the air. Beck's mouth was still dry. Sweat soaked his shirt. He wanted to laugh with everyone else but couldn't.

"Where's she off to?" Henry asked, his gaze following Flick.

"Can we leave now?" Dina whined at Beck's side.

"Go back and tidy the site first," Beck said.

He set off after Flick who had stamped her way into the woods.

Beck found her sitting on a fallen tree.

"Hiding?" he asked.

"Oh God, can you see me? I'm as thick as a plank so I thought I was well camouflaged."

She was filthy, her face and arms covered with dirt. Beck sat down next to her.

"Christmas is cancelled," she said. "I never want to hear 'Rudolph the bloody Red-Nosed Reindeer' again."

"Are you okay?"

"Fine."

"Feeling embarrassed, humiliated and a little stupid?" he asked.

"You don't need to be," Flick said. "I won't tell anyone if you don't."

Beck laughed. "So, do you remember what you said?"

Her head dropped. "I was desperate. I didn't want to die without someone wishing I hadn't."

Beck edged a little closer. "I'm glad you're alive."

He wanted to kiss her. He was going to kiss her. Just—

"Beck, Beck," Dina called, rushing up.

"What?" Beck snapped and turned to face her.

"Matt won't come out of the tent. He's having a panic attack. He's breathing all funny."

When Beck turned to Flick, she'd gone.

Chapter Thirteen

Beck heard the throaty purr of Isobel's car pulling onto the drive just as he finished eating. Matt and Ross sprang up from the table, tripping over each other in their haste to get to the door. Beck wandered into the hall in time to see them fighting for the honor of carrying her luggage. Isobel Marshall was petite and perfectly formed with large breasts, tiny waist, dancing eyes and long, thick flaxen hair tinted with auburn.

"Hello, gorgeous. Good journey?" Beck asked.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Hello, handsome. No, completely shitty. From Leeds to here was an absolute nightmare. Stop-start all the way, and more bloody speed cameras than lampposts." She tossed her handbag onto the hall table. "What is there to drink?"

"I've..."

"Do you..."

Neither Matt nor Ross finished what they were saying but clattered upstairs to their stash of alcohol.

Isobel handed her car keys to Beck. "Don't go above eighty. The windscreen wipers have a rhythm of their own and the clutch is temperamental. Don't shove it down too hard."

"Isobel, you're an angel."

"How's the dig?"

"Fabulous," Beck lied.

"Like pig-shite then, I take it?"

"The troops are disillusioned, demoralized and depressed. Now you're here, that will all change."

"Is the site really a washout?"

"Today I had to stop them cataloguing gravel. Plus we had the armed forces out this afternoon after a singing Christmas decoration was mistaken for a bomb."

"Which one of our idiots did that?"

"Fortunately, not one of ours."

"Ah, lovely boys. What shall we open first?" Isobel beamed at Ross and Matt who'd slid most of the way downstairs, clutching bottles, twin gazes hovering between her face and chest. Dina stood watching, her eyes narrowed. Jane hovered by the kitchen door.

"We'll stay in, order pizza, get pissed and you can tell me what's been happening," Isobel said.

Matt and Ross bounced like puppies. Beck expected to see tongues hanging out any second. Dina, on the other hand, stood tapping her feet, coming up to the boil.

"Come on, get some glasses, Jane. I want to know everything. Who've we upset so far?"

While Isobel took control, Beck nipped up to get his bag. Dina caught him on the way out.

"Where are you going?"

"To stay with a friend."

"It's because of me, isn't it?" She sniffled.

"No," Beck said. "I need to be somewhere quiet in the evenings to work on my book."

"Don't you find me attractive?" Her face crumpled.

Shit. "You're very attractive." But not when she pulled her face into that shape.

"You don't think my nose is too big?"

Yes. "No." Beck backed toward the door.

"We were all so close to death. I realized I shouldn't be afraid of expressing my feelings." She took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly.

Beck found himself holding his breath.

"I really, really like you, Beck. I feel we have a connection."

Was it a girl thing, Beck wondered? If he was faced with possible death, he wanted to eat his favorite meal and watch Manchester United slaughter Chelsea, not talk about feelings. Only he was glad Flick had told him he took her breath away and now he wished he'd said the same thing, instead of making that pathetic crack about her being ugly. She'd laughed, but what if she was insulted? God, what an idiot.

"Dina, I'm flattered that you fancy me," he said. "But it's not going to go anywhere. You're my student. I'm responsible for your education. I'm not going to have a relationship with you." He felt relieved and very mature when he'd said it. If he'd really been mature he'd have said it a week ago.

* * * * *

When Josh and Kirsten walked in humming "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer", Flick groaned.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"Bush telegram, otherwise known as local radio. Haven't you had a call from the TV yet?" Josh asked

"Don't tell me they know my name," Flick said in horror.

"You're an unidentified local woman," Kirsten said.

"No nice adjectives with that?"

"Such as?" Kirsten asked.

"Beautiful, attractive, witty, intelligent. Or did they actually say stupid, half-soaked and idiotic?"

Then the phone rang.

"I'm not in. I don't live here," Flick said.

Kirsten picked up the receiver and shook her head. "Sorry, could you say that again? Er...could you say that again?"

Flick breathed a sigh of relief.

"You'll have to speak up. I've been at the firing range and I'm temporarily deaf," Kirsten shouted.

Eventually she got cut off. Kirsten checked her watch and wrote down the time.

"You are so mean to your mother," Flick said.

"That wasn't your mother?" Josh asked in alarm.

"Too easy, Josh." Flick ducked as he threw a cushion.

* * * * *

"Beck? Are you awake? I've made you a cup of tea."

A woman's voice. Beck's eyes flashed open and he scanned the room, breathing out in relief when he realized the voice had come from the other side of the door. Willow, not Dina.

"Are you decent?" Willow asked.

"He won't be and you're certainly not. I'll take that in," Beck heard Giles say. The door opened.

"Sleep okay?" Giles asked.

"Great." Beck sat up.

"Good, because I have a feeling you're about to have a bad day." Giles handed over the tea.

"Why?" Beck didn't like the grin on Giles' face.

"Dad's rung to say the press are camped out at the Hall. It's silly season. I've already guessed the headline. 'Indy unearths singing sensation'."

"That had nothing to do with the dig."

"Ah, but why let the truth interfere with a good story. One of your students caused the rumpus and they want the story from your mouth, with photos."

"Shit." Beck thought about what his head of department was going to say and wanted to slide back under the covers.

"If I were you," Giles said, "I'd go up to the Hall, make a statement and get it out of the way."

"If you were me, you'd have left the country."

Giles coughed uncomfortably. "Well, I only did that because Yasmin's brothers were after me."

"Since all this is down to Flick, maybe if I give them her name, they'll leave me alone." Beck groaned. "She's caused me nothing but trouble since the moment I saw her."

"Flick's not a threat to you."

"In the way a killer whale isn't a threat to a seal pup?"

"And what a cuddly little seal pup you are."

"Piss off," Beck hissed, but when Giles had gone, he smiled.

* * * * *

Beck took his time over breakfast in the hope that the press would have evaporated by the time he walked up to the Hall. He ate a bowl of cornflakes one flake at a time, but soggy corn was no match for the patient press. They'd sniffed a juicy story and it would take an earthquake to shift them.

He was amazed at the number of reporters and photographers milling about on the gravel. Henry stood on the steps and waved to him.

"Professor Beckett."

Beck felt like a goldfish tossed into a pool of piranhas. All faces turned and he struggled amidst a sea of arms waving microphones. Henry pulled Beck to his side.

"I was waiting for you. We'll face them together." Henry had a gleam in his eye.

"Is it true you risked your life staying with your student?" someone shouted.

"Is it true you and she are having an affair?"

Beck's eyes opened wide in alarm.

"They don't know about Flick. Don't give them her name," Henry whispered.

"Can't your students tell the difference between a Roman artifact and a piece of twenty-first century crap?" yelled a woman.

"Is this a publicity stunt?" called another woman.

"It worked," someone else shouted and everyone laughed.

Beck pulled himself together. "The point is," he said in a firm voice, "you don't take risks with people's lives. If it had been an unexploded grenade or a mortar you'd have a very different story to write, maybe even a tragic one. I think it was brave of her to have stayed where she was until the army investigated."

"Can you give us the name of the student? We'd like a photo of the two of you together."

"With Rudolph," someone added.

"No," said Beck. "Contrary to what you think it wasn't a Yorkshire University student involved."

"The young lady in question was a visitor here and has now left," Henry said.

Interesting, Beck thought.

"What's her name? What was she doing on your dig?" someone called.

"She has no connection with the dig," Beck wondered how many times he had to repeat it. Not that it would make any difference. If they wanted her to be a student, they'd say she was. "The incident occurred in a field adjacent to the one in which we're working. There's nothing more to say. This story is as dead as the one about the Beast of Ilkley Moor." Beck forced himself to smile.

He heard Henry coughing at his side and turned to look at him.

"Well, actually I did see the Beast on Monday night," Henry said. "In the field where the dig is taking place."

The microphones moved away from Beck's face to Henry's. Fresh blood and Beck had the feeling Henry had deliberately opened a vein.

"Do you think it was trying to warn you about the bomb?" came a voice.

Beck suppressed a laugh. Some of these people had to be sharing a single brain cell.

"Can you describe it?" asked a woman.

"It had a long thin tail. Looked like some sort of cat but it reared up on its back legs at one point. It was dark-colored except for the tail."

Beck sidled off as Henry talked.

As he walked back down to Giles' house, he took out his phone and rang Isobel. "Fancy a day off?"

"I've only just got here."

"The press are swarming. They want a story, and although the bomb scare had nothing to do with us, we're going to get dragged in. Make all five of them promise not to talk to anyone about what happened."

"That won't work."

"Take them to Lightwater Valley theme park for the day and stick them on a few roller coasters. I'll pay."

"That might work. I'll call you later."

Beck had things to do. No, one thing to do. Find Flick. Take her breath away again by kissing her because he'd been wondering how much more of a hint he needed? She liked him. More than liked him. He just had to convince her he felt the same way.

Chapter Fourteen

Flick had promised to spend the day laboring for Bob Hulme, a farmer who owned a large chunk of land around Timble. They'd chatted in the pub a couple of weeks before and Flick had told him she'd studied drystone walling. He'd made the irresistible offer of payment for her help rebuilding several sections in his fields.

Maybe the word "studied" had been a slight exaggeration. Not one man had registered for the course and the teacher not only had a moustache but boobs. Flick hadn't bothered with lesson two but how hard could it be? No cement to mix up, slap on and scrape off. More like an overweight three dimensional jigsaw puzzle. It was merely a matter of selecting the right shaped rocks and stacking them in a pyramid. Easy.

Flick was looking forward to a day away from everything and everyone. She'd packed sandwiches, a large bottle of water and her gardening gloves. Bob picked her up at 6:30 in the morning. He was large, red-faced guy with a shock of blond hair.

"Morning, Flick," Bob said as she climbed in his Land Rover.

"Good morning."

"Now if you see anything you don't like the look of, for goodness sake don't put your finger on it."

"And after I'd decided this was going to be your lucky day."

Bob laughed.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Because you and trouble are joined at the hip."

"And you still want me to help?"

Bob glanced over. "As I recall, you told me drystone walling was at the top of your list of skills."

Flick wriggled. "You shouldn't have bought me that last vodka and orange. Top of the list was stretching it a bit."

He sighed. "You have done this before?"

"Yes." The fact that the first and only lesson had not moved beyond "This is a piece of limestone, this is sheep poo. Don't get them confused," did not mean she couldn't do it.

Bob dropped her off next to a broken-down stretch of wall and then drove further up the hill. Flick gaily waved goodbye before turning to the pile of stones and groaning.

She sorted them by size, by shape and considered sorting by color. There were no corner pieces, no straight edges and the largest stones proved impossible to move. Not as easy as she thought.

While occupied with this, Flick made a mental note to go through her CV, take out skills she had yet to master and put them under hobbies. Included in that was her ability to change barrels. The pub manager had returned on the afternoon of day one to find his cellar inches deep in beer with a soaked Flick trying to lasso a spinning barrel with a hose. There hadn't been a day two. Grinstead's sneaked in under her radar and Flick groaned. Who'd set her up? Who hated her that much? She couldn't think of anyone. Only she had to. She shouldn't be pretending this was going to go away. Maybe she should write again to the managing director. That would be the tenth letter. Ten could be her new lucky number.

After a while, Flick relaxed and began to sing. Now she'd buried Grinstead's deep in her mind, this was going so much better than expected. The sheep had left her alone and the sun had come out. The wall did look a bit wonky, but she'd made good progress. The last rock slotted into place and Flick looked up to see Beck striding up the hill on the other side of the wall. It was the wrong moor and she wore the wrong clothes, but she felt like Cathy watching Heathcliffe coming toward her. Beck looked dark and dangerous. No, Flick corrected, the dangerous part would be her. But her heart did a little jump for joy.

Beck put his hand on the top of the wall to hoist himself over on to her side. The stones shifted and suddenly Beck formed part of an avalanche heading in Flick's direction. She shrieked and fell backward. The whole of the section she'd rebuilt toppled over and spread out at her feet along with Beck who lay motionless.

"Are you still alive?" Flick gasped.

"Just," he groaned.

"Well, prepare to die. I've spent all morning working on that."

"Drystone walls aren't supposed to collapse at the slightest touch."

"I don't call fifteen stone the slightest touch."

He levered himself upright. "I don't weigh that much."

"Ten stone then."

"I don't weigh that little." He scrambled to his feet and brushed himself down.

I'd like to do that, Flick thought, then looked behind him at the devastation and sighed. "I've too much to do to argue about how much you weigh. I thought it was supposed to be the female of the species who obsessed over weight."

"You brought it up," Beck said in a grim voice.

Flick decided to change the subject. "How did you know where I was?"

"Phone call to Giles, another to Willow, a text message to Kirsten and then I spotted you from the road. I could probably have spotted you from outer space dressed like that."

Flick looked down at her bright red top and the green and black striped shorts. He was right. Her shoulders slumped and she began to move the rocks again. "Fine. Just leave me in peace to finish this."

She picked up one of the large stones and put it at the base of the wall. Beck picked it up and moved it.

"It's better that way round," he said.

Flick bit the inside of her mouth and picked up a smaller rock, tossing it from one hand to the other. Beck caught it in flight.

"I'll point them out. You pass them to me. I'll slot them in place," he said.

"You have to train for ages to master the craft of drystone walling," Flick passed him another stone.

"So how long did you train?"

"Two hours."

Beck turned and grinned. Flick tried not to blush and failed. He made this look so easy, working at twice her speed, picking up two rocks for every one she handed him and jamming them in far more forcefully than she'd managed.

All Beck had to do was tell her how he felt. How difficult could that be? Very.

"So why aren't you working?" Flick asked.

Beck crouched with a huge stone in his arms. "I am working."

"Aren't you supposed to be digging holes?"

"I've given everyone the day off. The Hall has been invaded by the press. Henry seemed keen they didn't get hold of your name."

"That was nice of him."

"Where do you want to put the ties?"

Flick stared. "Is that a trick question? In the wardrobe?"

"Do you call them throughs?" Beck shoved another rock in place.

"Are you speaking English?"

"Do you know anything at all about what you're doing?"

He winced when she scowled. He was supposed to be asking her out, not pissing her off. "I'll take that as a no. Brief lesson. The wall has to slope inward from both sides to be stable. Two stones wide with the occasional tie or through going the whole width. Fill in the centre and gaps with smaller stones. Large flat stones on top and then add a coping made up of flat, rounded stones laid on their edge." *God. Seal my mouth now.*

Beck could see her working up to some smart quip and knew he deserved it. "Thank you," she mumbled.

He was shocked. "At least the foundations are okay. You weren't strong enough to move the really large boulders."

Flick bristled and he rushed on. "Drystone walling is quite an ancient skill. There's some evidence it began in the thirteenth century, though it wasn't until the sixteenth century that people began to use it as a method of enclosing their holdings." What the hell was he doing? Where was the witty repartee?

"Really." Flick yawned.

"Most of these walls were built in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Did you know you need one ton of stone for each square yard of wall?" If he'd had a gun, he'd have shot himself.

"Is that a fact? And how much would it take to cover a body?"

Beck stopped working. "Sorry. I talk too much when I'm nervous." *Ask me why I'm nervous.*

"So do you think you could get a body in the gap? I wonder if there are any in all these miles of walls."

"I'll shut up," Beck said.

"Just don't stop working."

What the hell was he doing? All he had to do was tell her he felt the same way as her.

* * * * *

Fifty minutes later they were nearly done. Fifty minutes of mostly silent, hard work where Flick had gone through a million different things to say and dismissed all of them. Beck had given up his day off to look for her and then help her, only he'd not said anything she wanted to hear.

Bob pulled up in his Land Rover as Flick pushed the last rock into place.

"Persuaded a passing motorist to help?"

"I'm a friend of Flick's," Beck said.

Her friend? After he'd worked quietly next to her for so long, she'd begun to think he wasn't interested.

"I'm only paying one of you." Bob ran his hand over the wall and tested a couple of the stones with his fist. "You made a good job of that, Flick's friend. Saved me having to do it all over again. I've got to go back home for an hour or so. Start on that next section and I'll pay you when I come to pick you up."

"Pay her now and I'll give her a lift back."

"That all right with you, Flick?"

"Oh, had you noticed I was here?" she said in a sweet tone.

Bob laughed and handed her fifty pounds. "You grow more like your Mam every day."

As Bob drove back to the road, Flick offered half the cash to Beck. "You did most of the work. You can go now. I'll do the rest on my own and hitch a lift back."

"So what do you actually do for a living?" he asked.

"Drystone walling. You can see samples of my craft over there, there and there." She pointed to sections where the wall had collapsed.

Beck laughed. "What do you really do?"

"Astro-physicist," Flick said, stepping into the minefield she'd been trying to avoid. She could have made up a more convincing lie. "Veterinary nurse specializing in small furry creatures." Now she'd managed to talk herself into a black hole. Might as well give up while she only looked stupid rather than a raving lunatic.

"Lunch," she suggested, hoping to deflect him.

"Brought enough to share?" Beck sat down in the sun with his back against the wall.

"Peanut butter and Marmite sandwiches."

"Peanut butter, please."

"No, I mean there's peanut butter and Marmite on the same sandwich."

Beck looked at her as though she was mad.

"They're really good." She sat down beside him.

He took a tentative bite.

"What do you think?" Flick asked.

"I think we'll finish this wall and I'll take you for a pub lunch. Then I can apologize for all the stupid things I've said and you can tell me again that I take your breath away and this time I can say something sensible back to you and..."

Flick scratched at a dirty mark on her shorts.

"Why won't you look at me?" Beck asked.

"Can't." She could barely breathe.

"Why not?"

Because if I look, I'll kiss you and I might not be able to stop. She fixed her eyes on the ground next to Beck's left hand.

"What are you frightened of?" Beck asked.

"Snake." Flick croaked the word out.

"That's not what I meant."

"No, there's a snake by your left hand."

Beck turned his head as Flick threw her sandwich. The snake recoiled, either from the blow or the Marmite. Beck yanked his fingers away, but it was too late, the telltale puncture wounds were evident on the back of his hand.

"Shit, it bit you." Flick was horrified. "I was trying to frighten it away. I'm so sorry. Speak to me. Are you all right? You're in shock. Do you need CPR or a tourniquet? I could take off my bra. I've done first aid."

Despite the fact that he was seriously freaked out, Beck wanted to laugh. "If you're asking if I need CPR, I think your first-aid skills might be a bit rusty. I'm not averse to the removal of the bra, though I think your timing's a bit off."

"I meant I could use it as a tourniquet," Flick said in indignation and jumped to her feet.

"I know and much as I'd like you to do that, I think we'd better go to hospital and let the experts take a look."

"You're very calm." She bounced up and down.

"It's not my first time."

She stopped bouncing.

"I've been bitten before."

"Oh God. Should we take the snake?" Flick asked.

"I don't think it was injured."

"No, I mean for identification."

"It's an adder."

Flick's heart lurched. "Adders are poisonous. You could die."

Beck sighed. "Do you have to articulate every thought?"

"Sorry."

By the time they'd reached the car, his hand had swelled up and Flick felt sick.

"You know, I'm beginning to wonder if there's some force at work that wants to stop me kissing you," he said.

"You want to kiss me?"

"Yes, but not right now. Could you drive? I need to keep my hand still. The calmer I am, the less the poison will spread."

"Okay."

The tires spun on the gravel as Flick slammed her foot on the accelerator.

"Take it easy. It's not my car," Beck said.

Flick kept glancing at his hand. "Does it hurt?"

"The pain is excruciating."

Flick whimpered. God, what had she done?

"Do you feel faint or short of breath," she asked.

"Only when I'm next to you because I'm always wondering what's the next way you're going to try to kill me."

Flick flinched.

"Is that why Henry wants to keep your name out of the papers? Do you already have a criminal record for disposing of guys?"

Beck had been joking but realized at once he'd said something to alarm her. Flick gripped the wheel so tightly her knuckles went white. He thought back to the first time they'd met. He still hadn't found out why she thought he was a policeman. She didn't want to tell him what she did for a living. She'd been kidding about the drystone walling but was it to avoid telling him the truth? Surely she did more than these part-time, dead-end jobs? Working for Celia? Selling ice-cream? Building walls? She was hiding something and it was coming between them.

The hospital was only a couple of miles away in Otley. It had a minor injuries department rather than the full accident and emergency provision of the infirmary in Leeds so Beck hoped it could handle a snake bite.

"Coming through. Snake bite. Coming through." Flick pushed open the doors and propelled Beck into the reception like a presidential candidate.

She'd looked for a wheelchair in the entrance and expressed her deep disappointment when Beck ushered her on.

"It's an emergency. It's a snake bite," Flick told the lady behind the counter.

"Name."

"Adder," said Flick.

"Your address, Mr. Adder?"

"Thank you, Flick. I think I'll take it from here. My name's Alexander Beckett."

"It's an emergency," Flick repeated.

She hopped from one foot to the other as Beck provided the rest of his details.

"Take a seat," the receptionist said.

"But it's an emergency," Flick protested. "Look at his hand. It's like a balloon. It's getting bigger and bigger. It might burst."

"I think they've registered that," Beck said. "Why don't you get me a glass of water?"

He watched as she dashed off, narrowly avoiding a collision with a young boy on crutches and after that with a porter pushing an empty trolley. Beck was intrigued by how she managed to be agile and awkward at the same time. She was all angles and looked like she could twist her body into all sorts of positions. Beck put a stop to that train of thought. She'd probably break his neck with her thighs. He moaned and a little old lady sitting next to him glanced at him sympathetically.

"Looks very painful," she said.

"She is," Beck replied.

By the time Flick returned with the water, Beck had disappeared.

"He's in a treatment room," an old lady told her. "Didn't look good."

Flick gulped.

"Did you try and suck the poison out?" the woman asked.

"No."

"Hopefully it won't have spread. Bad news if it has."

Flick glanced at her and wondered if it was Gertrude in disguise. How serious could it be? What if they had to amputate? Oh God. Would he believe her if she told him she didn't care if he only had one arm? No, he'd think she fancied him out of pity. Flick lifted the cup to her mouth and drank all the water before she remembered Beck had wanted it.

Several minutes passed and he failed to reappear. Flick's anxiety grew. Although she tried to convince herself everything was fine, another part of her brain told her Beck was dying and that she needed to hear his last words even if they were "piss off". What must he think of her? He'd slaved away on the wall and she hadn't even given him a kiss. Finally, she could stand it no longer. She made for the first nurse she saw.

"I'm looking for a man. He's tall, dark and handsome."

"Me too," quipped the nurse.

"Well, this one has a hand the size of a melon. Maybe a watermelon by now. It's not green though. Well, it might be."

"They're just patching him up. Room Three."

Beck lay on a couch with his eyes closed but he knew Flick had come in. He recognized her panicked breathing. Her hand squeezed his leg and he remained motionless. He really needed her to go away. Her fingers moved up his thigh.

"Flick, what are you doing?"

"You're alive," she yelled and moved her hand.

"Only just." Beck opened his eyes.

"I couldn't see your chest moving. I thought maybe you'd gone into anaphylactic shock and died."

"Did the fact that I'm still warm not give anything away?"

"You're all hard. I was thinking rigor mortis."

"If you'd carried on up my leg, I think you might have struck lucky."

Flick blushed and Beck smiled.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Better. I'm not breaking my back building a wall anymore."

"You see, there's always a bright side. So what's happening?"

"I'm waiting for antihistamines and antibiotics, then I can go."

Her mouth opened in shock. "They don't want to keep you in?"

"No. You can go home, Flick. I'll be okay to drive back."

He wanted her gone before the nurse returned to give him the shot. Beck was fine with most things but not with needles. He needed to lie down at the thought of a jab. Fainting was not unknown. He didn't want Flick to think he was a wimp, but his cold sweat was about to give him away.

"I'll wait for you," Flick said.

"No, I want you to go," he said in a firm voice, aware the nurse would return any second.

"Okay," she mumbled but she didn't move.

"Please go," Beck said in desperation. "I don't want you here."

He could have kicked himself when he saw the hurt on her face but she went.

Chapter Fifteen

By the time Josh and Kirsten got home, Flick had showered, cleaned the house and made a chicken salad.

Kirsten was suspicious. "What have you done?"

"Why do you think I've done something?"

"The house, the food?" Josh raised his eyebrows.

"Beck got bitten by a snake and it was my fault," she blurted.

"Don't ever volunteer to be a spy," Kirsten said. "We hadn't even resorted to inflicting pain."

Flick told them everything and they tried not to laugh.

"It isn't funny. He could have died. He must think I'm trying to kill him and all I want to do is—" She clamped her mouth shut.

"What?" Josh asked.

The phone rang and Flick grabbed it hoping it was Beck.

It wasn't.

"Hello. I'm ringing from 'Clean as a Whistle'. We come out to clean your carpets, upholstery, curtains and we just happen to be in your area next week and we're doing a special promotion at the moment and we wondered if you'd be interested in one of our experts giving you a quote for any work that needs to be done and we can—"

Taken back by the high speed and high volume delivery, Flick flinched, holding the phone slightly away from her ear. "Hold on," she managed to interrupt. "Can you get out blood?"

"Yes, no problem."

"There's quite a lot. It's on the curtains, the couch and the carpet."

"Yes," the voice not so loud and confident now.

"How about sheep's blood?" Flick asked.

"Er...probably."

"And pig's blood?" She turned to Kirsten and Josh. "Apparently not pig's blood."

They had their hands over their mouths trying not to laugh.

"We'll buy a new couch then. Thank you." Flick put the phone down, ticked the list and wrote thirty seconds. As she walked away, the phone rang again and she reached for it.

"Oh, you can remove pig's blood?"

Kirsten and Josh rolled around in hysterics. Flick offered the phone to Kirsten. "It's Pierce."

Kirsten took the phone and grinned at Flick. "Sorry. Yes, I know she's crazy."

Flick wished it had been Beck on the phone. She'd rung to see if he was okay, but Willow had answered, snapped out Beck wasn't there and broken the connection. When Flick tried again, the line was engaged. She wondered if the swelling had gone down. She felt terrible. If she hadn't thrown the sandwich, the snake would have left Beck alone. Now he wanted her to leave him alone.

She looked up when Kirsten gasped. It didn't take long to work out why the beam had gone from her face. Pierce had called to say he wasn't coming to the party. Flick pried the phone out of Kirsten's fingers and listened but there was no one there. A pity because she had a few well-chosen words from the cesspit part of her brain that she wanted to launch in Pierce's direction. Flick put the phone down and steered Kirsten toward the couch.

Josh's heart lurched as Kirsten sat down and burst into tears. He made frantic faces at Flick behind Kirsten's back, trying to find out what was wrong.

Flick mouthed, "Pierce not coming to party."

Josh pulled a sympathetic face. The moment he reached the kitchen he did a triumphant fist-pumping gesture that sent wine spilling from his glass.

"Thank you God, thank you, thank you, thank you," he whispered, grabbing a wad of paper towels and listening carefully to what was being said in the other room.

"How could he do this to me? Should I finish with him?" Kirsten sobbed.

"Yes, dump him," Flick said. "He doesn't deserve you."

"How many good-looking, professional, unattached men do you think there are out there? Can I find another one?"

"Easily," Flick said.

By the time Josh returned with his sad face in place and three mugs of tea, Kirsten had moved from simpering self-pity to full-blown towering fury. He wondered what he'd missed as the kettle boiled.

"How dare he? It's my bloody birthday party. He's my bloody boyfriend."

Josh glanced at Flick. This was strong language from Kirsten who had made a paltry one pound contribution to the forty seven pounds they'd donated from their week-long charity swear box last March.

"How can some stupid shooting event be more important than his girlfriend's birthday? He knows how I feel about shooting. I hope he bloody well shoots himself in the foot." Kirsten paused. "Or the head."

"Or the balls," Flick suggested.

Kirsten turned to look at her, burst out laughing and almost immediately switched back to crying.

Josh was all too aware that as he came from a different planet—in fact, he suspected a different solar system—he'd be wise to say as little as possible in case he got his balls shot off, too. So, he maintained the concerned look and lingered within earshot for instructions while at the same time his mind launched into hyper-drive, thinking of a way to take advantage of this unexpected opportunity.

"You've never liked Pierce, have you?" Kirsten asked.

Flick hedged. "Well..."

Kirsten turned to Josh. "What do you think of him?"

Josh looked around for someone else with his name and in the end repeated Flick's comment. "Well..."

It didn't work.

"What does that mean?" Kirsten asked him.

Josh's mouth opened but nothing came out. How come she hadn't pounced on Flick? How was his "well" different to hers?

"You don't like him," Kirsten said in a dull voice. "I thought you two got on okay."

Josh turned in despair to Flick who took a deep breath before she spoke.

"I don't like Pierce. I did at first, but he's unkind to you. He takes you for granted."

"Do you feel the same?" Kirsten asked Josh.

"Yes." *I absolutely loathe him.*

"Why didn't you say anything?" Kirsten sniffled.

"Because if we'd told you we thought he was a bastard you'd have hated us," Josh mumbled. "You'd have defended him every time he did something stupid."

"I wouldn't," Kirsten said.

"You do anyway," Flick said.

"So I should finish with him?"

Josh waited for Flick to say yes again and she didn't. He desperately wanted to say yes but he remembered what Flick had told him, that women generally regretted asking guys for advice, because sometimes they gave it. Similarly, if women asked you to tell the truth, that wasn't necessarily what they wanted. He pressed his lips together to stop him saying anything.

"You know you can't really ask us to make that decision," Flick said. "Do you feel like this because he's let you down over the party or is there more to it?"

"More," Kirsten admitted.

"Then you know what to do," Flick said.

"I'll never get over him," Kirsten whispered.

"Yes, you will," Josh said. "You'll meet someone special who deserves you. He'll adore you and never hurt you."

The pair turned to look at him and Josh gulped.

"Flick, you're going to be late for work," he mumbled.

"Maybe I shouldn't go."

"I'll look after Kirsten," he said. "I don't mind." He glared at Flick behind Kirsten's back.

When Flick was in the hall she called him out.

"Remember Josh—listen, be sympathetic, wipe away tears but offer no solutions no matter how much you're tempted. Maybe this is what you've been waiting for, but if you want my advice, don't take advantage tonight." She paused. "Wait until tomorrow."

Josh returned to sit with Kirsten.

"I'm not unreasonable, am I, Josh? I mean, you're a man. If you were still going out with Sadie, would you have done this?" Kirsten sniffled.

"No," he said.

"He's ruined everything."

"No," Josh said again. "No, he hasn't. This time tomorrow, you're having a party. Lots of your friends will be here. Most of them will get drunk and stuff themselves with lovely food and you're going to have a great time."

"You're so sensible, Josh. Maybe I'm overreacting. I suppose Pierce couldn't help it. He kept saying he was sorry. Am I being unreasonable?"

She burst into tears again and Josh pulled her against his chest. He wanted to tell her Pierce wasn't worth it but he was, only how could he? She needed his support now, not criticism. He'd have to sit and listen, offer his shoulder, tissues and wine, but not his undying devotion. Not yet.

As Kirsten alternated between tears, misery and fury, Josh realized he loved her even more. When she felt sorry for herself, she was like a little animal trying to burrow under his arm. When anger took over, she turned into a creature possessed, trembling with fury, eyes blazing like that mad flashing Santa they had in the attic. He'd never had anyone show that much passion over him. He was boring Josh, steady and reliable, always good to catch a spider or unblock the toilet, but there was more to him than that. He longed for Kirsten to look at him and see the Josh he could be.

"Why couldn't Pierce have told them he had a prior engagement? He could have come here afterward. Why couldn't he have told me sooner, not told me over the phone?"

Kirsten repeated the same things over and over, each time in a slightly different way as though the list of complaints against Pierce grew longer.

"Why didn't he explain he was going to his girlfriend's birthday party?" she asked.

Well, Josh could see why, and before he'd met Kirsten, he might have done the same thing, but he kept quiet.

"I wonder if he's trying to dump me?" Kirsten muttered, and Josh's ears pricked up.

"How could he want to?" he whispered.

"He said he'd come straight here from the hotel on Sunday morning."

For a shag. Josh seethed. To speak or not to speak, that was the question. Not to, the answer.

"I sometimes think all he's interested in is sex," Kirsten mumbled.

Josh didn't need to hear this. It was slow torture. He wondered what she'd do if he kissed her to shut her up.

"He's much more experienced than me."

The more she talked the more Josh became aware of feeling something he wasn't supposed to. Maybe if he tried hard – wrong word, tried not to feel it, it would go away. No, didn't work. He grabbed a cushion to put over the bulge in his trousers.

"What are you doing?" Kirsten asked.

"I thought you'd be more comfortable."

"That's so sweet, Josh. You're not like other men."

Oh yes I am, Josh thought, willing his erection to subside.

"I can tell you anything."

No, don't, Josh pleaded, at least no more about sex.

"I want to watch *North and South*," Kirsten said.

Oh dear God, no.

"You'll watch it with me, won't you, Josh?"

"Yes, course I will." What had he said? He'd been thinking rolling naked in brambles held more attraction.

"Will you put it on for me?" Kirsten asked.

"You do it and I'll get us a glass of wine." He hoped the place he'd hidden the two-disk set remained undiscovered.

Josh was relieved to see the bulge had gone as he went into the kitchen. The mere mention of the DVD had been enough to quell his ardor. But by the time he returned with two large glasses of wine, *North and South* had started. Kirsten had the instincts of a bloodhound. Josh knew every scene, every bloody line. Elizabeth Gaskell should have been strangled at birth. Only the fact that he'd be next to Kirsten for hours kept him from running out of the house screaming.

"He is so sweet." Kirsten sighed as John Thornton turned his smoldering gaze on Margaret Hale, the woman he had both repulsed and fascinated. "No one will ever want me that much."

Me, Josh wanted to scream. *I do. Me, you idiot.* He idly stroked Kirsten's arm as he tried to pluck up enough courage to kiss her.

Kirsten could feel Josh's heart racing under her ear, hear the sound of his breathing. The rise and fall of his chest soothed her, as though she rocked on a boat. His fingers were silky smooth on her skin. Kirsten moved so that her head was higher. She'd never noticed before how nice he smelled. Pierce always wore weird aftershave that cost a fortune and tasted horrible.

"I love you," Josh murmured.

Kirsten felt his heartbeat quadruple, enough to tell her she really had heard him say that. Her heart fluttered. React or pretend nothing happened? She turned to see Josh gazing at her with his beautiful hazel eyes. Why hadn't she noticed them before? His lips were slightly open. Kirsten reached up, pulled his head down and kissed him, but as he began to kiss her back she was suddenly horrified.

"Sorry," she mumbled, scrambled off him and fled.

Kirsten closed her bedroom door and sat down on the floor with her back against it. What had she done? She'd kissed Josh and he'd started to kiss her and it had felt completely right. Or had she been thinking about Pierce, imagined she was kissing him and it was completely wrong? She needed to speak to Flick, but she wasn't allowed to take her mobile phone to the gas station. If Kirsten hadn't been drunk, she'd have driven there. Only when she thought about it, she didn't know exactly where Flick worked. She ought to have asked in case there was an emergency.

Like now.

Kirsten groaned in frustration. What was she going to do if Josh knocked on the door? Kiss him again to see if it felt the same? But maybe that would be a mistake. When she caught herself chewing her hair, Kirsten knew she was in deep trouble.

At first Josh thought he'd died and gone to heaven, and if this was what happened in heaven then he hoped he was dead. He was kissing her, really kissing her. She was so soft and sweet and so—not there anymore.

Now he wallowed in an agony of indecision. Go upstairs. Don't go upstairs. Kill yourself. Don't kill yourself. What were Flick's words of warning? Don't take advantage of the situation and what had he done? Kissed Kirsten, although that wasn't strictly accurate. She'd kissed him and it was everything he'd hoped for, but a bit too brief. But now he had to do the right thing and not go upstairs. He had to let Kirsten make up her mind what she wanted.

But maybe he should go up and tell her he loved her. Josh got up and then sat down again. It was an action he repeated far too often over the next fifteen minutes until he decided it was easier to get drunk instead.

Chapter Sixteen

Flick crawled into bed exhausted. Her last dance had been as a cowgirl, a foot-stomping, hat-twirling, whip-flicking, breast-shaking routine that involved her getting drenched. Those sitting along the edge of the platform were armed with water pistols, and although Gerry had fixed them so the stream of water wouldn't take off their nipples, that was exactly where the men aimed. Flick always came home shattered.

She lay on her back, wondering if Beck was all right and hoping he'd come to the party. When she'd left him at the hospital, he'd seemed desperate for her to go, but he hadn't sounded angry, which made a change. It was lovely that he'd wanted to kiss her, even if he hadn't, so if he came to the party, should she kiss him? Walk right up and press her lips against his before she slipped with a cheese knife and stabbed him or accidentally smothered him with a plate of sausage rolls? Maybe he didn't like fast women. Maybe he liked to be the one to make the first move. Maybe with some snake venom still in him, he didn't want to make the move.

Flick knew Beck deserved someone who didn't pole dance to make ends meet, someone who hadn't been sacked for stealing money, even if she hadn't done it. He deserved someone who wasn't trying to kill him. Not that she wanted to kill him, she wanted to kiss him. Perhaps if she kissed him everything would be all right. He'd find her irresistible and forget about the little accidents. If he came to the party, she'd kiss him. Walk right up to him and kiss him. She slid into a dream where they kissed so deeply they suffocated each other.

* * * * *

"Flick. Wake up. Flick."

Flick opened her eyes. Kirsten's face hovered inches above hers.

"Happy Birthday," Flick mumbled and rolled over. "Present's on the floor. Now piss off."

"No, don't go back to sleep. I have to talk to you."

"What time is it?"

"Seven."

"Kirsten, I'm going to kill you." Flick couldn't help the whine. She hadn't crawled into bed until 3:15.

"I kissed Josh."

Flick opened her eyes and took a hammer to the jealous imp jumping in her head. Kirsten had kissed Josh and she couldn't even manage to kiss Beck?

"And?" Flick asked.

"And nothing. I just kissed him."

"Did he kiss you back?"

"Umm," Kirsten smiled. "For a moment. It was lovely."

"So what's the problem?" Flick rolled over and closed her eyes.

"Why did I do it?"

"You were feeling lonely, upset, pissed off with Pierce, and Josh is nice guy and a good kisser."

"How do you know he's a good kisser?"

Flick tried to keep hold of the sheet but Kirsten pulled it away.

"We kissed once when we were drunk. To test a theory. I love Josh to bits but I don't fancy him and he doesn't fancy me. He's crazy about you."

"About me? Sit up and talk to me properly."

Flick muttered under her breath as Kirsten kept poking her.

"How do you know?" Kirsten asked.

"I've seen the way he looks at you. I've seen the way he looks at Pierce. And he asked me not to say anything."

"He asked you not to say anything?"

Flick knew that would clinch it.

"Oh God. Pierce." Kirsten slumped on her back next to Flick. "What am I going to do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"You sound like a psychiatrist."

"Is that how you'd like me to sound?" Flick teased.

"Stop it. What do I do?"

"Wait and see what Josh says."

There was a long pause. "Yeah, that's a good idea. Do you want to go back to sleep?"

God, please. "No, I'll get up. We have a party to organize."

Flick had barely settled at the kitchen table when Kirsten started again.

"What am I going to do?"

Flick gripped her toast in case her hands flew to Kirsten's throat. For someone who made important decisions in her professional life, Kirsten was a wobbly canoe in choppy water when it came to personal stuff.

"Tell Pierce it's over."

"I thought I'd found 'the one'."

"Can you see yourself married to Pierce, bringing up his kids? What sort of father would he be? Controlling and critical like he is with you? Would he ever let them win at Snap?"

Kirsten winced.

"You don't even play with him yourself because he's smug when he wins and sulks when he loses. Even in discussions he always has to have the last word."

"But he can be kind. I thought I loved him. What if he is 'the one'?"

Josh froze outside the kitchen door, squeezing Kirsten's birthday present in his hands, wondering if he should move or keep listening.

"What if he's not?" Flick asked.

"I don't know what to do. I thought we were right for each other."

Josh pressed his lips together.

"He has a nice car," Kirsten muttered.

Josh's fingers pierced the wrapping paper. Kirsten had never shown any interest in cars. She couldn't tell a Lexus from a Lada.

"He's selfish and boring," Flick said.

"Yes." There was a pause. "Oh God, did I say yes to that?"

"And you're not even drunk."

Josh vowed never to be boring again. He bounced into the kitchen with a smile on his face, realizing he should have thought of something inspiring to say first. Flailing, he stuttered, "Happy b-birthday. I'm thinking of er...going...trekking in Nepal."

Both Flick and Kirsten stared at him in astonishment.

"You take your car to a mailbox less than a hundred meters away, so I find that hard to believe," Flick said.

He scowled at her and smiled at Kirsten. "Happy birthday." He held out the battered present and a card.

"Oooh, thank you." Kirsten carefully took off the wrapping paper.

He'd bought her a box containing a wine tasting system supposed to help the average person evaluate the different qualities of wine. The three of them played a game when they opened a bottle—what wine am I drinking? The only thing Kirsten ever got right was the color and if she wore a blindfold she didn't always get that right.

"Josh, this is fantastic. Look at all these scents."

She opened one of the small bronze containers and sniffed. "Oh God, that's vile."

Josh took it from her and turned it over. "Cat pee."

"What does that have to do with wine tasting?" Kirsten asked.

"If it smells like cat pee, don't drink it," Flick advised. "There's probably one in there labeled 'Josh's feet'."

"It's next to Flick's pork casserole," he said.

Flick growled.

"It's a lovely present. Thank you, Josh." Kirsten moved forward to give him a hug and suddenly froze with her lips in front of his mouth before landing a quick peck on his cheek.

Josh wished he'd had the courage to buy her the necklace he'd spotted. Maybe he'd have had a proper kiss then, like last night. What had happened last night? What were they going to do? He wanted to talk about it but it seemed Kirsten wanted to pretend it hadn't happened.

"Open mine now." Flick handed her two packages.

"*A Hundred Places To See Before You Die?*" Kirsten read.

"I figured it's only a present you can give someone who isn't in imminent danger of dropping dead. I think trekking in Nepal is probably in there. You and Josh can go together."

"It was just a thought," Josh said, panic welling in his stomach.

"I didn't think you meant it." Flick winked at him.

Kirsten unwrapped the second package and lifted out a Nicole Farhi dress. She held it up against herself and looked at Flick in amazement.

"This is where I confess it's not new. I don't think they realized what they were selling. I hope you don't mind someone else wore it first."

"It's fabulous. Didn't you want it?"

"Yes, but it's not my size."

"You two are the best friends I could have." Kirsten put her arms out for a hug.

Josh's heart sank. He didn't want to be just her friend. He hugged her only for a couple of seconds before he rushed out of the room.

* * * * *

Flick winced after she opened the oven door. The cake had not risen. It remained as flat as when she'd placed it in there thirteen minutes before. How could that be? The only thing it had done was change from one disgusting shade of brown to another. She nudged the shelf and the cake wobbled. Not good.

She wondered whether to turn it out on to the cooling rack and risk it oozing through to the work surface or whether she should leave it in the tin in case it set like a jelly. Not that her jellies ever set, but that was because she couldn't resist consuming a few of the raw cubes and then forgot to adjust the water. With this cake she had followed the instructions more or less exactly. Another egg could never be a bad thing, surely? Even if she'd had to scrape it off the work surface? Something had clearly gone wrong. In the end, the decision was taken out of her hands because Josh burst into the

kitchen to tell her to hurry. They were supposed to be going to buy the food and alcohol for the party.

"Is that it?" Josh asked, trying to see what Flick had spent the best part of the morning flapping about.

"Yes," she snapped.

It was Josh's fault she'd spent too long in a harassed condition in the kitchen when she should have been harassed in the bedroom, although she would have only been painting walls. After Josh had suddenly announced Flick would be making the cake, he'd handed her the recipe and gone off to mow the lawn. The fact that Kirsten lounged on the patio, reading a book and wearing a bikini had nothing to do with his change of mind, Flick was sure. Now he had the nerve to complain over how long she was taking.

"Did you remember to line the tin with baking parchment?" Josh asked.

Oh shit. "No, I forgot but I did grease it well." She had slathered a thick layer of margarine on the sides and the bottom of the container.

"You better not leave it in the tin in case it sticks. Turn it out."

Flick picked it up with the oven gloves and turned it over a plate. When she lifted the tin, the plate was empty. It was like she'd cocked up a magician's trick. She put the tin down, tapped on the top three times and lifted it once more. Still nothing. There was no point saying abracadabra. Flick looked around for something to bang on the base. Josh leaned against the edge of the table and watched.

After five hard blows with her shoe, there was an unpleasant squelching sound similar to the one their sink produced trying to swallow too much cereal. Flick nervously lifted the tin.

"It's out," she announced. "It's a girl, slightly premature."

Josh peered over her shoulder. "Did you preheat the oven?"

"Yes." No.

"How long did you cook it?"

"Thirteen minutes."

Josh opened his mouth and then closed it again.

"What?" Flick demanded.

"Nothing."

"That's what it said. It was your recipe."

Josh still said nothing.

"What?" Flick repeated.

"Thirteen doesn't sound very long. You sure it didn't say thirty?"

"Absolutely." Shit. That probably explained why it looked hollow in the middle. Flick squeaked. "It's getting bigger."

The cake oozed sideways.

She sighed. "I'm going to have to chuck it away. We'll have to buy one."

Josh lifted the bin up from under the sink. Flick slid the cake in.

"Maybe it's just as well," she said with a grin. "There has to be a million calories in it. Three bars of chocolate, six eggs and a bag of sugar. All that and it looks like a cowpat."

"What looks like a cowpat?" Kirsten asked as she came into the kitchen.

"The cake I just made for you," Flick said.

"I'll see you in the car." Josh looked away from Kirsten.

The moment he'd gone, she slumped onto a kitchen chair. "He won't talk to me. What am I going to do? Maybe I read it wrong. Maybe he's not interested."

"Kirsten, he's spent all morning mowing the lawn so he could look at you in your bikini. Believe me, he's interested. He's just nervous."

"He's sorry he kissed me." Kirsten looked up and did her mistreated puppy look.

"Yes, all right." Flick rolled her eyes. "I'll speak to him."

* * * * *

"Faint heart never won fair lady," said Flick as she drove toward Guiseley.

Josh sighed. "Right."

"Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

"Give it a rest."

"*Carpe Diem*. Strike while the iron's hot. He who hesitates is lost. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. No, not that one."

"You were the one who told me not to do anything last night," Josh said.

"That was then, this is now. You need to say something. Life's too short. You might fall off a mountain while you're trekking in Nepal. Tell her."

"Okay, I'll say something tonight. Now drop it."

Flick pulled into Morrison's car park. "Twenty minutes. No longer or I turn into a demented axe murderer."

Kirsten had given them a long list and they weren't allowed to come back without everything. Flick gave the list to Josh and then pushed the cart at breakneck speed down every aisle. He grabbed food from the shelves and flung packets and bottles in her direction. Two elderly ladies actually clapped when Josh threw two bags of crisps and Flick let go of the cart to catch one in each hand.

"Go for the alcohol," one of the woman shouted after them.

"They think we're doing one of those three minute dash-around-and-pick-up-as-much-as-you-can affairs," Josh panted. "Slow down, Flick."

When they finally reached the checkout the cart was overflowing.

"Having a party?" asked a woman behind them.

Flick looked on the belt at the fifteen French baguettes, one hundred tiny sausages, thirty packets of crisps, five huge wedges of cheese, four tubs of ice cream and enough booze to stock a pub.

"No, I'm a raging bulimic and he's a recovering alcoholic." Flick turned to smile at the woman who'd spoken and gasped.

"Does Gordon know you're bulimic?" The woman glared at her.

Flick took a deep breath. "Sally, I—" She found herself talking to thin air.

"Who was that?" Josh asked.

"Just someone from work."

"She doesn't really think—"

"Hey, do you think we've got enough sausages?"

"Yes."

"This lot should last us until tomorrow, don't you think?"

"Possibly," he said with a laugh.

Flick wasn't so cheerful when Josh couldn't see her face. Why did Sally Greene dislike her so much? Enough to make it look as though she'd stolen from Grinstead's?

Chapter Seventeen

When Kirsten sashayed into the kitchen that night, wearing the slinky red dress Flick had given her, Josh's gasp coincided with the one shooting out of Flick. Of course Flick didn't also get the instant hard-on. Josh grabbed a kitchen towel to hide his crotch.

"What's the matter? Too much?" Kirsten asked.

Josh opened his mouth, closed it and then shook his head.

"You look sensational," Flick said. "I didn't know you had such an amazing cleavage."

"It's a work of art. Strategically placed sticky tape."

If only he could unwrap her. "You're a work of art," Josh spluttered. He handed her a glass of champagne. "Happy birthday."

The three of them chinked flutes.

"Not wanting to wreck the mood," he said, "but you two should pace yourselves, otherwise you'll be pissed by nine and asleep by ten." He looked at Kirsten when he said that. A couple of glasses of wine in the evening and Kirsten usually dropped comatose onto the couch. "Overdo it and your companion for the night could turn out to be a chunk of white porcelain." He stared at Flick.

"Okay, Dad," she said and tipped the rest of the glass straight down her throat.

Kirsten laughed.

"We have a surprise for you, birthday girl," Flick said. "All this time you've spent soaking in the bath and using the last of the hot water—but we won't yell at you because it's your birthday—we've been busy."

Josh took a deep breath and grabbed Kirsten's hand. "Shut your eyes and no peeking."

He led her out of the back door and nodded to Flick to switch on the lights.

"Okay, open them now," Josh whispered.

Kirsten gasped. The whole of the garden twinkled with lights. Every tree, bush and even the hedge had been decorated.

"It will look better when it's really dark," he said.

"We borrowed sets off everyone." Flick ran on to the lawn and twirled in a circle.

"It's the most beautiful thing I ever saw." Kirsten sighed.

"It was Josh's idea," Flick said. "I'm just the laborer. He remembered how you didn't want to take the lights down at Christmas."

"You are so sweet." Kirsten smiled at him.

"And he has his own hair and teeth," Flick yelled. "Mostly anyway."

She swerved as Josh tried to grab her. "I'm going for a shower. Put some music on. Turn it up so I can hear."

Alone. Josh could feel his heart trying to burst out of his chest. All he had to do was pull Kirsten into his arms and give her a birthday kiss. Do it. By the time his arm moved, so had Kirsten.

"Music!" Kirsten said with a laugh.

Josh followed her into the house. When Kirsten had announced she wanted a James Bond party, he'd spent hours downloading appropriate songs from the movies. He'd produced two full CDs, all the theme tunes interspersed with songs he knew Kirsten liked. If he hadn't managed to kiss her by the end of the first disc, he'd shoot himself.

* * * * *

When Flick came back downstairs Kirsten and Josh were giggling in the kitchen. Josh was in his tux. They'd already opened another bottle of champagne. Flick wondered what had happened to pacing yourself.

"Wow, Flick. Is that one of your creations?" Josh asked.

"Originally French Correction. More recently, Help the Aged charity shop in Otley."

"If any aged men see you in that they will need help." Kirsten laughed.

Flick wore a strapless black tube dress, two sizes too small and tourniquet tight. She'd unpicked the seams and sewn it back together with long lengths of thin red ribbon. It clung to every curve and she wore nothing underneath. Beck had better come.

"Are they new?" Kirsten stared at her shoes while Josh's eyes hadn't dropped that far.

"New-ish," Flick answered. Her shoes from work – high-heeled, strappy red things she danced in.

"Josh, put your tongue away." Kirsten frowned.

He turned back to her. "Reflex response. Can't help it. Flick needs locking up."

"Make sure you lock someone nice in the room with me."

Flick knew almost none of the people Kirsten had invited. Most worked at the law firm. The others were university friends or Josh's colleagues. Although Flick told Kirsten she'd asked half a dozen people, in fact she'd invited no one. Her friends at Grinstead's had drifted off after the trouble and she'd drifted off too. She didn't want to keep in touch because it reminded her of what she'd lost. Flick had hoped some of her former colleagues would keep in contact, but they hadn't. She understood. They still floated while she'd sunk. If they took her hand, she might pull them under.

* * * * *

Kirsten took a photograph of each guest as they arrived. She'd assumed the men would wear black tie and the women their sexiest dresses but many had come as Bond characters. Her supervisor had dressed as Odd Job, complete with bowler hat. The guy she shared an office with arrived holding a stuffed cat and asked Kirsten to stroke his pussy.

"Very soft," she said, tickling the cat's head.

"Like me to stroke yours?" he asked.

"I don't have – oh very funny, Simon." Kirsten rolled her eyes.

Several people sported gold-wrapped fingers and one imaginative guy had even come with a makeshift Union Jack parachute hanging out of a backpack. Most of the women wore pretty dresses but Sarah, another trainee solicitor, had come as a female Q in a lab coat and nothing else. She tried to waylay Josh but he made straight for Kirsten.

"Don't look now," Kirsten said, "but the guy Flick fancies has just walked in."

"Where?" Josh turned.

Kirsten grabbed his bow tie intending to yank his head around but the whole thing sprang away from his collar. She was so surprised she let it snap back. Tears sprang into his eyes.

"Sorry. Hey, I bought you a proper one last Christmas."

"I can't tie it," he said.

"I'll teach you."

"Will you?" Josh stared at her.

"Course I will." She hugged him. "There, does that feel better?"

He nodded.

"No stinging pain across your lower face?"

He shook his head.

"Liar."

For a moment, neither of them moved. Why was he looking at her like that? Like he wanted –

"I have to take a photograph," Kirsten whispered and turned to the new arrivals.

Willow hugged her and introduced the pretty blonde standing next to Beck.

"Kirsten this is Isobel. She's working on the dig."

Isobel gave Kirsten a bottle of champagne. "Hope you don't mind me gate-crashing."

"Not at all." Kirsten felt bad for Flick.

Isobel was the ultimate Bond girl. She'd wrapped herself in a white bed sheet, her hair tousled and her face made up to look flushed, as if she and James had just fallen out of bed. Beck wore naval uniform, complete with cap, and he looked divine. He presented Kirsten with a large box of chocolates and a bottle of wine.

"How's your snake bite?" she asked, glancing at his bandaged hand.

When a sea of faces turned in his direction, Kirsten realized her mistake. "Sorry," she mouthed.

"You said you'd cut yourself on broken glass. What happened?" Isobel demanded.

* * * * *

Flick turned at the end of the dance and saw Beck in the corner of the room. He looked so drop-dead gorgeous she almost did drop dead. Then she saw the drop-dead gorgeous woman in the sheet holding onto his arm, stroking his hand and looking into his eyes and Flick felt something break inside her.

So there would be no kiss. He'd probably be allergic to her. After all, she'd wrecked his dig, tried to drown him, blow him up, bury him under a ton of stones and even done the Cleopatra bit with the snake. He'd told her to go away at the hospital and turned up tonight with a half-naked woman on his arm. She should forget him. Flick grabbed the nearest bloke, pulled him to the middle of the room and found a moth-eaten cat in her arms.

Flick had made many important decisions about men based on their dancing ability. She'd found rhythm and energy levels on the dance floor to be excellent indicators of whether there was any chance of compatibility in bed. The cat had more life than the guy she'd just shimmied away from. Miserable Bastard had been a pretty good dancer, though a little inclined to forget Flick danced with him. Giles, who had just moved in front of her, was appalling—all hips—so that the top half of his body looked unconnected to the bottom half. Sheet-woman was dancing with Josh and bobbed up and down on the spot, her arms clamped to her sides. That it could hardly be called dancing didn't matter when you had boobs like hers. Flick sighed.

Beck, within touching distance and dancing with Lab Coat, moved with a languid grace that reminded her of a big cat. Just once Flick had caught his gaze and she sizzled like an ice cube tossed on to a bright halogen hob. Forget playing cool, she was desperate to dance with him. One dance wouldn't do any damage.

Beck hoped his mouth hadn't dropped open when he'd seen Flick's dress. She looked as though she'd been poured into it. She was the sexiest thing in the room and boy, could she move. Like watching a strip of material floating in a breeze, she had grace and style. No jerky arms. No dipping and diving. No self-conscious shimmying. He was in trouble. He wanted her.

Only he also wanted to take a leak. As soon as this dance finished and he could get away from the corporate lawyer who'd zipped herself to him, he'd head to the bathroom. Then he'd take his life in his hands and ask the redhead to dance. As the music changed, he dashed out of the door.

Flick tsked. She couldn't get a much clearer rejection than that. Beck couldn't get away fast enough. She stamped off to the kitchen and scooped up a cup of punch, taking a large gulp before she remembered how terrible it tasted. With the way to the sink blocked, she couldn't spit it out and had to swallow. Desperate for something to take the taste away she picked a gold foil wrapped chocolate ball from the pyramid Josh had carefully built, only to see the whole lot collapse.

"Fuck."

Flick scrambled about on the floor, gathering up the chocolates and putting them back on the table. Two had come out of their wrappers so she popped them in her mouth and stood to find herself facing Beck.

"Hi." He smiled at her.

Speaking was impossible. She attempted a smile.

"Why do you look like a hamster?"

Flick sucked both chocolates out of her cheeks and into the center of her mouth, chewed frantically, swallowed and a piece of nut lodged in her throat. She began to cough. Beck offered her a glass of punch.

Flick shook her head. "It tastes like rat poison," she gasped.

Beck pushed his way through to the sink and poured it away, refilling the glass with water.

Flick drank the lot. "Thanks."

"How do you know it tastes like rat poison?" Beck asked.

"I helped make it and I did try rat poison once when I was a child. Just a lick."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"How's your bite?"

"Fine."

Kiss him. Kiss him. Kiss him. He looked at her with those dangerous eyes and Flick lost her nerve. She picked up a couple of strips of carrot from the dish on the kitchen table.

"Talking of rats has just reminded me I've forgotten to feed Hannibal." She had to get away from Beck before something bad happened.

"You have a rat?"

"Hamster."

"Can I help?" Beck asked.

She briefly considered getting him to sign a waiver in case Hannibal leapt for his jugular. "Okay. It's upstairs."

Beck had his gaze fixed to her backside as she walked up, the temptation to touch almost too much to resist. Her dress was skin tight and he doubted she wore

underwear. He wanted to run his fingers down the ribbons. Actually, he wanted to take a pair of scissors to the ribbons.

He followed her into a bedroom. One look at the bed—a four poster draped with acres of translucent voile and a pale pink duvet—and he pictured Flick lying on it, naked, her long legs wrapped round his waist, still wearing those high heels with her hands gripping the headboard. Maybe tied to the headboard. He stifled a groan.

“You live here with Kirsten?” he asked.

“She lives with me. It’s my house. Mine and my sister’s, but she’s away at university. It’s her hamster and it’s not called Hannibal. Its name is Fluffy but it has a lot in common with Hannibal Lecter. It likes human flesh. It’s bitten me every single time I’ve touched it. The little monster lies in the cage, pretends to be dead and the moment I reach in to check, it lunges for me.”

“So you’re not a veterinary nurse specializing in hamsters?”

“No.” Flick blushed.

In the corner sat an elaborate system of multicolored tunnels curving in every conceivable direction to connect several rooms. There were see-through turrets, a maze and even a gym with a seesaw and exercise wheel.

“Wow, hamster paradise,” Beck said.

“Clever marketing strategy. Pet shops sell hamsters for a few quid, but to house them and keep them happy takes an entire week’s wages. This system can be added to ad infinitum. Hamlet to conurbation in the flash of a wallet. But although Hannibal has its own mini-city with every treat imaginable, it would rather live under the floorboards snacking on electric cables—and me.”

Beck liked the idea of nibbling on Flick.

“If it weren’t for the problems a cat would bring, like scratches, nips and fleas, I’d have considered getting one so if the hamster does escape, nature could take its course. The idea of those sharp yellow teeth wandering the house while I’m asleep terrifies me.”

As they approached Hamsterville, Fluffy stood up against the bars of the cage, big brown eyes fixed on Beck, whiskers twitching, looking docile and cuddly.

Flick scowled. “I know what you’re thinking and you’re wrong. It isn’t sweet or cute. Don’t be seduced by those big, dark eyes. It has the heart of a psychopath.”

“I’ve always been a sucker for big, dark eyes,” Beck murmured as he reached toward the cage, but looked at her.

“Don’t put your fingers near the bars. Just distract it while I put this food in.”

But as soon as the hamster heard one of its escape routes being unclipped it raced through the twisting tunnels faster than a Formula One driver. When Flick froze, Beck took a piece of carrot from her fingers and held it at the opening.

“Please don’t let it escape. I won’t be able to sleep in the house if it gets out.”

The hamster screeched to a halt at the end of the tube, sniffed once and then crawled onto Beck's outstretched hand. It picked up the piece of carrot, bit it in half, stuffed both pieces in its pouch, raced up his arm and then moved over to explore his chest.

Flick glared in disbelief. "How do you do that? Hannibal is exactly the same with Stef – completely normal. The perfect bloody pet."

"She's sweet." Beck smiled.

"She?"

"It's female."

"How can you tell?" Flick asked, then blushed.

"Years of experience. The males have lumpy bits at their rear. Females have lumpy bits somewhere else."

"Is that the technical term?"

Beck laughed. "Try holding her. Sit on the floor and cup your hands."

"I don't think so."

"It'll be fine. Trust me."

"It's not you I don't trust."

"Good." He grinned and raised his eyebrows.

Flick hesitated and then with some difficulty, due to the tightness of her dress, she sat on the floor and cupped her hands. Beck allowed the hamster to run from his palm onto hers and for a moment it sat there, cleaning its face.

"Oh, it's going to be all right," she said and smiled.

Beck's gaze was fixed on Flick's mouth. His lips ached for hers. He could just lean over and it would be like a jigsaw. Perfect match.

"Do you think stroking would be okay?" Flick asked.

Beck lost his train of thought. "I'd like that."

"Oh, she is sweet," Flick whispered.

Fluffy pattered over her hand, twitched her whiskers and sank her teeth into Flick's thumb.

"Fuck!"

Blood ran down into her palm. Beck grabbed the hamster by the skin at the back of its neck and returned it to the cage, securing it inside before turning to Flick.

"Sorry," he said.

"The hamster bit me, not you."

"I don't normally draw blood," he said.

She laughed.

"I shouldn't have pushed you into holding her."

"It's not your fault. It's a complete psycho." Flick sighed. She struggled to her feet and grabbed a tissue from the box next to the bed. "I feed it, clean it out, put it in its bloody ball and let it wander round the room every other night and the thing hates me. I have really tried but I cannot bond with it."

"You'd better wash your hand, use some antiseptic. Is there anything in your bathroom?"

"It's not my room. You think I sleep in here with that thing in the corner? I'm not that crazy. It's my sister's room. There's some stuff in the other bathroom. It's okay, I can see to it."

"Let me. I feel responsible."

Beck took hold of her hand and jerked as an explosion of desire ripped through him. His eyes met hers and he knew she'd felt it too. His heart pounded like rain on a glass roof—noisy, furious and very insistent. She was the one who looked away.

Flick led him to the bathroom, showed him the medical supplies, and he washed the bite, sprayed it and stuck a dinosaur plaster over the top.

"What are you thinking?" Beck asked.

"That it was worth getting bitten by the bloody thing because you're holding my hand, but I still wish it was dead."

He ran his thumb around her palm.

"We have matching wounds now." Beck smiled.

"That's true." Flick flashed her eyes at him.

He raised his other hand and stroked the outer curve of her breast. Her nipples immediately turned diamond sharp under the material and his cock swelled.

"You're not wearing anything under this are you?" he whispered.

Beck couldn't stop touching her, overwhelmed by an urge to unpeel her from the dress and prove he was right.

"I think we better go downstairs," Flick said.

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

He twisted his fingers in the ribbons down the side of her dress.

"No, but Kirsten will kill me if I drag you up to my room. Anyway, I want to dance with you. You're the only one here who can move without looking as though you're in pain."

He smiled. "That's exactly what I thought about you."

Chapter Eighteen

"Are you all right?" Two Kirstens looked at Josh in concern.

"Fine."

He wasn't fine at all. His plan had gone wrong. He'd intended to have a few drinks to bolster his courage so he could tell Kirsten how he really felt about her but because he wasn't brave enough, he'd had another drink, then another and now he felt rather unwell. He tried to turn two Kirstens into one.

"Because you don't look fine, Josh, and after lecturing us about being careful and not letting ourselves down, you seem to have ignored your own advice."

"I'm absolutely fine." He wondered if he'd articulated that sentence properly. Maybe he should say it again. He needed to get beyond the feeling sick part and on to the "I'm-very-funny-and-everyone-loves-me" stage and all would be well.

Maybe he'd got that the wrong way round. Maybe he'd already been funny and loveable.

Perhaps he ought to lie down.

"I'll just...wash my face," he hiccupped.

He wanted to tell Kirsten why he'd got so drunk but he didn't trust himself to speak. He was spinning on a whirling fairground ride and couldn't get off. Better to lie down. The toilet floor looked lovely.

As Beck and Flick walked through the hall, Kirsten grabbed Flick's arm.

"You have to help me."

"Now?" Flick tried to send a semaphore message with her eyes for Kirsten to look down at the two hands entwined in front of her and take in the fact that Beck had been with her for more than fifteen minutes and was still alive.

"Right now. It's an emergency. Please."

"I'll go and find a drink." Beck released her hand.

Flick groaned and groaned again when she saw Josh curled up on the floor of the bathroom. "Josh, wake up."

"Josh, you have to go upstairs and lie down. You can't stay in here, people need to use the toilet," Kirsten said.

Flick sighed. "We're going to have to get him to his feet. You take one arm and I'll take the other."

They dragged him upright.

"So sorry," Josh slurred.

"You will be tomorrow," Flick said. "I can't believe you've done this after all you said to us. What were you thinking?"

The three staggered out of the toilet and over to the stairs. Josh had an arm across each of their shoulders. As they started to climb Flick became aware his face had turned an unusual shade of green.

"Do you think Josh looks that color because of the revolving disco lights?" she asked.

"Well, you're not green," Kirsten said.

"Quick, get a bowl or something."

"Why? Oh, right."

The moment Kirsten let him go, Josh slumped. Flick struggled to keep him upright but they fell onto the stairs. She let out a yelp of pain as Josh landed on top of her.

"Sorry, Flickety, didn't mean to hurt you, you know I love you." He nuzzled against her chest.

"And I love you too, Josh, you drunken idiot. Come on, up to bed."

She turned to look for Kirsten and saw Beck standing with two glasses in his hand. He looked at her and Josh whose drooling mouth was fixed to her breast and then disappeared. Flick sighed with frustration. Why couldn't he offer to give her a hand? Why couldn't he see the truth?

By the time Kirsten came rushing back with a bowl, Flick had hauled Josh halfway up the stairs. Between the pair of them they managed to get him into his bedroom. After they'd maneuvered him on to the bed, they sat panting by his side.

Kirsten turned to Flick. "Josh told me he loved me."

Flick smiled.

"I also heard him tell Chloe, Anna and Bethan he loves them too and he's only just met them."

Bugger, Flick thought.

"Plus Bethan is that weird one with the tattoo of a coffin on her neck."

Double bugger, Flick amended.

"Only the thing is," Kirsten hesitated and looked at Josh who lay with his arms above his head, snoring quietly, "I feel differently about Josh now. He was just a friend, a housemate, but things have changed."

"Good change or bad change?"

"Not sure."

"So if Pierce turned up tonight what would you do?" Flick asked.

"He's not down there, is he?" Kirsten's eyes opened wide.

"Not as far as I know, but you didn't answer my question. You have to decide what you want. Don't mess Josh around. He wants to tell you how he feels. My guess is that's why he's lying here in a drunken coma. He's frightened, Kirsten. He's wanted this for so long. He's watched you and Pierce and it's eaten him up. If you're thinking differently about Josh because you're starting to have feelings for him then maybe you and Pierce aren't quite what you thought you were. Not coming to your party was wrong but was that really why you were so angry? Maybe part of you is relieved. Maybe this has given you the chance to breathe unaided. Only don't string Josh along and then fall back into slime boy's arms tomorrow. Make your mind up and go for it. Stop dithering."

Flick looked at Kirsten's face and realized she'd gone too far.

"Brilliant advice, Flick. So why are you up here instead of downstairs dancing with Beck?"

Flick resisted the temptation to remind Kirsten she'd come begging for help with Josh just when she'd managed to hold Beck's hand for a few minutes without some disaster unfolding.

"Fine, I'm going to go downstairs now and make him dance with me," Flick said. Or drag him upstairs and get him naked and horizontal.

When she walked into the living room her heart dropped into the bottom of her stomach where it was attacked and torn to pieces by Rottweilers. Only one person was dancing—a tall, tanned blonde wearing minute triangles of white material masquerading as a string bikini. She had a mobile phone strapped to her thigh with a red shoe lace. She was the only one dancing because everyone else stood watching and every man had his tongue out. Flick wished the sight of her sister filled her with joy but it didn't. Stef was a millstone around her neck and that might not be so bad if Stef cared, but she didn't. The sad thing was that part of Flick was jealous that Stef had things so easy and yet it was Flick's own fault. She was as annoyed with herself as she was with her sister. As Flick glared, Stef turned and smiled with her megawatt teeth that had cost Flick a fortune. The brightness level in the room went up a notch.

Stef ran over and threw her arms round her sister.

"Surprise! I decided to come to the party. How's Fluffy?"

"Your hamster has just taken a chunk out of my finger." Flick was surprised she could speak, considering the size of the lump stuck in her throat. "How did you get here?" *Please don't say taxi.* Knowing Stef, it wouldn't have been a taxi from Menston or Ilkley but all the way from Leeds, costing at least forty quid.

"Drew lent me his car."

"I hope you're insured." Flick cursed herself as she said it.

"Of course, don't nag."

"I wasn't nagging. And where did you get that mobile phone? I bought you a bog-standard pay-as-you-go. I can't afford a contract."

"Chill out, Flick, for Christ's sake. Drew lent it me. I lost the other one."

"I'm not buying you another."

"Whatever." Stef turned her back on Flick and strolled over to Beck.

"Hello, sailor." Stef smiled. "Are you married, engaged or otherwise attached?"

Flick wanted a hole to appear in the floor, hungry for human flesh called Stephanie Knyfe.

"No, well...er...I..." Beck stuttered.

"Good." Stef linked her arm in his. "I've been driving for hours. Help me find a drink."

Flick's heart exploded. That was the trouble with Stef, you couldn't say no to her. Their father's fault. When Stef was little, she whined, begged and pleaded until she got what she wanted. Within a couple of days she usually lost interest in her new toy because it was the procuring that held the excitement not the actual possession.

Same with men. Stef liked to make men fall in love with her, although to be fair she didn't have to make much effort. When you had long golden hair, a dazzling smile, cute button nose and legs up to your armpits, it required no more than a five-second sultry stare across a room before the victim swallowed the bait. Once Stef had someone on the hook she teased him for a while before she dumped him, jetsam in her wake, temporarily ruining a life. Flick had seen it happen many times. Boys had cried on her shoulder and told her they just didn't understand what they'd done wrong. Flick could never make them see they hadn't done anything.

Now, just as she thought there was a chance for her and Beck, in walks Stef. Flick was tempted to believe in fate. When they'd handed out the bad luck, someone had thought, *hey, I'll give it all to Felicity Knyfe. I'll give her a sister called Stef.*

Flick knew in the grand scheme of things many people were far worse off than she and she did feel terrible about starvation in Africa and all those people who died in natural disasters and everyone with horrible diseases. Reason enough to stop her sliding from one depression to another worrying over her own problems, but knowing others had worse luck didn't make her feel any better.

She watched Stef run her hand down Beck's back and gritted her teeth. The crazy thing was had it been anyone but Stef, Flick would have walked over and run her hand down his back, but she sensed her body retreating, felt her heart closing all entry points. She was furious with herself but she couldn't help it.

Flick walked past Stef and Beck, through the kitchen and out the back door. The fairy lights had turned the garden into a twinkling grotto. In the dark, it looked magical, as though the stars had fallen to earth and all landed in one garden in Timble. Flick sat on a wooden bench her dad had made. Stef always managed to make her miserable. She'd steal a few moments feeling sorry for herself before she went back inside.

Stef was selfish and thoughtless. Flick didn't like her. Horrible admitting she didn't like her own sister and she felt guilty about it, but not guilty enough to change her

mind. Flick wished they could change places for a while, so Stef knew what it was like to have responsibility heaped so high on your shoulders you felt like your feet were planted in concrete.

After their parents died, Flick had tried to look after Stef, to protect and care for her, to be the mother and father she'd lost. Flick did it because she was the older sister, but did it more because it was her fault their parents had died. That day, Flick had locked herself out of the house. She called her dad and they'd rushed home and never got there. No one knew. She hadn't even told the police. Even thinking about it made Flick feel so ill she was barely able to breathe. And it was partly her fault that her sister had turned into a self-absorbed airhead. In pandering to her every whim, Flick had done Stef no favors, only bought herself expensive and temporary peace. All Flick wanted was for Stef to love her, but all Stef did was take her for granted.

Fortunately, Stef kept her visits to Yorkshire brief. Long enough to wreck her bedroom and swap her dirty laundry for Flick's clean clothes before she went to stay with some wealthy friend. Kirsten and Josh couldn't understand why Flick let Stef treat her as she did, nor why Stef got the large bedroom that had belonged to their parents, since Flick was in the house far more than her sister. But Flick didn't want to sleep in there. It made her unhappy. She'd tried. She'd spent a lot of time and effort changing the room but it made no difference. It remained her mum and dad's room. Since she'd given the other two bedrooms to Josh and Kirsten, Flick had retreated to the attic. Her bedroom was small, too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter, but safe.

Flick knew Stef would only play with Beck. He wasn't her type. Not rich for a start. Maybe she ought to go and rescue him. He'd wanted to kiss her earlier, she knew he had, so all she had to do was find him and take up where they'd left off. She'd explain about Josh's mouth on her breast and everything would be fine. Hope flickered inside her, a need to be held and told her life would be what she wished for.

When she walked into the house and saw Stef in Beck's arms, Stef's lips on Beck's lips, she carried on walking—upstairs to her room. Before she could change her mind, she picked up the phone.

"Hey, Gerry, it's me."

"Hey Flick, what's up?"

"I wondered if you needed me tonight after all."

"I thought you had a party to go to?"

"It's turned out not to be much fun. I can't drive but if you want to send a car I'll come in."

"Two girls down tonight. I'll order a cab from Otley, so ten minutes or so. See you later, babe."

* * * * *

Beck thought Stef danced well, though not as well as Flick. Stef wanted to impress others rather than simply enjoy herself. She reminded him of Dina—young, attractive, spoiled and selfish—wanting something for the challenge of having it. When the beat changed to a slow number, she moved closer and put her arms round his neck. Beck sighed and removed them. She'd already tried to kiss him once. He didn't want Flick to see them and get the wrong idea. He glanced round.

"Are you looking for my sister?" Stef asked. "I think she's in the kitchen. Come and get a drink."

Beck followed but there was no sign of Flick.

"So what are you studying?" he asked.

"Land Economy. I've just finished my second year. What do you do?"

"Teach."

"Oh."

Beck smiled to himself. He knew that wouldn't impress her. "Did Flick go to university?"

"Yeah. Have you ever been to Aruba?"

"No."

"It's fantastic. My boyfriend's family has a huge house there. They've just come over to play golf at St Andrews and invited me to join them. I've only come home for some clothes."

"Leaving Flick to look after your hamster?"

"Have you met Fluffy? Isn't she the sweetest, most adorable little thing?" Stef beamed.

Beck found her broad smile annoying. "Your hamster bites."

"Flick doesn't have my skills." Stef winked. "I don't get bitten."

"Why don't you take Fluffy back with you?" Beck thought he ought to try to rescue Flick.

"Too busy." Stef shrugged. "I have so much to do in the evenings, I'm not around when Fluffy's awake. Anyway there's more room here and Flick has plenty of time."

Beck didn't like Stef. While she'd been talking to him, her gaze darted around so he never felt she listened to what he said.

"I think you're the best-looking guy here."

Beck gave a short laugh. She hadn't said it in any sort of complimentary way.

Stef stared at him for a moment. "You remind me of Marcus."

"Who's Marcus?"

"Flick's boyfriend. A television producer. He's not around at the moment. He went to Australia to make a film."

Beck didn't want to know any more.

Chapter Nineteen

By the time Flick got back, the party was over but faint strains of music tinged the air. The living room looked like an excavated Pompeii, but populated by characters from James Bond movies. Odd Job reclined on his back, a plate of food on his chest. Parachute Guy slumped with his back against the wall, eyes closed, surrounded by a sea of empty bottles. Lab Coat lay entwined with one of the Gold Fingers in the corner. Flick found Josh and Kirsten sitting in the garden drinking coffee.

"Where've you been?" Kirsten demanded.

"Work."

"You had the night off."

"Emergency."

"They must have been lining up for fuel with you in that dress." Josh whistled.

"Yep, we ran out of diesel. So how did the rest of the evening go?"

"Great party. Josh only reappeared for the last hour." Kirsten looked at him and grinned.

"The last hour was the best part." Josh reached out to touch Kirsten's cheek.

Flick smiled. "I'm off to bed. I take it there's no one in my bed? Though obviously I wouldn't object to George Clooney." Or Beck.

Two guys slept in Flick's room, neither of whom slightly resembled George Clooney or Beck so she dismissed the idea of climbing in with them and went down to bunk up with Stef. As Flick opened the door she heard the rumble of a male snore and saw the outline of two figures lying under the covers. A naval cap lay on the floor and her stomach joined it. She closed the door and went downstairs.

Flick wasn't sure how she felt at that moment. Angry. Yes, because Stef always did that to her. Angry with Beck too. Had he hoped for an easy conquest, thinking Flick looked okay until something better came along? If he'd jump into bed with Stef, then he'd probably do the same with any of his attractive female students. Maybe he already had. But Flick felt disappointed, as well. She'd missed her chance and not stood up for what she wanted. No one to blame but herself. She'd walked away and delivered Beck into the arms of a heart-breaker.

She grabbed a blanket and went to the garage. After opening the doors, she lay on the couch they'd moved out of the lounge. The sky was clear, stars shining like diamonds she'd never get. Beck didn't deserve her. Maybe there were no men worth having. She'd liked Beck better than Marcus but made yet another mistake with a tall, dark, handsome guy. There could never have been anything serious between her and

Beck. He was a university professor, she was an embarrassment and he didn't even know the worst of it. Stef had done her a favor. Really.

* * * * *

Dawn's soap opera woke Flick. A horrible racket. What the hell were the birds saying? *Hi, I'm still alive. Are you alive? Deidre's had it. That cat got her. Are my feathers straight? I fancy that thrush on the oak tree. News flash, bread crumbs at number 32.*

She collected her clothes from her room. The two guys were back-to-back and snoring. Flick wanted to be out of the house by the time Stef and Beck appeared. She needed not to think about them and knew just the thing to occupy her mind. Piling stones in a heap. She'd been paid for a section of wall that still had to be rebuilt.

* * * * *

Stef tiptoed into Flick's room. She could see two figures under the covers and smiled. So Flick wasn't waiting for Marcus. Stef systematically went through her sister's clothes. She barely made it by on the money Flick gave her and could only afford to buy a few new items each term. She'd bought a couple of dresses, two coats because a long thick winter coat—totally necessary for wet and windy Cambridge—was no use in spring when she needed a much lighter jacket. One pair of designer jeans that were reduced to a hundred pounds, such a bargain, six tops for everyday and four special ones to wear in the evening and of course the obligatory ball gown. She might need another. She'd also had to fork out for several pairs of shoes, oh and boots, knee high and ankle. But it was still worth looking to see what she could snaffle of Flick's. Most of her stuff was crap but there might be the odd thing or two.

Drew had been really generous and bought her quite a lot but Flick always had something worth borrowing. Her sister was taller and a bit fatter than her so most of her things fit them both. She particularly liked the dress Flick had worn for the party but couldn't find it on a hanger or on the floor so she'd take that another time.

When Stef discovered her doll-sized Armani sweater pushed to the back of a drawer, she considered waking Flick to shout at her. The useless idiot had obviously shrunk it in the washing machine. Stef walked toward the bed to yell in Flick's ear but then looked at the pile of clothes she held and changed her mind. She'd demand a new sweater, and not a fake one either.

Drew was waiting for her by his car. He was such a sweetie. He'd totally shocked her when he'd turned up last night. His parents had been travelling up to Scotland in a private jet and dropped him off at Leeds-Bradford airport where he'd hired a car and driven to the house. They'd arranged for the jet to return to pick them up today. How cool was that?

* * * * *

Josh and Kirsten had spent the remainder of the night in their own bedrooms. Josh wanted her in his bed and Kirsten wanted to be in his bed too. They'd barely kept their hands off one another, but Kirsten wanted to finish with Pierce first and Josh understood, though Kirsten knew he was a little afraid she wouldn't go through with it. She made him promise to not interfere.

When Pierce turned up, Kirsten sent Josh to the kitchen. Her heart beat so fast she felt lightheaded.

"Morning, sexy," Pierce said. "I've been thinking about you all weekend."

Kirsten swallowed hard, but before she could speak Pierce started again.

"Let's go upstairs and I can give you the best part of your birthday present. Probably more than once, you lucky girl."

"No."

Pierce looked startled. "What?"

"No, I'm not going upstairs with you."

Pierce looked around the lounge. "There's no furniture. It'll be a bit uncomfortable in here."

"Fuck off, Pierce."

The shocked look on his face thrilled her.

"What's the matter? You don't swear. Is this about your party? I told you I couldn't help it, sweetie. It was business. I'll make it up to you. We'll go for a meal this lunchtime. You wear your blue dress with the daisies. You look smart in that. Then we can come back here and you can open your present."

"I don't want to see you anymore. Please leave." Kirsten had her hands glued to her sides. She didn't want him to see her shaking.

Pierce didn't say anything for a moment. Then he sneered and gave a short laugh. "You silly cunt."

Kirsten steeled herself. Pierce proceeded to run her down, every aspect of her figure, clothes, the way she spoke, her sense of humor, her inability to recognize good wine when she drank it and her performance in bed. After he'd finished, Kirsten made herself smile. The biggest, broadest smile she could manage and when she saw the look on his face, she knew it really was over and that she'd won. Moments later, the door slammed.

Josh came in. "Are you okay? You're not sorry he's gone?" He reached out to take her hand.

Kirsten shook her head. "I'm only sorry how much time I wasted on him. He didn't even try to get me to change my mind. He didn't care for me at all."

"He didn't deserve you."

"Did you hear everything?"

He nodded.

"Even the bit about sex?"

"I don't believe a word of it."

"Oh, Josh."

He pulled her into his arms. "No more tears. You're wonderful and Pierce is an idiot, running you down to try and save face. He's the past. I'm the present and your future. I'm going to make you happy because just being next to you makes me happy."

Kirsten smiled. "Well, if you're going to be my new boyfriend, you'd better come and have lunch with my parents."

"Out of the fire and into the frying pan?"

Kirsten groaned. "My Dad's going to love you. He's not funny either."

* * * * *

Flick arrived back after lunch. She did a quick check round the house, but it was empty. Kirsten and Josh had cleaned the kitchen and emptied the living room of debris, clearly destined for sainthood.

A note from Stef lay next to the kettle.

"Gone to Scotland to stay with Drew and his parents."

Beck hadn't lasted long, but maybe he hadn't cared. Maybe they were both one-night-stand sort of people. Flick stripped the sheets from her bed and put them in the washing machine. She noticed Stef had helped herself to her clothes, but had no energy to be angry. Cleaning her own cubbyhole didn't take long, but Flick hesitated before she went into Stef's room.

As usual she'd transformed it into a tip. Clothes lay everywhere, many items Flick didn't recognize. She gnashed her teeth as she picked them up. Would Stef care she flashed her boobs in men's faces so she could splash out on new clothes? Stef could shop for England. If it was an Olympic sport she'd be a cert for a medal. Four empty condom packets sat on the bedside table. Four. Flick felt like her heart had been ripped out. She dragged the sheets from the bed and threw them downstairs.

She cleaned the house in a raging temper, vacuumed everywhere, accidentally sucked up Kirsten's new rose petal potpourri and sucked up the sawdust on purpose from around a sleeping Hannibal. If the hamster had disappeared up the nozzle she'd have been glad. She tossed Beck's naval cap on the bed, only just resisting the temptation to stamp on it. Flick attacked the bathrooms with rubber gloves, bleach and anti-men spray. She bagged rubbish, sorted bottles, recycled cans, took down all the fairy lights and was still hyper. The one thing she couldn't do on her own was move the furniture back into the house.

In a moment of masochism, Flick decided she'd use the paint earmarked for her bedroom on the living room walls. Her father's old dustsheets were stored on a shelf in

the garage so she spread them over the wooden floor, took down the curtains and flung open the windows.

Ten minutes later Flick stood on a step ladder in a yellow lace bra and matching French knickers, clutching a tray of paint and wielding a roller.

Sixty minutes after that, the ceiling had two coats and so did Flick. She looked like a Pollock life-model. Picking up a brush she wrote "Stef is a bitch" and "Beck is a wanker" several times all over one of the walls. Flick was amazed how much better she felt until she realized someone stared at her through the open window.

"The bell's not working," Beck said.

"What do you want?" Flick rushed to roller over what she'd written.

"Can I come in?"

"The door's not locked."

Seconds later Beck stepped into the room. "Unusual technique," he commented as Flick tried to cover the last of her graffiti. Two walls were covered with crisscrossing lines.

"Stef's not here," she said.

"I haven't come to see Stef."

"Right." Like she believed that.

"I lost my cap. I'll get charged by the hire company if I don't find it."

Stab me again, why don't you? "It's where you left it."

"Where's that?"

"Stef's bedroom. You can go and get it."

Moments later he was back. "I'll give you a hand."

Flick tried not to stare. He only wore boxers, blue ones with goldfish all over them.

"Gap?"

"Where?" He looked down.

She laughed. "No, I meant is your underwear from Gap?"

"Yes. Was that a guess or are you an expert on boxer shorts?"

"PhD."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing. How about your underwear?" He picked up the brush and tin, and started to go round the edges of the skirting board.

"Bargains-are-us." Flick thought of saying La Perla but the label might be showing.

"I wish I'd known girls painted rooms semi-naked. Or is it just you?"

"Probably just me. Emulsion washes off skin easier than clothes."

"Maybe we can wash it off together."

Flick let a few seconds go past before she blurted, "Stef's gone to Scotland."

"Good."

Four condoms and he says good? Maybe Stef had worn him out.

"I saw you in bed with her," she said and then rolled the wall so hard paint sprayed everywhere.

"No, you didn't. Stef grabbed the cap and disappeared with it."

Flick froze.

"I presume that's why I'm a wanker and Stef is a bitch?"

She winced.

"I stood at the window for a few moments before you noticed me. A lot to admire apart from your calligraphy. Yellow lace. Tanned skin. Umm."

Ribbons of arousal fluttered through her body. "So who was Stef sleeping with?"

"Her boyfriend Drew."

"Oh."

"Feeling foolish?"

"Uh-huh."

"Embarrassed?"

"Yes."

"Looking for a stone to crawl under?"

"Don't push your luck." Flick slapped paint on the wall and splattered her face.

"She's not my type."

Flick guffawed. "She's sex on legs."

"No, she isn't."

Beck ran the brush around the edge of the door.

Flick turned to look at him. "So what is your type?"

"A paint-splattered woman."

He turned and she watched his gaze slide from the curve of her neck down to her toes. Her hand shook as she pushed the roller over the wall. He moved up behind her and the breath caught in her throat.

He groaned. "I hear a car. I wish I'd unclipped your bra half an hour ago."

"I wish I'd dragged you into the shower ten minutes ago. It looks great, thanks for helping."

"You're welcome."

"How come there's no paint on you?" Flick asked.

"Probably because I'm careful. Pity I don't need a wash."

Flick picked up the brush and ran it down his arm. Beck laughed.

Kirsten poked her head round the door. "Josh. There are weird naked people in the living room carrying out some bizarre painting ritual."

"Less of the weird," Flick said.

"More of the naked," Beck added.

Josh joined Kirsten at the doorway. "Wow, great bodywork, Flick."

"Great body, Beck." Kirsten laughed.

"Hey," Josh protested.

"You're supposed to be admiring the walls," Flick pointed out.

"Did you get any paint on them? Oh, Beck, that's your phone," Kirsten said.

She and Josh moved further into the room as Beck went to retrieve his mobile.

"You missed a great lunch," Kirsten said.

"I take it your mother thinks Josh is wonderful." Flick smiled.

"How could she not? He ate everything, praised everything, played nicely with Tom, told Lucy she was pretty and listened to Dad talking about hammer drills for thirty minutes. When Josh confessed to being a power-tool addict, Dad went into raptures. I, on the other hand, am less impressed."

"I've got a power tool to show you," Josh whispered and Kirsten giggled.

"Sorry, I have to go," Beck called. "I forgot Willow's father was coming round to—give us the benefit of his extensive local knowledge."

"Bore you to death?" Kirsten asked.

"Or that." Beck chuckled.

Flick leaned against the door watching him get dressed. "Do you want to wash your arm?"

"I'll preserve it. When you're a famous artist I can sell it for millions."

"Did I mention I was the only one in my class who failed art?"

Beck moved toward her as if he was going to give her a kiss and then stepped back. "Have you any idea what you do to me standing there in yellow lace underwear? If I kiss you I'm not going to want to leave."

"I don't want you to go," Flick said in a quiet voice.

"I don't want to go, but I have to."

"Maybe you could give me just a little kiss."

Beck wavered and then bent his head, but his mouth touched her ear and not her lips.

"There isn't anything I'd rather do more than kiss you, but there's no way I can kiss you and stop. If just looking at you makes me smolder, a kiss will make me explode in a fireball. I really have to go back. I promised Isobel. I already owe her big-time."

He pressed his lips against her hair for a moment, then gave a big smile and left. Flick sighed and turned to see Josh and Kirsten staring at her.

"Well?" Kirsten asked.

"He's the one," Flick said.

Chapter Twenty

"Morning, Nergel," Flick greeted Henry.

He nodded. "Chief of the Secret Police of Hell. Yes, I like that."

Flick scowled. "I'll never catch you out."

"Keep trying." He handed her the list. "Pre-wedding cleaning. Celia would like you to stay the whole day if you can."

"That's fine."

"Unfortunately, we don't need any painting doing."

Flick stared and Henry grinned. "I overheard Beck talking to Giles. All this time I could have had you working in your underwear and didn't realize."

"There are things other than painting I like to do in my underwear but they're not on your list."

"Little temptress."

"Puriel."

"The fiery and pitiless angel. Not me at all."

"You torment me all the time," Flick said. "I don't know how I keep my hands off you."

Henry smiled. "Neither do I. Sad to say, I have to remove myself from your vicinity. I'm taking the ladies of the house to Leeds, so you'll be on your own. I think Celia has finally accepted the silverware is safe in your hands."

"She didn't miss the spoons then?" Flick asked.

Henry laughed.

As soon as they'd gone, Flick turned on the radio and started work. Without Gertrude she could work at twice the speed, giving her time to wander in the garden in case she met anyone worth talking to. As she reached up to grab the furniture polish, the envelope that had arrived that morning fell out of her pocket. Damn. So it hadn't miraculously disappeared. She stared at it and wondered if by sheer strength of will it could be turned into a winning lottery ticket. Flick thought very hard for five seconds. Nope, didn't work. She picked it up and stuffed it back in her pocket. It would spoil her day so she wouldn't open it.

* * * * *

Dina had rarely felt so miserable. She couldn't bear to look at her fingernails. Her back ached, and if she dug another hole and found nothing, she'd scream. The weekend

had been a disaster. Beck turned up at the house on Saturday night to take Isobel to a fancy dress party and looked so divine Dina had wanted to eat him, only *Eat Your Man* wasn't in her book of helpful hints. He wore a naval officer's uniform and Dina knew she'd stared for ages with her mouth open. She couldn't help it. Then Isobel had come downstairs, her hair cascading over her shoulders, wearing nothing but a bed sheet and Matt, Ross and even Pravit had almost imploded. Bloody Jane had done Isobel's makeup. Jane knew nothing about makeup. Why hadn't Isobel asked her? Then when Beck kissed Isobel and told her she looked fabulous, Dina thought she might throw up. The boys had gone into Leeds but Dina hadn't felt like it so she'd stayed with Jane and watched Saturday night TV. Her life was crap.

Sunday was a washout too. They had to go and listen to some old fart who was a local history fanatic bore them for hours with thousands of mind-numbing slides. Beck had only turned up for the last hour and he'd sat next to Jane. Life wasn't fair.

She had another twenty-one days on this bloody dig and then she was off to Ibiza with a couple of mates and she couldn't wait. She was fed up with moving earth when she wanted someone to make the Earth move for her. Dina angrily jammed her trowel into the ground and yelped when it hit a solid object. She threw off her glove and rubbed her fingers. She should have gone to Italy. She could have found some dark-haired Italian with a Ferrari and a beautiful villa. She might have even settled for Rich Foster.

Dina slipped the glove back on, moved the trowel further along and hit stone again. Ouch. She tried going deeper and found more of the same. Bloody typical. Her patch had to be the one with the massive boulder. She carried on moving soil from around the obstacle, muttering to herself.

"What do you have there, Dina?"

She hadn't heard Beck come up behind her. She bit back the temptation to say "a rock" and instead muttered, "Not sure."

"Can I give you a hand?"

She glanced up in surprise and nodded. As they worked side by side Dina wanted to be cross with him but he was too good-looking. She teased out a pottery fragment, expecting it to be another piece of a Wedgwood gravy boat, only it wasn't. Dina brushed the dirt from the face of the potshard to reveal a distinctive orange color and the hint of a pattern. She felt a rush of excitement.

"Is this Samian ware?"

Beck took the fragment from her fingers and looked at it. "Yes, it is. Brilliant." He beamed at her. "Well done, Dina. We'll make an archaeologist of you yet. Over here everyone, look what Dina's found."

Beck exchanged glances with Isobel. She'd know how he relieved he felt. The piece of Samian Flick picked up, that had brought the dig to the Hall, could have found its

way there by any number of means, including a manipulative Giles, but now they had another piece, it made it more likely there had been a dwelling on the site.

"Jane, why don't you help Dina expose more of this stonework," Beck said.

Thirty minutes later, there was silence as Beck and Isobel inspected what they'd uncovered.

Beck sat back on his haunches. "Anyone like to hazard a guess?"

Jane bounced at the edge of the group. "Looks like a hearth."

"That's what I was going to say," said Dina.

"Well done. That's exactly what it is." Beck smiled at Jane and then looked at the others. "Jane just saved the rest of you from the embarrassment of admitting you haven't got a clue."

For the first time since the bomb incident, the site buzzed with excitement. The grid was reallocated and within minutes Matt found part of a Roman ladle. As Beck watched, the atmosphere changed. They believed now and they hadn't before. There was a sense of purpose in the way they worked. They talked about something other than what they intended to eat for dinner or what was on TV. They shared the tasks of washing, numbering, drawing and bagging the finds. Although they all used excavation notebooks to record the exact position of every object, the data had to be entered directly on to the computer. They took it in turns, without arguing. Beck began to relax.

When Matt screamed that afternoon Beck thought it was another worm attack, but Dina rushed into the tent to drag him to the edge of the area in which they'd concentrated their efforts. Beck stared down in disbelief, hardly able to accept he was looking at the remains of a hypocaust system, the series of channels used to heat rooms underneath Roman floors. He took several photographs with his digital camera and then took another with his mobile phone and sent it to Stanley Hunter at the university.

Beck hoped Stanley would drive to Ilkley to take a look but instead he told Beck to drive to York and bring details of what they'd found so far. Typical of the lazy bastard, Beck thought.

* * * * *

Flick polished the mahogany banister until it gleamed in the sunlight. She liked the entrance of Hartington Hall, a brightly lit circular foyer with the stairs curling off in a loop. The marble floor had an inlaid pattern so beautiful she always felt guilty walking on it. Overhead arched a hand-painted sky filled with angels and fat cherubs. Flick was surprised Henry hadn't requested the addition of a few demons.

A large glass chandelier hung from the central point. Celia had never asked Flick to clean it before but it was on the list. Clean chandelier. BE CAREFUL. Lower using switch located in cupboard under stairs. BE CAREFUL. Use washing up liquid and

water sparingly. BE CAREFUL. Flick was relieved nothing went wrong. By the time she'd finished the glass sparkled.

She'd just moved it back into position when the doorbell rang. She hoped it might be Beck but it was Jared, George Clooney's brother.

"Oh, hi." He gave a shy smile.

Flick was glad to see he looked sheepish. "Hi, yourself."

"Are you okay?"

"Do you mean did I survive the terrible blast when the bomb exploded? Barely. Lost both legs and an eye."

"Joking again, right? Thanks for not telling the press what happened."

"About you running away and leaving me to blow up," Flick teased.

"No, well, yes. I feel terrible about that. You were really brave." He looked at her through his long eyelashes and Flick felt nothing. He was tall, dark and handsome, flirting and she didn't feel a thing.

"So what do you want this time?" she asked.

"We've brought the marquee. I wanted to check we're okay to put it up."

"I suppose so. Make sure it's in the right field."

He smiled. "Maybe see you later?"

Or not, Flick thought as she closed the door. It seemed a bit early for the marquee. But what did she know? It probably took two weeks to put the thing up. She sat on the stairs and took the letter from her pocket. She couldn't put it off any longer.

* * * * *

By the time the Hartingtons returned, the marquee was up. Flick watched through the window as Celia pointed at the huge white mushroom that had sprung up in their absence. Henry walked toward it and Celia helped Gertrude into the house.

"Felicity," Celia shouted.

Flick emerged from the kitchen.

"Why did you allow them to erect the marquee?"

"They threatened to pull out my fingernails one by one if I didn't."

"I beg your pardon." Celia's gaze sharpened.

Oops, not funny. "I thought you'd ordered one."

"For next week. The Furry Friends Protection League summer garden party is due to take place in that field on Saturday."

"Oh, I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"Yet again Felicity, you have let me down. I'm going to have to arrange for them to remove the marquee and bring it back next week. I expect I will have to pay so I will not be giving you any wages today or in fact ever again. I no longer require your services."

Familiar words to Flick, though Celia seemed more furious than usual.

"How was I supposed to know about the garden party? Or that they weren't due to put the tent up until next week? You're being unreasonable."

"How dare you? You should have used your common sense. Why would we need the marquee now?"

"You might be glad if it rains on Saturday."

"It isn't going to rain."

"No, it bloody wouldn't dare, would it, if you told it not to?" Flick snapped.

"Really, Felicity, it's no wonder you can't find a proper job. It was at Henry's insistence I found a little something for you to do here but this has gone on long enough. You're lazy, arrogant and rude."

"I'm not lazy or arrogant. If I'm rude it's only because you drive me bloody insane."

"And you swear," Celia said.

"You're enough to make a saint swear."

"You dress like a whore."

That came like a slap to the face. Flick took a deep breath. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"You show no respect."

"Nor you to me," Flick said.

She walked out as Celia still talked. Her heart ached. The job gone. Why hadn't she just groveled? She knew why. She had enough of being criticized. Flick crossed the lawn and headed for Beck's dig. She really needed that kiss he'd promised but when she got there she could see they'd left. She'd hoped he'd come to see her. Flick retreated to the side of the marquee, sat down on a pile of planks behind the catering tent and burst into tears. She didn't know what was wrong with her. She never let herself cry.

"Flick?"

She glanced up to see Henry walking toward her. He sat down and put his arm around her. "What's the matter?"

Flick couldn't speak. A dam had burst inside her. It wasn't just Celia, but everything—her parents, Stef, the issue with Grinstead's, Beck. Henry pulled her head against his shoulder and patted her on the back.

"There, there," he said. "It's okay, Flick. Everything will be all right."

When Flick was calm again she told Henry what had happened.

"That doesn't sound any worse than normal. So I'm guessing this isn't only about Celia?" he asked.

Flick shook her head.

"Then tell me what's wrong."

She handed him the letter and Henry read it.

* * * * *

The first time Henry had seen Flick was when she'd appeared one day at his estate agent's in Ilkley looking for a job. Henry happened to be downstairs out of his office and heard the exchange. As soon as Flick explained she'd been dismissed from her previous position and the matter was still in dispute, his manager refused her an interview. On her way out, Flick knocked over a potted plant and then a display of leaflets and managed to save both before they hit the floor. Henry retrieved her CV from the waste bin, read it and went after her. He asked her to have a coffee with him in Betty's Tea Rooms.

Once they were sitting with coffee and buttered tea cakes, Henry asked why she'd told the truth about Grinstead's. Flick told him she was innocent. She hadn't lied then and she wouldn't lie now. He'd been impressed. Henry couldn't offer her a job in his company until the Grinstead's business sorted itself out but he could give her work at Hartington Hall. Celia had been complaining about the general reluctance of her cleaner to hand wash her crystal, polish the silver and dust her porcelain. Henry thought Flick would suit very well, particularly if she managed to drop Celia's horrible Royal Doulton.

As she sat by the marquee crying in his arms, Henry knew he'd made the right decision not to give her a job in his company. Her hair was soft and warm against his cheek and she smelt wonderful. He was an old fool and she was too tempting. He'd have made an idiot of himself long ago if he'd been confronted by Flick every day.

"They're going to prosecute because I won't tell them how I infiltrated their systems. If I was clever enough to come up with a way to defraud them that they still can't figure out, how come I was stupid enough to put the money in my bank account where it could be easily traced? It doesn't make sense."

"You're right." Henry handed back her letter. "You should speak to a lawyer, Flick. This is too much for you to handle." He squeezed her shoulder and gave her a kiss on her head. "I'll have a word with Celia. Get you working again. I don't think she can manage without you."

"You think? I have a feeling Celia finds me as useful as a piece of chewing gum stuck to her shoe."

"I know I can't manage without you," Henry said. "Things have never been so lively. We're going to dine out for years on that business with Rudolph. You're a breath of fresh air. I wish Giles had found someone like you."

"Willow's lovely," Flick said.

"She is, but thou art lovelier, Lilith."

"Thanks, Agares."

"You see me as an old man astride a crocodile with a goshawk on his arm?"

"That's exactly how I see you. Celia is the crocodile and Giles the goshawk."

"Crocodile Dundee—I like it."

Flick chuckled.

"That's better. I don't like to see you sad." Henry stood up. He took out his wallet and handed her five twenty-pound notes. "I'll give you a ring when I've spoken to Celia."

"This is too much," Flick said.

"Nonsense. You're worth every penny. I look forward to our little game. But for the moment, if you want to come over to check out the dig, make sure Celia doesn't see you."

"Thanks, Henry." She gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"You're a good girl, Flick." Henry sighed. "It's such a pity."

Flick gave a little smile. "And you're married."

"That's a pity too."

Giles saw his father kiss Flick on the head. He saw his father wrap his arms around Flick's body. He saw her arms clutch his father. He knew his father was fond of Flick but this was more than fond. A secret meeting? His father had handed Flick money. Shit. And what about Beck? His closest friend. The way he'd talked about Flick last night told Giles his best man hadn't fallen for a bridesmaid. Now he had to decide whether to tell him what he'd seen or not. And what about his mother? Should he tell her or confront his father first?

Chapter Twenty-One

Flick had already eaten dinner by the time Kirsten and Josh arrived back from work. Two slices of Marmite on toast. Her housemates kept touching one another, laughing and kissing, commenting on conversations she hadn't been part of and Flick felt like an intruder. She didn't begrudge Kirsten and Josh their happiness, but life had changed. She was going to be lonely. She hadn't heard from Beck after he'd helped her paint and couldn't understand why he hadn't called, particularly as their last meeting hadn't ended in a near-death experience.

When Kirsten and Josh sat down to eat, Flick slipped up to her room. She sat on her bed with her latest bank statement, several unpaid bills, the contents of her purse and went through her current financial situation. Not good. Her rainy-day porcelain hippo fell apart when she picked it up. It held a note from her sister. "Sorry. Needed cash." Flick knew she'd never see that fifty pounds again.

When Kirsten came up to ask if she wanted to go to the pub quiz, Flick shook her head.

"You're depressed," Kirsten said. "Trying to sort out your finances will make you feel worse. If you don't want to come out with us, why don't you clear this lot away and finish off all those jobs around the house you've been meaning to do? It will make you feel better."

"Such as?"

"Sorting your books, cleaning out the hamster, defrosting the freezer."

Flick wondered why Kirsten didn't add poking her eyes out and cutting off her fingers with blunt scissors.

"Good idea. Right. See you later." Flick picked up the papers on the bed and made it look as though she intended to tidy them away. The moment Kirsten left, she threw them on the carpet. Once she was sure they'd gone, she went downstairs.

Finishing off things was a good idea. She started with the Cointreau, moved on to the Drambuie and followed that by emptying three tubes of crisps and half a packet of biscuits. She shaved the moldy bits off a lonely, dried-out chunk of cheese, microwaved it for fifteen seconds and swallowed the resultant gooey mess.

She finished the Parma ham—one slice; the last of the peanut butter—two large spoonfuls; and although this couldn't strictly be defined as part of the hoovering up binge, she also ate the two bars of chocolate Kirsten had hidden on the bookshelf. After she'd consumed a cup of margarine, sugar, flour and milk whisked together with a fork—the nearest she could get to raw cake mixture, Flick slumped on her bed feeling ill and felt worse when she remembered she'd not fed Hannibal.

As the psycho pet rolled around the floor in its plastic ball, Flick cleaned out a couple of sections of the unit. The whole system needed a wash but she hadn't the energy, so limited herself to replacing sawdust, changing water and adding a fresh scoop of dried food. Flick was struggling to entice her nemesis to walk from the ball back into one of the tubes when the phone rang. Hannibal scuttled backward, resisting attempts to tip her in so Flick gave up and tried to twist the top back on the ball only now the hamster wrapped her feet over the edge and poked a nose into the air, whiskers twitching manically.

The phone was still ringing and Flick thought it might be Beck but she needed to get the hamster back into captivity before she answered it. It was almost as though Hannibal delighted in her desperation. Flick tried to push her down with the plastic lid but the creature levered herself up the side of the ball and Flick began to panic. She couldn't let her get out. She'd seen Beck grab the flesh at the back of the hamster's neck to lift it, but fear made her move too slowly. Hannibal bit her finger, Flick shrieked and the phone stopped ringing.

* * * * *

Beck picked a route from York to take him past Timble. He still buzzed from the discovery on the dig. After looking at the photographs Stanley Hunter had agreed the students could continue to work on the field without bringing in a more experienced team, then gave Beck a lecture about making sure the site underwent a thorough investigation to ensure a representative sample. Beck felt like asking if he thought he'd never supervised a dig before but he bit his tongue.

He got on okay with Stanley, although his boss always pestered for more articles. A chart hung in his room with the names of each member of the department and the number of articles they'd had published. It reminded Beck of the star charts his mother used for him and his brother. A star for not picking your nose, another for not eating it.

Beck had no interest in producing a certain number of words for the sake of it, nor in submitting the same article, slightly amended for several different publications. He'd nearly worn his fingers down to the knuckles to get his professorship. He needed a break which was partly why he was working on his gory thriller. He'd told Stanley he was doing research with a view to producing something new next year, but that would only put him off for a while. The aggravating thing was the only reason Stanley had his name on so many books was because he either edited them or wrote brief, slimy introductions. That way he didn't actually have to come up with anything new at all. The man was as shallow as a saucer.

Deciding he'd better not arrive unannounced at Flick's house, Beck pulled up a short distance away and called on his mobile. No answer. Since he'd already turned off the A59 he decided to drop in anyway. The lights were on and he perked up at the thought of seeing her.

He knocked and as he stood waiting, he heard Flick behind the door.

"Ow, ouch, ooh. You little bastard. Let go. Oh, no, no, no. Not harder no, please don't do that, it hurts."

Then the door opened and she stood there pale-faced, her hands behind her back.

Beck grinned at her. "You sounded like one of those sex lines."

"And how would you know?"

"Do you have a problem?" He looked at Flick's feet. Blood dripped onto the floor behind her.

"Yes, could you come back later?"

"When?"

"Next January?"

He laughed. "I don't think I'm going to be around that long. Show me what you're hiding behind your back."

Flick brought her hand around to show the hamster hanging off her finger. Beck winced.

"I've tried pleading, squeezing, stroking and threatening. I'm thinking sharp knife."

Beck put his hand under Fluffy's feet and stroked the back of her head but the hamster stayed put. "Let's try food. Got any cheese?"

"I just ate the last piece. It probably knows."

"Chocolate?"

"I ate that, too. Don't ask for Parma ham, peanut butter or crisps."

They moved through to the kitchen, with the hamster sitting on Beck's hand, teeth still fixed in Flick's finger. Beck opened the fridge. Fluffy refused everything Beck offered.

"It's hopeless. It only wants my flesh."

"Well, she can't have it." Beck turned on the tap.

Moments later Fluffy was not fluffy. She sat in the bottom of the sink with soaked fur, looking half her previous size, a murderous glare in her dark brown eyes. Flick grabbed a sheet of kitchen roll and as she wrapped it around her finger, Fluffy grabbed the other end and proceeded to stuff it into her pouch.

"For Pete's sake," Flick yelled, dragging it away from the hamster. "Why do you hate me? Are you some distant relative of Fudge trying to get your own back?"

"Who's Fudge?" Beck asked.

"The school hamster."

Beck knew he was going to regret this, but went ahead and asked anyway. "So what happened to Fudge?"

"My turn to look after it for the weekend and I built it a house of pink modeling clay. Next morning the house had gone. I thought Stef had taken it, but turned out

Fudge had eaten it. Months later he pulled it from his cheek pouches and piled it up in his cage. The mound was bigger than him. A week later he died."

Fluffy looked up and began to clean her fur.

"Probably no connection," Beck said.

"You'd be the only person in the world who thought that. In assembly, the head demanded to know which stupid child had fed modeling clay to the hamster. Because the pink gloop hadn't appeared in the cage until later, I might have got away with it but this little voice piped up from the front. Stef saying, 'Felicity did it.' Her three favorite words. I was hauled out in front of the entire school. They knew I hadn't meant to kill it but that didn't stop the headmistress using me as an example of the very worst sort of girl. Apparently she now had her eye on me. And a mad, staring eye it was too. Though it went nicely with her beard. So that was my school career doomed."

"How old were you?"

"Seventeen."

Beck chuckled. "You're funny. Would...you like to go out with me?"

Flick stared straight at him and he felt a burst of desire for this redhaired weirdo.

"Well?" he asked, a little disconcerted she'd said nothing.

"Yes, if you put Hannibal safely back in her cage."

"Damn, I should have held out for sex," Beck said.

"If you accidentally drop her and step on her on the way upstairs, I'll think about it."

He glanced at her.

"Sadly, if she dies, Stef will kill me."

"But not before we've had sex."

Flick laughed.

"Hamsterville still in the same place?" Beck asked.

"Yep."

Flick didn't follow. He wondered if she was worried he'd drag her into bed. Beck didn't want to push her. He'd fix the date and then leave.

"You can sleep safely now," he said as he came back down. He walked toward the door.

"You're not going already?"

"You wouldn't sleep if I stayed."

Flick gulped.

"I love it when you do that."

"What? Breathe?" she asked.

"No. Get overexcited. But I'm going to go before it happens again. I'll be here at 7:00 tomorrow. We'll eat in. I'll cook. I want you breathless with anticipation."

"I'm not sure I can wait that long."

A rush of heat flooded his body.

"Can I make you a drink before you leave? Coffee? Tea? Screwdriver? Staple gun?"

Beck's curiosity got the better of him. "What's a staple gun?"

"My own recipe but it's very alcoholic. If you drink two, you'll be stuck to the floor and won't be able to drive."

Beck swallowed. "I'll try one then."

He followed her into the kitchen and sat on the edge of the table. Flick opened the fridge, took out the orange juice and poured a healthy slug into two glasses.

"I hope you're not watching me. This is a secret recipe handed down from generation to generation."

"Good job I know how to keep secrets," Beck said.

Flick tipped in small amounts of gin, whiskey, brandy and a larger measure of some green liquid.

She opened the fridge again. "Olive?"

"No, thanks."

"Anchovy?"

"I'll pass on that too."

Flick handed him a glass. "Cheers."

Beck waited. She took a tiny sip.

"Umm."

"How bad is it?"

"Pretty bad," Flick admitted.

Beck took a mouthful and swallowed. Good grief. "Needs the anchovy."

"How can it taste so revolting? I like everything that I put in it, except for that green thing. I've never tried that," Flick said.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to drink one of these, let alone two."

Flick took it out of his hand and poured it down the sink. "With my ability to cause you serious harm, I don't think you'd better drink anymore. I've probably inadvertently created rocket fuel."

"I need something nice to get rid of the taste," Beck pulled her toward him and hooked his legs round the back of hers. "I know just the thing."

Flick had expected a hard kiss but it didn't happen. He teased her mouth, trailing his tongue along the edge of hers, winding all her internal organs into a frenzy of longing. Beck's hands slid up her spine and slipped into her hair, altering the position of her head so he could kiss her more deeply.

Their tongues tangoed, waltzed and jived. Her heart rate rocketed and she could feel the beat in her head. No doubt now that he wanted her. The evidence lay hard between them, pressing against her belly. Flick's hands swept over his chest, around his nipples, tweaking them through his shirt before she dropped her fingers to the back of his jeans, dipped under his shirt and touched hot skin. Beck groaned into her mouth.

The front door banged and they jolted apart. Beck got off the table, but they didn't stop looking at each other.

"Flick?" Josh called.

"In here."

Giles and Willow came in with Josh and Kirsten, and Flick knew something was wrong. Giles' face was flushed with anger and Josh wouldn't look at her. It had to be bad.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Lost the quiz?"

No one said anything and then Giles stepped forward, his eyes flint-hard. "I'm sorry, Beck. I wanted to talk to you first but this won't wait." He turned to Flick. "How long have you been having an affair with my father?"

"What?" Flick gasped and then gave a short laugh, but any thought this was a joke slipped away. Her heart began a slow insistent thudding. Beck stood tense and rigid beside her.

"It's no use denying it. I heard you. I saw you," Giles said.

Flick's knees shook. "I don't know what you think you heard or saw but you're wrong. I'm not having an affair with Henry." This was bloody Sally Greene all over again. Flick hated being accused of things she hadn't done. She had no interest in her boss Gordon and no interest in Henry. Not like that.

Giles took another step toward her. Flick held her ground.

"He had his arms around you. He kissed you. He gave you a hundred quid and said when you came to the Hall, not to let my mother see you. How long has he been fucking you?"

Flick flinched. "I'm not sleeping with your father. Henry's my friend."

"Friends with an old man? How likely is that?" Giles spat.

"He's not old and he's kind to me."

Flick wanted to run away, she didn't want to hear this, but knew that would make her look guilty.

"So he's a friend who kisses you and puts his arms around you?" Giles asked.

Flick's breath caught in her throat. Josh still wouldn't look at her but Kirsten, Willow and Giles stared grim-faced. She couldn't bear to look at Beck. She tried to close off her heart from the wave of cold water trying to sweep her away.

"Did he kiss you and put his arms around you?" Kirsten asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes, but not like that, I was upset."

"What about?" Kirsten asked.

"That's my business." Flick put the barriers up. She wouldn't tell them about Grinstead's.

"What about the money? How do you explain that?" Giles asked.

"I earned it. I spent the day cleaning."

"A hundred pounds for a few hours cleaning?" Giles scoffed. "Dad said he enjoyed your little games and that you have a secret. What little games? What secret? What do you do for your money, Flick? Wear short skirts and tight tops and parade around in front of my mother? You tried to kiss me when Willow was only feet away. You're nothing but a slut."

The walls of the kitchen closed in, crushing her until she couldn't breathe. It was happening again. Just like Grinstead's. They'd made up their minds she was guilty. Kirsten and Josh were supposed to be her friends but hadn't stuck up for her. Giles' words twisted her heart, squeezed the life from her. Beck had said nothing but what must he think? Flick glanced at him. He looked confused and hurt.

She tried again. "There's nothing going on between me and Henry. Does he say there is? We do play a game but it's a word game. There is a secret, but it's mine, not his. It has nothing to do with any of you. I didn't try to kiss you, Giles. You're lying. You were drunk. You tried to kiss me." Flick's skin turned cold and her muscles tightened ready for flight. She forced herself to stand still. "Josh, Kirsten, you're supposed to be my friends yet you've listened to Giles and made up your minds without even speaking to me. If I'm ever tried by a jury I hope you aren't selected. You haven't heard the whole story and you've already decided what you want to believe. I...I..." Flick gave up. "You know, I don't give a shit what any of you think. You can all fuck off."

She stormed out of the room and slammed the door. Flick glanced toward the stairs then turned the other way and slipped out of the front door. She set off walking down the lane toward the reservoir and then began to run.

The five of them stood staring at each other.

"What the hell?" Beck said. "Giles, what the fuck was that about?"

"I know what I saw." Giles' mouth tightened into a stubborn line. "She's a flirt. She led him on."

"What does your father say?" Beck asked.

"I don't need to speak to him. I know what I saw."

Beck clenched his fists. "You haven't even spoken to him? You complete wanker, Giles. You've jumped to conclusions and the rest of you followed like sheep."

"What more proof do I need?" Giles shouted. "You weren't there. I know what I saw and heard. They were in each other's arms. He was stroking her head. He kissed

her. She kissed him. And you know how Flick launched herself at me the night of the dinner party."

Beck could see Giles pleading with his eyes for him not to say anything more about the kiss. He'd told Willow Flick had kissed him and asked Beck to back him up.

"I think you'd all better go," Kirsten said.

"Not before I speak to Flick." Beck crossed his arms.

"She's gone," Josh said. "I heard the front door."

"Where would she go?" Beck asked. "We should look for her."

"If she doesn't want to talk to anyone we'll never find her," Kirsten said. "Flick knows this area really well. She'll come back when she's ready."

"Tell her we still have a date for tomorrow night," Beck said. "Tell her I believe her."

Giles stared at him with his jaw set. Beck didn't give a shit.

* * * * *

By the time Flick reached the bridge, she could hardly see for her tears. She'd done nothing wrong. Well, she'd flirted, but so had Henry. It was just fun and she never did it in Lady C's hearing. It would never have gone further than talk. How come no one believed her? She could see why Giles might not and Willow would believe Giles. But not Kirsten and Josh. And Beck.

Flick gulped back a sob. Every time she thought something might happen between them, it went wrong. He'd even volunteered to cook for her. Normally guys expected her to cook, though she only ever had to do it once. She'd worn out two smoke alarms. But maybe he'd still come tomorrow. She'd speak to Henry and get him to talk to Giles. Then they could all apologize. Only why did she doubt that would ever happen?

She sat on the wooden picnic table and looked out across the water. The summer had been hot and the water level was low. There was no settlement submerged here, unlike at Thruscross reservoir further up the Washburn Valley, where West End village had disappeared beneath the water. When Flick was little she'd thought maybe there had been houses under their reservoir, a fairy village no one had known about. She used to stare at the water until she convinced herself she could see lights dancing beneath the surface. Fairies having parties. She'd told her father and it had been their secret. They didn't tell Stef and that had made the secret even more special, and the pain of betrayal even more heartbreaking when Flick discovered Stef had won a prize at school for her essay about a fairy village lying under the waters of a reservoir near their house.

So was it time to tell Kirsten and Josh about Grinstead's? Flick had been thinking about it because she knew Henry was right, she couldn't handle it on her own anymore. She'd tried to bury it deep inside her but it couldn't stay hidden forever. Josh and Kirsten hurt her tonight when they hadn't stood up for her. Maybe they wouldn't

believe her when she told them about the money. Flick stared out across the water and watched a bird make a low swoop for insects. She couldn't tell Beck but he was the one she wanted to tell most of all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Flick snuck back into the house after Kirsten and Josh had gone to bed. She spotted but ignored the note they'd propped against the kettle. As she passed Kirsten's room she heard them laughing. Flick gave a quiet sigh. They'd leave and find a place of their own. It made her decision about the house a little easier. Three had become a two and one.

In the morning, she threw her mobile under her bed and left before they woke. She didn't want to speak to anyone. After she'd finished work at the gym, Flick went straight to Yorkshire TV to do a chauffeuring shift, all the time wondering if Beck would still turn up that night and cook a meal. If Giles had spoken to Henry, he'd know he'd misinterpreted what he'd seen. He'd tell Beck and Beck would be waiting at Timble with a meal, flowers and a smile on his face.

In a parallel world.

On her final trip back to the television center, Flick had to maneuver around an empty police car sitting on the forecourt. She parked and got out to open the back doors of her vehicle for the two Chinese passengers she'd picked up at the airport. As they walked into the building, two policemen came out and headed in her direction. Flick glanced around and then turned back to face them. She'd seen no one behind her and realized with a heart sinking faster than the Titanic that they wanted her.

"Felicity Knyfe?"

She nodded.

"We have a warrant here for your arrest."

Flick didn't hear anymore. They carried on talking but it was as though they spoke a foreign language. She saw faces watching through the glass doors of the lobby and closed her eyes to block out their stares.

* * * * *

They'd picked her up at 4:00 and when they finally released her it was 10:30. Flick felt empty. They'd asked the same questions over and over and she had few answers. In the end, she'd made a statement and signed it. Flick's world had collapsed. She needed a hug. She needed her dad. Stef would be no use even if she knew how to reach her. Flick had no one and the pain of that tore at her heart.

She had a long walk back to her car, and as her mind began to click back into gear she remembered Beck had expected her at the house by 7:00. She'd spent the entire day excited that he might turn up and now she hadn't. Flick groaned and looked for a phone box.

No answer from Beck's mobile. Eventually it went through to voicemail.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I meant to ring. I got—caught up in something. I'm only just on my way home. Maybe you didn't come to the house. I don't know. I can explain. Sorry," she gabbled. "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

An incoherent message. She should have phoned Timble first to see if he'd actually come. Flick used the other coin to phone Kirsten. The answer machine responded. She couldn't see the point in rambling again.

By the time she got home it was gone midnight. Everything was clean and tidy but the aroma of curry still lingered. Flick checked the kitchen waste bin and her heart sank. In a way she'd hoped he hadn't turned up. Now she knew he had. He'd thrown away what he'd cooked. If the food had belonged to Kirsten or Josh they'd have saved it for her. For the first time in her life, Flick wished she was dead.

* * * * *

Beck was lying in bed when he heard his mobile beep. He picked it up, listened to the message and threw the phone down. Bit late for apologies. He'd had an unpleasant row last night with Giles when they'd got back from Timble because the prick had continued to insist there was something going on between Flick and his father. But now she'd stood him up, Beck wondered if his trust in her had been misplaced. Couldn't she face him?

Something else had begun to gnaw at him too. Could Giles be trying to deflect everyone from the fact that he and Flick had fucked each other? Beck thought it quite possible Giles had finished his bloody alphabet game. He'd backed Giles up about the kiss the evening of Celia's dinner party mostly because he didn't want to hurt Willow, although he'd decided Flick had been the victim of Giles' drunken groping. Now Beck wondered if he'd been wrong about that too.

* * * * *

When Flick woke the following day, Kirsten and Josh had left for work. Apart from the food in the fridge that wasn't hers, it was like living alone. Flick felt wretched. She was due at the gym at 4:00 for the late shift so she couldn't even make it up to Beck by taking him out that night. Maybe he wouldn't give her the chance. She tried ringing him but it always went to voicemail. She needed to see him only the mere thought of it made her get back into bed and pull the sheet over her face.

A plan to run away from everything, go abroad, get a job in a bar and start afresh surged in and out of her mind. She could grab her passport, pack a bag and walk out—let Stef sort out the house and the debts. Let her sell it, she could keep the money, blow it all in Harvey Nicks. Flick didn't care. She curled up and pulled the sheet tight around her. Okay, that's what she'd do. She'd run but first she'd apologize to Beck.

* * * * *

Flick saw something different about the dig site when she arrived. An air of purposefulness that hadn't been evident before. She saw Beck talking to Isobel and hung back until they'd finished. But when she approached, his face hardened and her shoulders tensed.

"What can I say? I'm really sorry about last night." Flick got the words out as fast as she could.

"So you said."

His voice sounded cold and dead. He started to walk away. Flick moved to his side.

"Please let me explain."

He stopped walking, stood in front of her with his hands pushed into his pockets. "Go ahead."

Flick took a deep breath. She was going to tell him the truth. All of it. She just had to start slowly.

"I'm sorry about last night. These two guys, well they sort of kidnapped me. They took me to a place in Headingley, questioned me for hours and didn't let me go until ten thirty." She gave a little smile.

"Is that the best you can do? You couldn't call? Your mobile get snatched by an alien?"

Flick ignored the warning voices telling her to stop messing around. "I'd left it at home. I wasn't allowed to use a phone."

"I'm too busy to listen to lies." He strode off down the field.

"It was the truth." She realized whatever had been between them had gone. He believed Giles. No point saying anything else.

Beck made his way over to the area he was excavating. She called that an apology? A stupid joke? What was she thinking? He dropped to his knees and picked up his trowel. Digging was safe. You knew exactly where you were on a dig. Surprises were almost always good ones. Everything was organized and methodical and even if you went down ten feet and didn't find a thing, there was still a sense of satisfaction for a job well done. He dug out a trowel full of earth.

Women, on the other hand, he couldn't understand, no matter how hard he tried. Even when he thought he'd done everything right—sent roses or chocolates, he'd find they thought flowers a waste of money or they'd started a diet. If he took them to the opera, they preferred a TV soap, if he suggested a night in, they thought he was cheap. If he trusted them, they let him down. He'd never been stood up before. Never. He tossed a trowel-full of soil further than he'd intended and heard Matt squeal.

Flick walked away with her heart pounding. She went into the field with the marquee and sat on a stack of boards. She'd said she was sorry. Part of her wanted to go home and stick her head in the oven. God knows she had enough reason, but even when he'd turned his back on her, she still wanted him, still felt that flutter inside when he was near. She decided to find him again in an hour and repeat her apology and then the next hour and maybe the one after that, and she'd have to carry on until he forgave her because Flick knew she couldn't just let him go.

She tried on three more occasions to speak to Beck. The first time a bunch of little children surrounded him. The second time Dina intervened and told her he was busy and couldn't be disturbed. The third time, Beck looked up and said, "Leave me alone."

So Flick did.

She retreated to the other field and sat next to the hedge with her eyes full of tears. Had no one spoken to Henry? The whole thing was ridiculous. Maybe she should go to Ilkley and see him. Or would that make things worse?

Flick sat slumped over, her fingers fiddling with something by her side and when she looked down, she saw one of Jared's marker flags. She realized he must have missed it. This flag was nearer to Beck's site than any of the others Jared had placed. Maybe there was something down there relating to the dig, something that might make Beck smile at her again. There couldn't be two singing reindeer. Even she wasn't that unlucky.

Picking up a sharp stone, Flick scraped out a square around the flag, then began to lever up the grass piece by piece.

* * * * *

When Flick returned from her shift at the gym she found Josh and Kirsten waiting.

"You're avoiding us," Kirsten said.

"Hungry?" Josh asked.

Flick shook her head. "I ate at work." She'd eaten nothing substantial for days. Her appetite had disappeared.

"Drink?" Kirsten offered her a glass of wine.

"No thanks."

"I knew it," Kirsten said. "You're ill."

Flick blinked. "I'm not ill. There's nothing the matter." Nothing that could be fixed.

"What happened last night?" Josh asked. "Beck waited for three hours. No phone calls, nothing."

"I wasn't even sure he'd turn up after that business about Henry." She took a deep breath. "I don't know how you could think I was having an affair with him."

Kirsten and Josh glanced at each other.

"Giles was so insistent. Anyway, he's spoken to his father. It's all sorted now," Kirsten said.

"We're sorry," Josh added.

Kirsten moved toward Flick to give her a hug and because Flick was tired of confrontations, she let it happen, but the hurt remained. Everyone wanted to believe the worst about her, even the two people she thought were her closest friends.

"So what did Beck do for three hours?" Flick asked.

"Cooked you a meal, then threw it away. He went to look for the gas station where you work. Presumably he didn't find you. So where were you?" Kirsten asked.

Flick still didn't want to tell them the truth, not exactly.

"I'd driven back to the TV center from the airport. When I came out of the building two guys bundled me into a car and took me to some place in Headingley."

"You're kidding?" Josh gasped.

Flick kept her face expressionless. "That's exactly what happened."

"You were kidnapped?" Kirsten's eyes opened wide.

Being arrested felt like that, Flick thought, and it was about time someone felt sorry for her. "They didn't let me go until ten thirty."

"Why did they let you go?" Josh asked.

"I told them what they wanted to know. I rang Beck and left a message. I tried here but no one picked up."

Josh and Kirsten kept their eyes down. Flick guessed what they'd been up to.

"What did they want?" Josh asked. "Did they...did...?"

"They didn't hurt me. They just wanted to talk to me. They asked me questions about people I used to know. Some bad people." The people at Grinstead's were bad. This was easier than Flick thought.

"Tell me you went to the police," Kirsten said.

"I told the police everything."

"So what's the problem with Beck?" Josh asked.

"He doesn't believe me. I've tried to apologize but he doesn't want to know." Before they could say anything she added, "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm tired. As far as I'm concerned it's over. It never started." Flick slunk off to her room feeling a little guilty about her not-altogether-true cover story.

* * * * *

Willow finished the call and went into the living room where Giles and Beck sat watching paint dry. No, not quite, Willow thought – two fat men playing darts.

"That was Kirsten on the phone."

"Yep," Giles muttered.

"She wanted to know if Flick could come to my hen party."

Giles looked up. "What a bloody nerve. Of course she can't."

Willow noticed Beck's gaze remained on the television.

"She's bad news," Giles said. "Beck had a lucky escape. You don't want someone like her on your hen night. You don't even know her that well."

Willow didn't like being suspicious. She wanted to trust Giles. She didn't want to be the jealous type, but wanting didn't make things so. Why was he so anti-Flick? Willow had been there when he'd confronted his father about her, and Henry had laughed before he'd grown angry. He'd denied there was anything between them other than friendship. Giles said he believed Henry, so why was he protesting so much?

"Why are you so against her?" Willow asked. "You made a mistake. Henry explained everything. I don't understand. It wasn't you she stood up. It was Beck." Beck didn't respond. Willow sighed and then added, "Wasn't it?"

Giles got to his feet and put his arms around her. "Sweetie pie."

Willow's lips quivered.

"There is nothing going on between Flick and me. The woman is crazy. She flirts like mad. Maybe she knew I was nearby when she was with my father and she wanted me to think they were having an affair. Maybe that lunge she made for me at the dinner party and the fact that I was a little slow to avoid her lips, made her think there was something between us. There isn't. Now she makes up some fantastic story about being kidnapped and expects to be believed. The truth is she's so loopy she probably forgot Beck had arranged to go round."

"Maybe she told the truth," Willow said in a quiet voice. "Kirsten and Josh believe her about last night. Flick's spoken to the police."

Naked women playing darts or even football couldn't have held more interest than Willow at that moment. Both men stared at her.

Beck had paled. "What are you talking about? The police? What happened?"

"Kirsten doesn't know much," Willow said. "Flick won't talk about it."

They waited. Willow knew if a guy had said that to them, they would probably have expected no more information and turned back to the TV, but now they expected her to tell them everything.

"Kirsten said two men abducted Flick from outside Yorkshire Television Center and took her to Headingley. They asked her questions about some people she used to know. They didn't hurt her but they dumped her afterwards and she had to walk back to her car. She told the police everything. That's all I know so it's no use looking at me like that."

"Beck's still better off without her," Giles said. "And so are you. I can't begin to imagine what she'd get up to on your hen night."

Willow chose her words with care. "I think Flick would be fun."

Giles glared at her and mouthed a curse. Willow felt her stomach turn into a hard lump. Maybe Giles intended to see Flick the night of her hen party. Maybe Flick had told the truth all along and it was Giles who'd lied.

"She's trouble, sweetheart," Giles said.

"Maybe it isn't Flick who's the trouble at all," Willow muttered. She'd send a text message to Kirsten and tell her Flick could come on the hen night because she'd decided while she could see her, Giles was safe.

Beck felt like he had early onset dementia. Flick hadn't lied. She'd actually been abducted and when she'd told him, he'd walked away. How about instead of believing the worst about her, he did the opposite and trusted her? Giles had got pissed and leaped on her, she and Henry were nothing more than friends, and she hadn't stood him up, she'd been kidnapped. It wasn't that difficult to believe, she had the craziest life of anyone he'd ever met. She'd tried to talk to him and he'd refused to listen. Beck groaned.

It also hadn't escaped Beck's attention that Giles kept lying to Willow about the kiss. Did Giles have a grudge against Flick because she'd rejected him? Or was he plotting to get X off his list before he was married? One thing Beck was sure of—he wanted to believe Flick.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Flick wondered how she'd let herself get talked into this. Well, she knew exactly how. When Kirsten told her Willow wanted her to come on the hen night to make up for not believing her about Giles and Henry, Flick had wavered. When Kirsten said Beck would drive them in the minivan and that he felt terrible because he hadn't trusted her, the wavering slowed. When Flick realized she wouldn't actually have to ski and she could ask Beck to go for a drink so they could talk, the wavering stopped.

Only now she wondered if they'd both been set up because Willow had done a good imitation of Jack Frost when she and Kirsten had climbed in the van. Flick sat directly behind Beck who'd not said a word the whole journey, apart from "hello" when he'd collected her and Kirsten, and another "hello" when he picked up the others. Flick went off the idea of risking more rejection and decided she'd have to ski. Only as she'd listened to the three bridesmaids talking about their last trip to Lech, she'd grown more and more nervous. Apparently, watching other people fall over was the highlight of the day.

"Can you ski, Flick?" Willow asked, her coolness unmistakable.

"Not very well," she said. Like not at all.

"You'll be fine. It's easy."

Since from that moment Willow sounded friendlier, Flick suspected she'd been penciled in as the evening's entertainment.

Beck had been struck dumb by the turns the conversation had taken. From talking about pistes in Lech and ski instructors' bums, the brides-trolls had moved on to being pissed in Lech and scoring each instructor's bratwurst on rather too many levels for Beck's liking. He wondered if they remembered there was a man with them. He didn't need to hear that sort of detail. From bratwurst their minds had inexplicably warped into a discussion over what they'd like in their coffins when they were dead. He'd never understand how women's minds worked.

"My teddy bear, Edward," Willow said. "I've had him since I was a baby and he's always been there for me. I'd still like to sleep with him only I can't."

"Why? Does Giles object?" Kirsten teased.

"His head's full of sawdust and he leaks."

"Sounds just like Giles," Flick muttered.

Beck stifled a laugh.

"Well, I'd like to be wearing my Prada outfit," said Airy. "I saved so long to buy it, I want to get my money's worth."

"Louis Vuitton bag. Ditto," from Fairy. "I don't want my sister to get her mitts on it."

"Jimmy Choo shoes," from Mary. "All five pairs in case heaven doesn't stock them."

"My mobile phone, just in case," said Kirsten. "And a spare battery and I don't want to be cremated."

"That's not a bad idea," Mary agreed.

"What about you, Flick," Airy asked.

"A hunky man, just in case," Flick said in a low voice.

Everyone but Willow and Beck laughed.

He pulled up at the entrance of Xscape to drop them off. A group rushed toward Willow as she got out of the van and showered her in pink confetti. Flick hung back clutching a plastic supermarket bag in her arms. She looked so sad and lost and un-Flick-like that Beck wanted to sweep her into his arms and drag her to safety. Instead, he drove off. He watched through his side mirror and saw her gaze after the van as he pulled away. Beck's heart lurched. He went around in a circle and drove back into the car park. What the hell was he playing at?

Flick's depression deepened when she realized how much it was all going to cost. She had nowhere near enough cash.

Kirsten elbowed her away from the group. "I'm paying," she whispered. "It's my treat."

"You can't pay for me."

"No arguments. I'm sorry I've not been there for you lately. If bribery is what it takes to get you to smile again then that's the way it's going to be."

When the bridesmaids and Willow emerged from the changing cubicles in ski pants and matching jackets, they looked like four different flavored ice pops. The rest of the hen party were also attired in appropriate gear. Flick wore pink chinos and a thin pale green shirt.

Kirsten winced. "Flick, let me hire you a ski suit. You're going to be too cold."

"No need. It won't be that bad. I've got gloves and I've brought my sweater."

Of course she never thought it would see the light of day, but she'd wanted to make it look as though she intended to ski. She pulled a large hand-knitted sweater out of her bag, made by her mother for her father. The first and last. There was a large horse's head on the front and a lopsided horse's bum on the back with a little plaited tail that swung free. Flick held it up to show Kirsten before dropping it on to the seat beside her.

"That's revolting," Kirsten said.

"I know but it's warm." Flick pushed her foot part way into one of the ski boots where it came to a mysterious halt. "And remember, I'm not going to be the one

wearing the hat made of inflated condoms. I think I heard Willow say last bridesmaid on the slope wears it first."

Kirsten paled.

"I'll be fine. I'll catch up." Flick waved her away and breathed a sigh of relief when they'd all disappeared. If it hadn't been for the fact that Kirsten had already forked out a fortune, she'd have dumped the gear and gone for drink. Once they were back in Leeds, she'd head home. Willow didn't want her around and Flick had no intention of spoiling her hen night. She pulled and twisted the million clips on the boot and finally wrestled her foot back to freedom, groaning as she flexed her toes.

She turned to the teenager behind the counter. "Can you give me a hand?"

Five minutes later, Flick had her feet tightly encased in lumps of lead and was staggering toward the snow like Frankenstein. When she'd first picked up her skis they sat neatly together but within two steps they'd squirmed apart. Flick lifted them over her shoulder and in a fast scissor action almost decapitated the woman standing behind. She heard the squeal of alarm, turned to apologize and just missed the woman's companion. More apologies but no more turning. Flick set off again with her poles trailing behind her.

Beck sat upstairs in the window seat of the café overlooking the slope. He was cross with himself for not having made a way to speak to Flick because that had been the point of driving them. He couldn't see her skiing, but it was impossible to miss Willow, who wore a flashing tiara, mini veil and a dazzling smile. She glided without effort down the hill somewhat belying the large L for learner plate stuck to her back. After a moment, he spotted stormy-faced Kirsten who appeared to be wearing a large hat made from different colored balloons. No, not balloons. Beck smiled. He watched as she performed a series of elegant parallel turns to reach the bottom of the slope. Still no sign of Little Miss Trouble.

Flick eyed the ski pull from a respectable distance, in other words from next to the exit. There looked nothing to it but experience had taught her that as far as she was concerned, what might appear simple would be devilishly tricky. As far as she could make out, she had to slide forward to the line, reach behind, grab the pole, push the round rubber plate between her legs and let it drag her up the slope.

She shuffled forward at a slug's pace, missed the first pole when she leaned too far forwards and promptly fell over. The second pole hit her on the head as she struggled to her feet. The third she caught but it slipped out of her grasp and the one coming after smacked her in the face. The attendant finally shut off the motor.

Behind her she heard sounds of people getting impatient, people sniggering, people wincing. No way would the fifth pole escape, only once she had it in her grasp she forgot how she was supposed to get it between her legs and managed to tangle it in her

sweater. Someone yelled instructions but she was too traumatized to take in what they were saying and clutched the rubber plate in her arms, letting it haul her up the hill.

By the time she approached the top, Flick was exhausted by the strain of remaining upright with her arms at full stretch. Desperate not to fall, she ignored the shouts of the attendant and kept her eyes down. By the time Flick registered she had to let go, she and the pole were entwined together and she slid straight into a mound of snow.

It took a few moments for the attendant to dig her out. Flick burned with embarrassment as she tried to avoid those coming up behind. She slid one ski forward, then the other and moved several inches backward. She tried again, less ambitious with the distance and shuffled her way to the middle of the slope. Slow was good because it delayed what Flick feared would be the fast part.

When she'd stood at the bottom, the incline looked gentle, no more than a snowy hillock. Now it had taken on the proportions of a sheer ice face, sister of Everest. Only pride stopped her taking off her skis and walking to safety. She could see Kirsten on her way down again, and Willow and her friends waiting at the bottom of the other button pull.

Flick watched those around her and listened as a man instructed his son about transferring weight from one foot to the other and to lean down the slope. She sighed as everyone glided effortlessly past. Willow and her chickens whizzed by ignoring her, pursued by Kirsten waving the condom hat, desperate to pass it on. Flick flinched as two tiny tots whipped either side, leaning so far back they were practically sitting down.

Flick sighed. She was fit, supple and she could do this, and if she waited any longer she'd freeze to death anyway. With that thought, she pushed off.

I can do this. I can do this.

I can't do this.

Flick gathered speed with no idea how to stop or turn. Praying no one got in her way, she leaned backward, then forward, then sideways and swished to the left. Bingo. She leaned the other way and moved right. Encouraged that she'd mastered one maneuver, she let her concentration lapse, her speed increase and suddenly the base loomed.

People yelled and scattered. Flick put her hands over her eyes, her poles dangling from her wrists and shot straight through a gap, up the nursery slope right to the top and then slid backward, squealing in terror. Finally she fell in a heap. She still had her eyes closed and didn't dare move. She wondered how many bones she'd broken and hoped no poor sod lay flattened underneath her. Maybe the wetness she could feel was snow and not blood. Could things get any worse?

"Flick."

Ah, yes, they could.

"Open your eyes," Beck said.

I don't think so.

"Is she dead?" someone asked.

With considerable reluctance, Flick opened one eye and peered up. Beck held out a gloved hand. Gloves were good. Nothing could happen through gloves. But the moment he took her hand in his, energy travelled between them, a surging shockwave that leaped from her body, sparking though her fingertips and two sets of thick gloves. He flinched and she knew he'd felt it too.

Flick allowed him to pull her to her feet. Beck began to brush the snow from her jumper and as he was about to touch her breast, stopped with his hands poised above the horse's eyes.

Kirsten swished to a stop beside them.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Fine."

How Flick hated that bloody word. She wasn't fine. She was frozen. Her bum was soaked, her legs sticks of jelly, her heart jived in her chest and she suspected she had third degree burns on her hands.

"What are you doing here?" Kirsten asked.

"You bloody well made me come," Flick snapped.

"She means me," Beck said. "Since I'd come all this way, I thought I'd have a try. I saw Flick having a little difficulty on the button pull."

Flick's flushed face turned what she suspected was an even deeper shade of crimson. He'd seen everything. Well, that was just great.

"I'll help Flick. You go and ski with Willow and the others," Beck told Kirsten. Once she'd skied off he turned to Flick. "What on earth possessed you to launch yourself from the top? You know nothing about skiing, do you?"

"Yes," Flick said in indignation.

"Is that yes meaning no?"

"I've watched that ski program on TV."

Beck groaned. "Look, I'm going to help you but you have to trust me and do exactly as I say."

"All right."

He frowned. "I mean it. Do exactly as I say."

He pulled her over to the button lift and he pushed the plate through Flick's legs.

"Don't sit down," he said as Flick sat.

She sank to the snow, the pole flew away and sent her sprawling. Beck dragged her to one side. Three poles later she was in the correct position, moving up the hill with Beck behind shouting encouragement.

"That's really good, Flick. Keep your feet parallel and in the grooves. When you get to the top, pull the button out and toss it to one side."

To her great surprise she didn't fall but managed to turn and slide away along the top of the slope. Beck came shooting up beside her.

"Well done. Now you only have to get to the bottom again."

With a heavy heart, Flick turned her skis toward the hill.

Beck pulled her back. "Hey, not so fast."

He moved behind her and slid his skis to the outside of hers and pressed up against her. Flick felt his warm breath on her neck, his body solid and firm against hers. She went weak at the knees.

"We're going to snowplow down. Spread your legs, keep the tips of your skis together and bend your knees. If you keep the edge of the skis pressed against the snow you can control your speed."

He pushed off, keeping Flick pinned in front of him. He talked but she hardly listened, the feeling of being so close to him had made her head spin. She was wet, cold, scared and never wanted to see another pair of skis as long as she lived, but when they got to the bottom and he said, "Again?" she nodded as if she couldn't wait, slithered back to the sadistic button pull and thought of all the other things she'd rather be sitting on.

It was the shortest and longest hour of Flick's life. She was surprised how much she enjoyed her lesson, how patient he was. She loved having him hold her and part of her wished it would never end. By the time it was over, she could get from the top to the bottom without falling. Beck told her she was brilliant.

As he helped her take off her boots, she heard herself agreeing with Kirsten's suggestion they go on a skiing holiday next year. Flick knew even if she wanted to go, she couldn't afford it. She struggled to fasten the laces on her trainers. Her fingers were freezing. Her bum frozen. She had a huge wet patch on the back of her trousers.

It had all been worth it.

"Want a ride back?" Beck asked.

Flick looked up and gulped. Yes! "Thanks." Her tongue felt like a wad of cotton wool in her mouth that she had to force the words around. The day had melted from a horrible nightmare into a warm and pleasant dream. She fumbled to pull off the sodden sweater and pushed it into her bag. Goose bumps covered her arms, her nipples clearly visible under the T-shirt she wore. She wrapped her arms around her chest.

"Here, wear my top if you're cold."

Beck tugged off his v-necked cotton sweater and Flick pulled it over her head. It smelled of Beck. She could feel the warmth of his body still clinging to the creases.

Once everyone was in cabs heading for Leeds, Flick went with Beck to the minivan.

As she settled beside him, he turned to face her. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

"What about?"

"You know what about. Everything. Henry. The kidnapping."

Guilt gnawed at her stomach. "It sounded unbelievable."

"I feel terrible. I sat there furious with you, staring at the curry, wanting to wring your neck and all the time you were in danger."

"I wasn't exactly in danger," Flick said, feeling worse.

"Did you know the men?"

"No."

"But you could describe them to the police."

"Oh yes, they're well known to the police." Oh God, this is not good.

"So have they arrested them?"

"I doubt it." Please shut up.

"Won't you press charges?"

"No." God, make him shut up.

"They didn't...hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"Don't you want to talk about it?" Beck asked.

"No. I really don't." She began to bite her nail.

"Okay. Well, would you like to go for something to eat?"

Flick was so racked with anxiety her stomach would likely reject anything she offered it, but she registered the change of direction and nodded. Beck was giving her another chance and she didn't often get those.

Chapter Twenty-Four

By the time they got to Yeadon, Flick had dried out, cheered up and felt hungry. Beck had done most of the talking; telling her about the discoveries on the dig, and his excitement calmed her down. Everything would be all right.

When she got out of the car and walked across the road to the Jade Palace, Beck took hold of her hand. A surge of lust swept through her body and she gasped.

"You okay?" He gave her a long look.

"You made my heart jump."

Beck squeezed her fingers. "Mine too."

"You ought to patent yourself. Hospitals wouldn't need defibrillator paddles. Just get you to hold the patient's hand and her heart would bounce back to life."

"What about male patients?"

"Well, that's already one of my many jobs."

Beck laughed.

Flick was desperate not to spoil things. After they'd chosen what they wanted to eat, she stayed with a safe topic and talked about the dig.

"So what's the latest development?"

"We found the remains of an underground heating system."

"A hypocaust?"

"Bless you." Beck grinned. "I could hardly believe it. It's really unusual for this area. The civilian settlement in Ilkley has always been more difficult to research because most of the building stones were re-used elsewhere, but I think we've found the remains of an upmarket dwelling dating back to the fourth century."

"Wow."

"Maybe one of the Romans stayed behind and married a local girl, or perhaps an enterprising guy copied ideas he'd seen the Romans use. We're finding more and more Samian ware, as well as the usual greyware, plus a few coins and personal items... I'm boring you. Sorry."

"No, you're not." His excitement fascinated her. "I think I've caught the archaeology bug. I'm desperate to have a go. I bet you wish you had a time machine so you could check if you were right."

"I'm never wrong," he said in mock indignation.

"How come?"

"Archaeologists have inbuilt defense mechanisms. If it ever looks as though we've made a mistake, we claim we were originally correct but the circumstances changed."

"Is that what happened with me?" Flick asked, looking straight at him.

"I was intrigued by you the first time I saw you."

"So was that bloody sheep."

"The sheep's long gone but I'm still intrigued," Beck said in a quiet voice.

Flick wanted to touch his hair, run her fingers through it. She sat on her hands. The way her luck played, his hair would most likely fall out in chunks.

He sat up straighter and began fiddling with his chopsticks. "That first day I met you, why did you think I was from the police?"

"A joke," Flick said. "Not a very good one."

She wasn't sure he believed her, but he let it go.

"What else do you do for a living apart from bring male hearts to life?"

"Lots of things only nothing as rewarding as that." She smiled.

"How many jobs do you have?"

"Not sure." Flick squirmed now the focus was back on her.

"Do you like any of them?"

This conversation was heading for shark-infested water.

"I like elements of all of them. The drystone walling was fun until the snake incident. How is your hand, by the way?" She lobbed the ball to his side of the table.

"Hurts like crazy. What else do you do?"

The ball came back and she swiped it across the net. "Shall I kiss it better?"

"Later." Beck coughed and smashed the ball back to her side. "What else?"

"I drive a limo for Yorkshire Television once or twice a week. I enjoy that because there's always the chance that I'll pick up Johnny Depp."

"What else?"

"Underpaid minion at a local gym. The hours are crap, though of course I live in hope of Johnny Depp popping in for a quick workout."

"What's all this about Johnny Depp?"

"I like Johnny Depp."

Not anymore. Flick licked a drop of sauce from her lip.

Beck groaned. "Don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Lick your lip. It distracts me."

Flick ran her tongue all the way around her lips. "Can I have the last piece of prawn toast?"

"I'm not that distracted. You ate all the others."

Flick picked it up and pushed it in his mouth. "I hope you choke," she said, immediately wishing the words back.

Beck chewed and swallowed. "Sorry, still alive. What about Hartington Hall?"

"What about it?"

"I know you work there, too."

"Doing all the jobs Lady C's regular cleaning lady doesn't like, plus occasional work such as the dinner party or granny-sitting Gertrude."

"Maybe you're also pretty good at taping out digs," Beck said.

Flick helped herself to more rice. "Only pretty good?"

"It was you," Beck said with a smile. "Thank you for doing that."

She sighed. "The least I could do after my dog-walking disaster."

He reached across the table and took hold of her hand. "I'm sorry about everything, Flick. I think there's been a lot of jumping to conclusions."

"Did Giles really do math at Cambridge?"

Beck chuckled. "He wasn't the only one who made two and two equal five."

Flick nodded. "At Birmingham University the first thing they taught us was that two and two equals four. Cambridge is clearly not all it's cracked up to be. Stef got in for a start."

"What did you do at Birmingham?"

She grinned. "History."

"No wonder you know so much about archaeology. Did you –?"

"Finish? Yes. I got a First and don't ask your next question."

"What would that be?"

"Why I don't have a proper job."

They ate in silence for a while.

"So what's your relationship with Henry?"

Flick dropped her chopsticks.

"Sorry. I wasn't suggesting...I mean...now I'm wondering how many feet I can stick in my mouth at one go," he said.

Flick thought about teasing him but decided not to. "Henry's been very kind to me. He's an angel, though he pretends he's a devil." What was their relationship? They played word games. They flirted. He'd never touched her in an inappropriate way though Flick sensed the possibility lurking. "I think he does fancy me but he'd never act on it and I'd run a mile."

Beck smiled. "Any more jobs?"

"Pub work. I deliver Yellow Pages once a year and then there's the fuel station," she mumbled.

"I drove along the ring road looking for where you work. Where exactly is it?"

"Not exactly on the ring road." Flick helped herself to more Singapore noodles. This was not the time to tell him she was a pole dancer. Not now they were getting closer. "This is really delicious." Take the hint, she pleaded.

"Yep, it is. Okay, you're bright and multi-talented, what is it that you'd actually like to do?"

Her gaze rolled around the restaurant and came to rest on the large aquarium. "Marine biologist." She liked the sound of that.

Beck laughed. "Why do you have so many jobs? I don't understand why you're not shattering some glass ceiling with one of your very sexy high heels."

"I don't want the responsibility," Flick lied. "And I get bored really, really quickly and I think that's enough about my jobs from someone whose career lies in ruins."

Beck groaned. "To think I've never heard that one before."

"Why did you decide you wanted to spend your life poking around in dead people's rubbish?" Flick tried to shift the conversation back to him.

"Because I thought archaeologists didn't need to shave and spent most of their time drinking."

"Ah, so you drew the short straw with Ilkley."

"No, I don't think I did," Beck said.

Flick smiled. "I need to tell you I don't like beards."

Beck coughed.

"No, I really don't. They scratch. My theory is men grow beards to hide how ugly they are."

"Flick." Beck glared.

She grinned. "Never grow a beard. They're like facial pubic hair, horrible."

There was a snort from behind her. Beck looked panic stricken and Flick turned, aware of what she'd see—a bearded man. He frowned so hard, his eyebrows looked like two brown worms wriggling across his forehead.

"But I find food gets caught, don't you?" She smiled and stroked her chin. "I shaved mine off and I've never regretted it. Why don't you try it?"

"Flick!"

She turned back. "He shouldn't have been listening. His wife will be grateful if he gets rid of it, believe me."

"You are so weird."

"Good weird or bad?"

"Good, I think."

"That's all right then. So give me the next installment of 'Famous Five Go For A Dig'. How's Jane getting on with the others?"

"Better. She and Dina are speaking to each other in a civil way now. Isobel has whipped them all into shape."

"The woman in the sheet."

"My post-grad assistant. And no, we're not and never have been."

Flick gave a little smile.

"Dina doesn't seem to be quite so hung up on me. She's more bothered by the fact that Ross and Matt are no longer biddable servants. They have their tongues permanently out and their gaze fixed to Isobel's chest."

"Mmm."

Flick had been chewing the same king prawn for the last few minutes and she didn't want to swallow it. Prawns shouldn't be chewy. She wanted to spit it out but Beck hadn't taken his eyes off her. Normally she wouldn't have minded but in a minute he'd wonder why she hadn't spoken for ages and had nodded and murmured with her mouth closed. She began to wonder what she had in her mouth. A prawn or something else? Part of a finger? Her stomach lurched. Maybe those stories about Chinese restaurants weren't all apocryphal. What if it was a chicken's penis? Where had that thought come from? Did a chicken have a penis? Cockerels must have. Now she was going to be sick.

She gave in, glanced over Beck's shoulder and waved. When Beck turned to look she spat the prawn into her hand.

"Someone you know?" he asked, turning back.

"I thought so but she didn't wave."

Flick felt in her pockets for a tissue. Nothing. She could drop the thing on the floor, but the tablecloth didn't hang very low and he'd see the piece of food when he stood up and think she was a slob. Of course, she could toss it his side, but he'd know he hadn't dropped it and anyway she'd probably miss and hit him on the leg, then have to use her foot to move it and he'd think—oh God. She could hardly nick the restaurant's linen napkin, so she pushed the chewed morsel into her coin purse. It didn't look like a prawn. What the hell was it? She suddenly realized Beck had asked a question and she hadn't been listening.

"Well, what do you think?" he said.

Flick came up with the one sentence that would make him forget what he'd asked. "Do you want to stay the night?"

His mouth fell open. Oops. She could see him wondering how the hell he'd managed that and was worried by the fact that he looked alarmed rather than keen.

"Relax, I'm not going to drag you into bed," she said.

"I'm disappointed now."

She grinned.

"Do you want anything else to eat or shall I get the bill?"

"I'm full."

Beck took out his wallet.

"We can split it." Flick tried to sound as though she meant it.

"My treat." Beck put a five-pound note with his credit card and patted his pockets.

"Do you have a couple of pounds? I'd rather leave the tip in cash."

Flick pulled her coin purse from her pocket and as she opened it the well-chewed body part masquerading as a king prawn flew out and landed right in front of Beck.

"What on earth is that?" he asked.

"It's...it's my lucky appendix."

She watched in horror as Beck speared it with his fork and sniffed it.

"It smells of prawn," he said.

"Why do you think they had to remove it?"

He burst out laughing. Flick pushed it behind the table decoration.

"Don't you want to take it with you?" he asked.

Flick sighed. "You know, I feel strong enough to say goodbye. You're a miracle worker."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Beck drove back to Timble as though he was taking his driving test. He didn't dash through any changing traffic lights, he didn't exceed the speed limits even in the sections between the speed cameras and he never took his eyes off the road. There was an erotic distraction sitting next to him he was trying not to think about. Flick had stretched out on the seat, slid her hand onto the back of his neck and was pulling his hair through her fingers. Beck moved his cheek against her hand, thought how soft it was and then jerked his head upright.

Concentrate. Road. Flick. Car. Drive. Flick.

He trembled as she ran one finger under the collar of his shirt and around to the front of his neck. His Adam's apple moved up and down under her thumb.

"How are you feeling?" Flick asked.

"I think you know." His erection strained against his zip. He needed to make himself more comfortable, but he didn't dare take his hands from the wheel. When he felt her fingers tickle his knee, a flaming arrow hit his groin and he groaned.

"I don't think that's a good idea." Beck knew his voice sounded strangled.

Her hand slid higher.

"Flick, stop teasing me or..."

"Or what?"

"You'll be sorry." How lame could he be?

"I want to kiss you," she said, "and I can't wait."

Beck wasn't sure he could wait either but the well-illuminated A65 was not the best place to be dealing with an attack of uncontrollable passion.

"Something is going to happen if we wait," she said. "Maybe there'll be an invasion and we'll find ourselves facing a line of tanks or a plane will crash in front of us. Ooh, or an impenetrable evil fog will appear out of nowhere, and creatures will materialize and drag us in different directions."

Beck gulped. "Now you're frightening me."

"So no, we can't wait. Turn right here."

He flipped his indicator.

"Straight over this junction and keep going."

"Flick, please take your hand off my thigh," Beck asked in a choked voice.

"Sorry. Next left. Up the hill. At the junction turn right."

"Could you repeat that?" he mumbled, having forgotten everything after the word "sorry".

Flick went through it again.

"How much further?" Beck asked. He wasn't sure, but he thought he'd asked that five times. He expected his dad to give him a clip around the ear any second.

They travelled along a dark country lane somewhere between Guiseley and Otley.

"Three hundred yards, then left," Flick instructed. "It's a dead end. Don't go too far or you end up in the sea. Okay, stop here."

Beck switched off the engine. "I feel I ought to point out we're a couple of hours away from the sea."

"Oh no, we're lost," Flick wailed and then cut it off. "Never mind."

She unfastened her seat belt, leaned over, took hold of his head and pressed her lips against his. Beck felt her tongue pushing its way into his mouth and for a moment he let her do all the work, reveling in being the one consumed before he started to kiss her back. She tasted so sweet. Her tongue was driving him crazy. His heart pounded. He wanted her so much he was in physical pain and the handbrake digging into his thigh wasn't helping.

Flick pulled away and moved back onto her seat. "Thank God."

"For what?" Beck stroked her cheek with his fingers.

"You kiss like you mean it."

"I do mean it. Only now I want more."

Flick glanced over her shoulder at the two rows of seats in the van. "How athletic are you?"

Beck doubted two broken legs could have stopped him. He scrambled over his seat onto the one behind.

"Not bad," Flick said and in one fluid movement slid backward to join him.

"My ideal woman. Witty and agile."

"I thought we only needed a pulse?"

"You have a pulse as well?" His lips moved to Flick's and he eased her back so she lay on the seat. He had one knee beside her and the other on the floor on top of something sharp and he didn't care. The kiss was deep and went on for so long they ran out of air and broke off gasping.

Beck lifted the bottom of her sweater—his sweater—and peeled it over her head, tossing it further back in the van. He continued to kiss her neck as his fingers fumbled with the buttons on her shirt. Flick's fingers were busy with the buttons on his.

"I was so jealous of Hannibal," she said.

"Why?" Beck opened the last button and gave a throaty groan. A red lace bra. He was dead and going to hell.

"Because she got to crawl all over your chest." Flick lifted her head, pressed her lips against his collarbone and licked her way down to his nipple as he hovered over her.

"She didn't get to do that," Beck gasped.

"If you're wise, you'll never risk letting her."

Flick peeled off his shirt and threw it over the seat. "Not just a great mind, but a nice body." She twirled her fingers over him.

"Only nice? Do you know how long I've spent at the gym toning and defining?"

"A month?"

Beck nipped her ear. Then they were kissing again in a tangle of limbs, with no room to move. He wanted her bra off. Now.

"How far are we going to go?" she whispered.

"I wasn't thinking of driving to the sea."

Flick bit his nipple gently.

"Ouch, thank goodness you aren't Hannibal." He pulled back. "Well, I guess we're not behaving like sensible adults. We're crammed in the back of a van with no room to stretch, virtually no room to maneuver." But even as he spoke he slid his hand inside the front of her pants. She was hot and wet and he was in deep trouble. Beck didn't care where they were. They could have been standing outside a pub and he would've had to do this.

Flick moaned in his ear and Beck trembled. "I wish I could have gone out with you when I was a teenager."

"Why?"

"Because I'd have spent hours kissing you, trying to get my hand right where it is now. It would have been months of exquisite torture."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm easy?" Flick asked in indignation, but her eyes were glazed with desire.

"Too late."

"I didn't notice you protesting earlier that you could wait. If you'd like months of exquisite torture, that could be arranged."

"I'm too old to cope with months of torture. I also think I'm too old to be doing this in a van." And too tall.

Flick pressed her hand against the front of his trousers, stroked his erection and made him groan. Beck moved his mouth to the side of her head and sucked her earlobe. As she squeezed his cock he kissed down her neck.

"Are you?" she whispered.

"Am I what?" Beck's capacity for logical thought diminished second by second.

"Too old for this?" Flick asked as she unbuttoned and unzipped him. He sighed with relief as his cock straightened out. Her fingers slid inside his boxers and wrapped around him. Beck inhaled as she began to stroke and twist.

"Flick, Flick," he murmured. "That feels so good."

He couldn't have stopped her now if he'd wanted to. Why would he want to? She had her mouth glued to his and her body pressed against his. That red bra. He was lost. His brain had shut down everything except his response to her touch. Her fingers were expertly bringing him to a climax he wouldn't be able to push back. Nothing was going to stop —

The bang on the window made them both jump. Their heads turned and they stared at a man who stared at them.

"Fuck!" Beck tried to fasten his pants while Flick blocked the view of his body.

"Move your bloody car, you perverts," the man yelled through the window.

He'd come up in front of them. They hadn't even noticed his headlights. Beck scrambled over the seat and Flick followed, slipped on her shirt and fastened a couple of buttons. She clipped on her seat belt and fastened Beck's for him as he reversed down the lane back to the road and pulled up out of the way. The guy roared off down the hill toward Otley.

"I think it was the same man that caught me when I was sixteen." Flick giggled.

Beck burst out laughing. "You'll be getting a reputation, Miss Knyfe."

"I wasn't the one with my pants down, Professor Beckett," she reminded him.

"Oh God, I hope he didn't see the writing on the side of the van."

"I think he was more interested in what was happening inside it."

"Now what?" Beck asked as he put away his disappointed cock and zipped himself up.

Flick retrieved his shirt and passed it to him. "Look out for speed cameras on the way home, but get there fast."

By the time Beck drew up outside the house, his heart pounded and his mouth was dry. Flick took hold of his hand and pulled him up to the door. They'd barely got through it before Beck was unfastening the buttons on her shirt.

"It's only two flights of stairs," Flick said.

"Not sure I can wait that long. You did say that evil fog can slide under doors."

They half-crawled up the stairs, their mouths together, hands all over each other. In the end, Flick pulled him into her room and closed the door. She moved to switch on a bedside lamp and when she stepped back, Beck stood behind her, his fingers reaching for the last button on her shirt. He pulled it off, threw it aside and plastered himself against her back, cupping her breasts. A deep groan bubbled from his throat.

"You are so sexy. This bra is wild."

"How do I know you don't just have a fetish for lacy bras?" Flick asked.

"Do you have any other kinds?"

"A few sheer ones."

He smiled, kissed her neck and ran his fingers around the edges of her bra. "I can't believe how much I want you."

"And when did this symptom first manifest itself?"

"When I saw you trying to get away from that ram." He kicked off his shoes and bent to remove Flick's. "With your wild hair, you looked like you'd just fallen out of bed and I wished it had been my bed. You irritated the hell out of Celia so I knew I'd like you."

"You didn't show any obvious signs."

She tackled the remaining buttons on his shirt.

"I repelled a rival, didn't I?"

"Yes, and he was such an animal."

Beck laughed as Flick pushed the shirt from his shoulders and ran her hands over his chest. His skin fluttered under her touch. Her fingers teased his nipples and she smiled when they hardened. He unfastened the zip on her pants and pulled them down to reveal a red lace thong.

"You really are trying to kill me, aren't you? Lie down."

Beck began at her feet and worked his way up her body. Inch by inch he kissed the exposed flesh, licking a wet path from her toes to her ankles, from her calves to her knees, from her thighs to her hips and as his tongue ran along the line of her panties, Flick whimpered. He kissed, licked and teased around the red bra, but when Beck finally reached her mouth, Flick rolled on top and pressed her lips against his.

"I'm torn between wanting this to last forever and ripping off the rest of your clothes," she whispered.

Seconds later they were both naked.

"That was a more difficult decision than it might have appeared," Beck said.

"I'm not complaining."

"I need my wallet."

"You don't have to pay," Flick quipped. "First time is free."

Beck grabbed the only condom he had, uttering a silent prayer for there to be nothing wrong with it and tore open the packet with his teeth.

"This is the only condom I have and I'm not sure how long—"

"If you don't hurry you're going to be playing with yourself."

"You think I'd let you get away with that?"

He lay beside her on the bed, moved his hand down her body, over her gently rounded belly and onto her damp folds. *Oh God, she's so wet.*

"Ooh, that's good," Flick gasped.

As he teased the little nub of her clit, her muscles clenched and the climax rolled through her. Beck was filled with a sense of pleasure that she'd come so quickly, that he'd made her happy.

"And to think I was worried about me being speedy," he muttered in her ear. "Mmm, fighting talk."

Flick ran her hands down his hips as Beck positioned himself between her legs and then slid straight inside her, pushing as deep as he could on the first thrust. She gasped and gripped him tighter. She kept her eyes open and watched him watching her, tension etched on his face. Flick wrapped her legs around his hips and as he shifted back and forth, she felt herself coming again, every part of her tightening before she was gripped in a series of electric contractions that pulsed through her whole body. Her climax dragged Beck's from him. He stiffened, then breathed out her name as he fell into her arms.

Flick felt as though she'd slid into a deep, warm bath. She relaxed as Beck panted in her ear, then began to count. "One. Two. Three."

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Working out how long it takes for you to get your breath back."

"Why?"

"I don't want to give you heart failure."

He chuckled. "You are so bad."

"I think you mean good."

Beck waited a couple of seconds. "Good then."

"We're going to have to practice abstinence until Josh comes back and then you're going to have to go and speak to him," Flick whispered.

"Why?"

"He has something we both need."

Beck leaned up on one elbow and furrowed his brows.

"A whole packet," Flick said.

"Will he be long?"

"Don't worry. I can make abstinence really good fun."

Beck collapsed onto his back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Beck had intended to leave early in the morning to get the minivan back to Isobel but Flick proved too tempting. Twice. He lay looking at the ceiling, willing his heartbeat to return to normal.

"Looks like you need to paint in here as well," Beck said. "If you promise to wear black lace underwear I'll help."

"How about a green thong and tassels?"

Beck moaned. "Not fair."

"No, that's what I want you to wear," Flick teased.

Beck rolled over and brought his face up close to hers. "I thought you liked me naked?"

"Only on Thursdays and it's Friday. Today you disgust me."

"That's not what you said a few moments ago. I think it was 'don't stop, don't stop'."

"I have a terrible short-term memory. Who are you, again?"

"Would you like to go for a picnic on Saturday? I'll pick you up about eleven. I'll bring the sandwiches. No more peanut butter and Marmite."

"But I only eat peanut butter and Marmite."

"Not smoked salmon?"

"I could force it down if it made you happy. If there's lemon and black pepper," she added.

Beck leaned over and kissed her. "You don't have to do much to make me happy."

She ran her hands over his back and pulled him closer. "Stay."

"Flick, I have to go. Isobel needs the van."

"The perv-mobile."

"Oh God, I'm never going to be able to drive it without thinking of last night."

"Good," Flick said and kicked him out of bed.

* * * * *

Beck drove back to Ilkley feeling like a teenager except he wouldn't just have had fantastic sex with a beautiful woman. He'd never been that lucky. But he felt lighter inside, everything looked brighter, more attractive, more worthwhile. Flick made him happy. She was challenging and funny and brilliant in bed and he wished he could see her this evening but he didn't think Giles would be pleased if he missed his stag night.

He'd a real pang when he'd looked at the books stacked up in Flick's room. Beck thought you could learn more about a person by spending ten minutes looking at their books than you could from two hours chatting. Flick liked the same sort of books as him—thrillers, twisted psychological stories with serial killers and predatory stalkers. The big difference being his books were neatly shelved by author in alphabetical order, while hers were in no order at all. A book on fossils sat next to the latest Kellerman, a history of American slavery next to an old Patricia Cornwell. Several books were upside down. It worried Beck. He was a typology expert—tidy and organized were his middle names.

* * * * *

Willow drove Beck and Giles into Leeds and dropped them at Revolution.

"Please don't let him do anything stupid," she said to Beck. "No trains to Glasgow. No tattoos saying 'I love Rachel'. No handcuffing him naked to railings."

"Spoilsport." Giles kissed her.

"Well, all right, he can do the naked bit," Willow said. "And he can have the tattoo but only if it's on his penis."

Both men shuddered.

"I'll look after him." Beck was supposed to be in charge of the stag night and had a feeling looking after Giles would not be easy with friends desperate to drown him in alcohol while subjecting him to an evening of debauchery.

Beck would have been happy with a pub crawl, but he knew the others had different ideas. Mike, one of Giles' friends, had sent the group an email with the suggestion they went to a theatre production of *The Vagina Monologues*. The next day he sent another email cancelling that because he'd found out it wasn't the equivalent production to *Puppetry of the Penis* and no one did anything interesting with a ping-pong ball. Baxter, another of the group, had suggested hiring a prostitute and telling her Giles was into S&M. After that Beck had started to take his role as stag night coordinator more seriously.

Pete, James, Baxter and Mike worked with Giles in Leeds. Three other friends, Sebastian, Jake and Tim, all lawyers, had come up from London. They were already in Revolution and had started drinking. A line of shots on a wooden board awaited Giles.

"If you don't guess the flavor you have to take off an item of clothing," Jake said.

Giles grinned and downed the first shot of vodka. "Cream egg." Then the next. "Jalepeño."

"Take it easy, Giles, or you'll be ending the night sooner than we'd planned," Beck said.

"White chocolate."

"Bloody hell. You're good at this. Have you done it before?" Pete asked.

"Pear drop." Giles gagged on the next one. "That was horrible. It tasted like cough medicine."

Tim and Sebastian roared with laughter.

"It was cough medicine," Jake said.

"Wankers," Giles said with a grin.

"Right, we've got another game to play," Jake announced. "It's a variation of the one Giles started at university."

Beck wondered what was coming.

"Tonight between the eight of us, we have to find twenty-six girls for Giles to snog. Age doesn't matter so long as they have boobs, and if we get desperate that might not matter either, but their names have to begin with the letters of the alphabet. Baxter, you keep a record. Make sure we don't miss any."

Beck saw the gleam in Giles' eyes and hoped Willow never found out about this.

The evening turned into a drunken crawl from one bar to another as each of Giles' friends competitively attempted to persuade every girl they saw to kiss the bridegroom-to-be. About half of those they asked, obliged. Baxter kept a list of their names on his mobile. Beck was impressed with the guys' powers of persuasion. As well as telling the truth, that Giles was getting married, he was also apparently dying of an incurable but not too unpleasant disease, leaving for a year-long expedition to the arctic, joining the army, navy, air force, or one better, the priesthood or, according to Tim, having his cock amputated the next day. The only girl Beck asked, kissed him as well. Her name was Fiona. He knew which F he'd rather have kissed.

He'd booked a table at a Chinese restaurant, only trying to get them all walking in the same direction proved more of a challenge than Beck anticipated. They were like a litter of puppies with only slightly better bladder control. He sighed with relief when he had all nine of them sitting at the table. They were loud but not too loud and the food began to soak up some of the alcohol.

Giles was tucking into his sizzling pork when an elderly lady tapped him on the shoulder. Beck swallowed his grin.

"Are you Giles?" she asked.

She looked great. Grey hair in a bun, wrinkled as a sharpie, carrying a walking stick and wearing a navy button-to-the-neck dress.

"Yes," Giles said.

"You've been looking for me."

The whole restaurant watched now.

"No, I think you've got the wrong person," Giles said.

"I'm Xandra. I'm your X."

Beck wished he'd thought to bring a camera to capture the look of horror on Giles' face. The laughter was so loud, the manager came to ask them to tone it down.

Giles had no choice but to kiss her.

As she tottered away, he turned to Beck and glared. "You wanker. She used her tongue."

By eleven thirty they were outside again and Beck walked them around the corner to the club. He knew that they wouldn't consider it a proper stag night if naked girls hadn't featured at some point. Against his better judgment, he'd pre-arranged a front row table at the Polecats Club.

* * * * *

Flick slid headfirst through the ceiling, down the pole into a swirl of machine-generated smoke. At least it wasn't cigarette smoke, she thought. Gerry grumbled about the ban but most of the girls who worked there were delighted. At the same time as Flick slid down, on either side of her on the raised platform, two others descended feet first. They all wore black French knickers with long furry tails. On their heads were matching furry ears and black eye masks with stiff whiskers. That was it. Their breasts were bare. A roar of approval came from the largely but not exclusively male audience as they began to dance. Flick's second set of the night. She'd had to promise Gerry two extra routines in return for not going in the following night so she could spend it with Beck after their picnic.

The rock music pounded and Flick undulated to the beat. Multicolored lights flashed and spun, jets of color darting over the room and across the stage. She twisted her body around the pole, matching the actions of Becca and Katya on either side. Flick found it easier to dance with others. She felt less exposed. Not all eyes rested on her. That night, as she wrapped her arms around the metal and ran her tongue the length of the pole, she imagined she was dancing with Beck.

Flick spun to the right and switched poles with Becca, arching back until she almost touched the floor with her head. As she twisted back up the pole, she looked across to smile at everyone, well actually to smile at no one, and saw Beck sitting with Giles. Flick leaned back into Katya and slid to the ground before her brain registered what she'd seen. Beck. Not a figment of her imagination. He was there, sitting a few feet away. Flick wanted not to look at him, wanted to pretend to be somebody else. Was there anything she could do? Rush off the stage? Faint? Think, she told herself. Stop panicking.

But the only thought running through Flick's head was that she had mere seconds of happiness left, that her life would never be this good, ever again. Even as she willed him not to look at her, he did.

Beck's mouth dropped open. He couldn't believe it. Giles pushed a glass of champagne into his hand.

"Aren't they fantastic," he slurred. "Bootiful pussy cats. Miaow."

Beck wanted to look away but he couldn't. It was as if his eyes had been pinned open for an operation. As Flick and the other two did the splits on the platform, he got up and bent to speak to Giles.

"We need to go now," he shouted in his ear.

Baxter pulled Beck down. "We've only just got here. Leave him alone. His last night of freedom. Last chance to have some fun."

Then Baxter, who had a wife and six-month-old twins at home, slumped back in his chair and promptly passed out.

"We've still four girls to get." Sebastian tugged Beck back on his seat after he got up for the second time. "P, Q, V and Y and we're not leaving until we've finished."

Beck tried not to look at the stage but he couldn't help himself. He wanted to walk out yet he couldn't leave Giles. He noticed his hand was wet and looked down to find he'd broken his glass, snapped the stem off and the cheap champagne for which he'd paid a fortune had poured on to the table. His hand shook. The men around him were shouting and calling out, whistling at the dancers, tossing money onto the platform. The music pounded in his head. He wanted to kill them. And her. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to kill her and kiss her. Kiss her first. Then kill her. Oh God.

Flick wanted this to be over. Everything was the same, yet everything was different. She moved on automatic pilot. She held the tip of her tail, ran it over her body, between her legs and kept her eyes closed. So stupid. It never occurred to her Giles might have his stag night at the club. This would have been so easy to avoid. Why hadn't she walked in and quit after last night? Everything had changed. Beck had changed her life. What was she doing up on this stage without her clothes? Damn, damn, damn!

She slithered along the platform, coiling up each of the three poles in turn. The mask hid nothing. Beck's eyes burned holes in her skin. She didn't want to move to the far end near their table and she began to change her routine but the men down there called her, shouted her and something clicked inside Flick. A knowledge that it didn't matter anymore. She shot back until she danced right in front of them, face to face with Giles, flicking her tongue over her lips. Giles reached out but she was too quick. Beck's hands stayed on the table, no expression on his face.

Flick kept her gaze down. She felt as though she'd been dancing for hours not minutes but finally the music came to an end in an explosion of sound and light and the pole carried her back into the ceiling.

The moment the opening closed and she was away from Beck's eyes, she pulled off her mask and burst into tears.

"What's the matter, princess?" Gerry asked. "Has some tosser tried to touch you? Point him out and I'll get Len to deal with him."

Flick shook her head. "No. It's someone I know who didn't expect to see me here."

Gerry gave her a careful look. "Do you want to go home?"

She wanted to crawl under her bed and find a parallel universe where this hadn't happened.

"Sorry, Gerry, I'm through. I can't do this anymore."

Beck watched as Giles' friends put together a pile of notes to buy a lap dance. They woke Baxter long enough for him to take two tens out of his wallet before he passed out again. In shock, Beck put twenty pounds on the table with the rest.

"That redheaded kitty-cat, *hic*...that's the one I want," Giles hiccupped.

"Go and pay for her." Pete offered Beck the money.

Beck somehow got up, only his feet were stuck. Sebastian gave him a shove and he made his way over to one of the tuxedoed bouncers.

He wanted to ask — *What the fuck is Flick doing here?* — but "I want to buy a lap dance for my friend," came out of his mouth.

"Speak to Gerry." The guy nodded in the direction of another man.

Beck struggled over and repeated his statement.

"Which girl?" Gerry asked.

"The redhead."

"She won't do it. Pick any of the others."

"Ask her."

"No point. She only does pole dancing. Pick someone else."

Beck returned to the table. Was the fact that Flick wouldn't grind her hips into a guy's face supposed to make him feel better?

Pete had a word with each of them and then said to Beck, "A thousand pounds. She'll do it for a thousand pounds."

Beck gasped. "You're crazy."

"Hey, she's the one Giles picked. We can afford it. We'll split the cost between us if you don't want to chip in. Use my credit card. Go ask her."

Beck went back to Gerry.

"So, he made another choice?"

"He still wants the redhead. A thousand pounds."

Beck offered him the credit card and the guy stopped laughing.

"Is this yours? P. Barker?"

"No, it's his. The one in the pink shirt. The lap dance is for the man next to him in the striped shirt. It's his stag night."

"I'll ask her."

"Want to earn a thousand pounds?" Gerry asked.

Flick dried her face. "Why do I think the answer is no?"

"A group in there wants the redhead to lap dance for a guy who's getting married."

"No," Flick said.

"A thousand pounds, princess. It's a lot of money. I know you need it." Gerry hesitated. "It pains me to say this, but you can keep it all. A goodbye present."

Flick saw the look in his eye and knew he wanted to see her lap dance too.

"I can't do it. I don't lap dance, you know that. Ask Natasha or Katya."

Flick washed her face again. She understood now about people never feeling clean when they'd done something awful. She could have told Beck, explained why she did this. She could still explain. Her heart belly-flopped into her stomach. No, she couldn't.

Beck watched the man walk over to their table and felt a pain in his chest spring up like sharp bamboo.

"Your card?" he asked Pete. "Sign here."

Beck got up and walked out. Only once he stood outside the club, he realized he couldn't just disappear. He daren't leave Giles with these guys. He'd heard Pete muttering about stripping him and tying him to a roof rack of some random car. He'd promised Willow he'd get him home in one piece and that was what he'd do. He'd wait for a while and then go back inside.

Flick watched as Natasha, in a red wig and her snake costume, earned a thousand pounds, half for her and half for Gerry. She knew if she'd done the dance Gerry really would have let her keep all the money. Flick wouldn't have done it for a million pounds.

Well, maybe for a million.

After all, the damage had been done. Anything there between her and Beck had been destroyed. She'd seen it in his face. Now he'd gone and Giles' eyes were on stalks. Flick supposed Beck was too disgusted to stick around.

"You're really not coming back again, are you?" Gerry said in Flick's ear as they watched Natasha.

She shook her head.

"So, you know those guys?"

"A couple of them."

Gerry guided her through a private door to where it was quieter.

"What's the problem, princess? Tell me what's eating you up."

"How would you feel if you went into a club and found your girlfriend pole dancing?"

"I'd be pissed off I didn't know. She could have been working for me." He winked.

"Would you want to date a girl who takes her clothes off in front of other men? The guys in here don't regard us as relationship material; they just like to ogle our tits and bums. They think we're cheap sluts and wank off imagining they're shagging us. They might not get to touch me, but I make it look as though I want them to. That's the whole point. When I take off my clothes and dance around the pole, I'm sharing myself with hundred of guys, so I'm not special for one. I wouldn't want my boyfriend to do what I do, why should I expect him to accept me doing it?"

Gerry stood looking at her for a moment. "I'm not surprised you're saying that, only that it's taken you so long to come out with it. I'll miss you, princess. If you change your mind, there's always a pole for you."

"Or a Russian or Albanian." She smiled.

Gerry laughed.

Flick cleared out her locker and pushed all her stuff into a plastic bag. There was a lot about Polecats she'd miss, but more that she wouldn't. She went to look for Natasha to say goodbye and bumped into Giles, staggering out of the gents, supported by two of his friends.

"Felicity Xanthe Knyfe, you luscious piece of fluff. Do you come here often?" he slurred.

"Only when it's your stag night, Giles."

"How about a kiss? I'm missing an X whose tits aren't down to her waist." He belched.

Flick rolled her eyes but as she stepped sideways to move past, Giles caught hold of her arm and pulled her face next to his. Flick thumped him but the guys with him moved in behind her, pinning her in place. She felt a flutter of panic but not for her own safety. Gerry or one of the bouncers would be watching this on CCTV. She had to do something before they burst into action.

Beck had worn a line in the pavement outside the club, but this time he wasn't out there voluntarily. He didn't know what made him angrier, the fact that Flick had danced topless in front of someone other than him or that she hadn't told him what she did. By the time he'd pulled himself together sufficiently to go back inside, throw his jacket over her and drag her from the stage, he'd been so blinded by tears he'd got the wrong girl and been forcibly ejected. He'd tried twice to sneak back in but the bouncers had made it clear another attempt would be very painful and might involve the police. Beck rang Giles on his mobile to tell him he had taxis arriving in ten minutes, with no expectation that the phone would be heard above the music, but to his surprise Giles answered.

As Giles took his hand off Flick to answer his phone, she twisted around, brought her knee up into his crotch and then dropped to the floor. She was much too quick for three drunks and reached the end of the corridor before any of them knew what had

happened. It had been easier to get away from them than she'd expected. The phone call had helped. It proved more difficult to persuade Gerry not to teach Giles and his mates some manners.

Beck's grip tightened on his phone. He heard Giles shouting Flick's name and then heard him groaning. He stabbed at the off button. Now he wanted to kill Giles too.

The taxis arrived as the group exited the club. One of the black cabs was for the guys who lived in Leeds while the other was to take the Londoners to their hotel before continuing on to Ilkley with Giles and Beck.

"Giles you are one lucky man," Tim said. "I am so jealous."

Beck didn't want to listen to this.

"I didn't think they were supposed to let you touch them," Sebastian said with a laugh.

"What did I do?" Giles had a stupid grin on his face.

"Licked her nipples, you crazy fool," Tim yelled.

"Tasty, tasty, very, very tasty," all but Beck sang in chorus.

Beck wished he was drunk, incoherently raging drunk.

"Flick has the sweetest lips," Giles mumbled. "But my balls ache so much." His head dropped to Beck's shoulder and he fell asleep.

The journey back to Ilkley was a long one for Beck. Enough alcohol raced through his bloodstream to make him drunk but he'd never felt so sober. Flick had told him all about her jobs, just not mentioned the one that really mattered. Why hadn't she told him? Because she was ashamed. Then why do it? She didn't look ashamed. She'd wrapped herself around that pole like a length of ribbon, writhed on the platform, ran her hands all over her body.

Maybe he could have coped with that, but she'd lap danced for Giles, let him lick her breasts, touch her. That, he couldn't forgive. It had made him think again about the things she was supposed to have done and claimed she hadn't; like kissing Giles and the affair with Henry, plus that crap about being kidnapped.

Giles woke as they pulled up outside the house. Beck paid the driver and dragged Giles from the car. He didn't try to be gentle and dropped him on the gravel.

"Was she a good fuck?" Giles asked as he stared up at him. "She must have been. She could do anything with those legs. Snake woman. Cat woman." He hiccupped.

Beck hauled him to his feet. "Shut up."

As he struggled to push the key in the lock, Willow pulled the door open.

"Hello, my angel, my little pudding, guess where we've been," Giles slurred.

"Midnight mass?"

"Guess again." Giles hiccupped.

"Supermarket?"

"Nope. Beck is the bestest best man in the whole of the world."

"I'll help you get him upstairs," Beck said. "Sorry, Willow, but he's completely smashed."

"Drunk I can cope with, black eyes and broken arms on the photos, I can't."

Beck knew she expected him to laugh, but he couldn't. He clenched his jaw so hard his teeth hurt.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

"Nothing," Beck said.

"Flick danced for me. Dad will be green."

"Flick? What was Flick doing on your stag night?" Willow had alarm etched all over her face.

"Let's get him in bed and I'll explain," Beck said, thinking how he couldn't explain anything.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Flick drove back along the A65 with her heart pounding. She stopped twice to throw up. By the time she crawled into bed, she'd thought through so many different scenarios her head buzzed. Pointless hoping Beck wouldn't mind. She'd seen his face. Hurt, disappointed, angry and worse. If she told him the truth and how desperately she needed the money, would it make any difference? Would it have made any difference if she'd told him before? She didn't think so. If she said she'd never do it again, could they turn the clock back as though it hadn't happened? No. He was disgusted and it was over. It was a car crash of a relationship and they'd hit each other head-on. No survivors.

Her head still throbbed when she got up the next morning. She'd had no more than a couple of hours sleep. When she went into the kitchen Josh kept his back toward her and although Flick had thought she couldn't feel any worse, she realized she was wrong. Everyone knew. Kirsten pulled out a chair and pointed. Flick sat.

"You told us you worked at a gas station. All this time you've lied. Why didn't you tell us?" Kirsten asked.

"Because you'd have disapproved."

"Damn right." Kirsten crossed her arms.

"I dance. I'm not a prostitute."

Josh gave a heavy sigh.

"Does this have anything to do with those men that abducted you?" Kirsten asked.

Shit. "In a way."

"God, Flick, why did you do it?" Kirsten shouted at her now. "It degrades women. Stripping? I can't believe you'd stoop so low. It's dangerous. It's demeaning. You could be stalked, raped. What were you thinking?"

Flick sat in silence as Kirsten ranted.

"Willow was so upset—practically hysterical. Have you any idea what you've done? I'm so...so cross with you. I can't believe you'd do this. She's getting married in a week's time. She sobbed to me on the phone for an hour. Her heart's breaking."

My heart's breaking too.

"Think about it. How would you feel if it was you?" Kirsten stared at her, hands on her hips.

"It was a stag night and they're men. What did she think happened at those sorts of clubs?" Flick sighed. "Anyway it was only dancing."

"She doesn't see it that way."

"But it isn't as if there's anything more to it than that."

"She's worried there is." Kirsten narrowed her eyes.

Flick thought about Natasha's boyfriend, a plumber from Otley who'd been with Natasha for years. They had a two-year-old. No way would Natasha be interested in Giles. "No, there isn't."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Kirsten said.

Josh sat next to her. "So why did you do it?"

"Because nothing else I could do, paid so well."

"You think because you needed the money that makes it acceptable?" Kirsten retorted.

Flick breathed out deeply. "It was acceptable to me, but I knew what other people would think, which is why I didn't tell you."

"You mean you enjoyed it?" Kirsten gasped.

Flick sighed. "I didn't say I enjoyed it. I just did it, that's all."

"You obviously felt comfortable enough to flash your breasts at strangers," Kirsten muttered.

Flick looked at the two faces in front of her. They morphed into the faces of her parents and then back to her friends. All four disappointed.

"Neither of you understand what it's like to need money. You have secure jobs with regular incomes. Respectable, professional jobs. You put your money into pension plans. You have health insurance. You're going to get promoted and go places. You'll be successful. You are successful. You'll buy flashy cars, smart houses, huge flat screen TVs, have holidays abroad every year and none of that will ever be mine."

"Don't be so defeatist," Kirsten said.

"It could be yours too. You don't look for a proper job," Josh said quietly. "You got a First, Flick. You're wasting your ability. You're clever but you do all these little dead-end fillers; couple of days at the gym, another at the Lido, laboring for farmers, working behind a bar. You could do so much better. I know you were upset when Grinstead's made you redundant, but there are plenty more firms you could work for."

Flick swallowed hard but the lump in her throat didn't move. There didn't seem to be anything left to lose by telling the truth.

"They didn't make me redundant. They sacked me."

Silence. Flick wondered what they were thinking.

"What did you do?" Kirsten asked.

Flick waited to see what Josh would say.

"Well?" Kirsten demanded.

Flick ignored her. Her gaze fixed on Josh.

"What happened?" he asked eventually and she gave a little smile.

"I didn't do anything, Kirsten," Flick said. "They made a mistake. They said I'd stolen a hundred and eighty thousand pounds. Since they found forty thousand of it in my bank account, they pretty much assumed they'd caught me red-handed. Only I have no idea how it got there. I think someone set me up because if it had been a mistake or deposited by accident, then they'd have spotted that. But Grinstead's want the rest of it and they had me arrested. So you see I'm a liar about a lot of things. I wasn't kidnapped. I was arrested, charged and now it's going to trial."

"Flick, I—" Kirsten began.

"I've not finished." Flick raised her voice. "Since they sacked me, I've done the best I could to keep everything the same, but I have no references, so no chance of a decent job. I still have a mortgage and bills to pay, food to buy and a selfish sister to support. Stef might be a pain in the neck, but she's my responsibility because I'm the only one left to help her. I don't buy my clothes at charity shops because I'm quirky, I do it because it's all I can afford. I work longer, shittier hours than either of you and I earn a fraction of what you get. Sometimes I don't even have enough money to buy food. You come home and I tell you I've eaten but I haven't. You tease me that Marmite on toast is my staple food, but it's true."

Kirsten and Josh looked at her in horror.

"Flick, why didn't you tell us? We'd gladly share—" Kirsten began.

"That's not the point. This is my problem, no one else's. My job at Polecats stopped me from drowning. Do you think it was easy for me to take off my clothes and dance in front of people? Have I ever stripped off in front of you, Kirsten? At least when no one knew, I could pretend I was someone else, pretend I worked on a till in a gas station but now I can't do that. I can't do any of this. I'm putting the house on the market. You'll have to find somewhere else to live."

Flick looked at their white faces and got to her feet. "You're not to tell anyone what I've told you. Henry knows, but not Stef. And there's no point asking me about it because I won't say another word."

Flick stayed in her room all day. She ate nothing and drank nothing other than water from the bottle she kept by her bed. A heavy weight lurked inside her, pressing her down, crushing her. She tried writing to Beck, but once she registered a sea of paper balls lay around her, she gave up and wrote a different letter instead. Still addressed to Beck but not a letter she intended to send.

A tiny part of her thought he might turn up to take her out for the picnic he'd promised. A larger part of her knew she needed to be booked in for a lobotomy for letting that enter her head. But Flick changed her clothes and put on her best black lace underwear and hoped.

He didn't come.

The pain in her chest grew so bad she thought she might be having a heart attack. In a way she wished she was and that she'd have to go to hospital so someone could look after her and take responsibility for whether she lived or died.

* * * * *

Beck had the hangover from hell. He couldn't tolerate any assault on his senses. Movement, light or sound could kill him. Too ill to sleep, he sat on one chair in the lounge and Giles sat on the other. It was some consolation that Giles looked worse than him. The whites of his eyes were bright red.

"How are you feeling?" Willow whispered.

Giles grunted. Beck tried to reply but his tongue had disappeared. What had happened to it? He felt a stab of terror until he realized it was stuck to the roof of his mouth. He reached for the water, drank a whole glassful and winced from the increased pain in his brain.

"Could you face anything to eat?" Willow suggested. "Some tomato soup?" The thought of it made Beck want to throw up.

"Better not, in case they have to operate," Giles muttered.

Willow stared at him. "Why would they need to operate?"

"Clearly more than a hangover. Has to be something really serious. If I don't feel better soon, ring for an ambulance."

"I hope you're not going to take after Gertrude. One raving hypochondriac in the family is enough." Willow turned to Beck. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Nnnn."

"Beer? Wine? A kick in the head?"

"Nnnn."

Thursday night had been one of the best nights of Beck's life and last night one of the worst. Willow had interrogated him until he'd given her almost the whole story and he guessed she'd rung Kirsten and her mother and by now half the population of West Yorkshire knew Flick danced in a strip club.

Beck imagined introducing her to his parents. His father would probably have a stroke. His brother would fancy a different sort of stroke. His mother would put on one of her faces and pull Beck into the kitchen to let him know exactly how she felt. They might be desperate for him to settle down, but not that desperate. It was over. It hadn't even begun. In two weeks he'd be back in York and he'd never see her again.

* * * * *

First thing Monday morning Flick went to Henry's office in Ilkley. She arrived before he did and when he saw her, he ushered her upstairs.

"Take a seat, Flick."

She didn't look at him. "I'd like to put the house on the market."

"Sit down," he repeated in a firm voice.

She sat.

"Why do you want to sell your house?" Henry asked more gently.

"I'm going to run away to a place with no extradition treaty before the police ask for my passport."

"Alternatively?"

"No really, I'm going to pay everything off, give Stef a lump sum and then disappear."

"Try again."

When she did tell the damn truth, no one believed her, Flick thought.

"You know my situation. I need to sell the house and the car."

"Where are you going to live?"

"In a tent in one of your fields?"

"I don't think Celia would approve."

"No, I don't think she would." Flick sighed. "No one approves of me and it hurts."

"I approve of you, Flick."

"Only because we're having an affair."

Henry laughed. "Oh yes, I heard about that."

"Giles didn't say anything to Celia, did he?"

"Fortunately not. I think I might have had trouble getting her to believe the truth."

"I've had enough," Flick said.

"You'll be fine. You're gutsy and feisty, you'll bounce back from this."

"So what do you think of the fact that I was working as a pole dancer?" She looked him straight in the eyes.

"I was surprised."

"You don't think my breasts are big enough?"

"Flick!" He shook his head.

"I'm not doing it anymore."

"Right, so I should sell my ticket?"

"You wouldn't be caught dead in a place like that."

"That's exactly what I'd be if I was caught in a place like that. Dead. You're quite enough excitement for me with your clothes on."

She groaned. "I feel terrible. Beck is disgusted along with Kirsten and Josh. Willow hates me. Giles too, I expect, now he's sober."

"Actually Giles has said very little. He spent the whole weekend feeling rather ill."

Good. "I have to be realistic, Henry. I've done the best I can, but I can't afford the house. Will you come and value it?"

Henry leaned back in his chair. "When did you last have something to eat?"

"Why?"

He stared at her. "You don't look well. I'll come and value the house this afternoon if you come to Betty's now and have breakfast."

"You're not ashamed to be seen with me?"

"Well, I'm not sure I like the shocking pink shirt but the denim skirt's nice."

Flick smiled.

She hadn't thought she'd be able to eat but she did and felt better afterwards. Henry didn't lecture or question her, just chatted about inconsequential things. He promised to come round to the house at five, so Flick bought a local paper and drove home. She needed another job and if the house sold as fast as Henry had suggested, she'd need another place for her and Stef to live. One bedroom was enough if she put a futon in the living room, though she guessed she'd end up on that when Stef came home for the holidays. One more year and her sister could look after herself. If she even hinted at more study, Flick would strangle her.

Picking up her mug of coffee, she sat at the kitchen table. Because Flick was trying to delay the inevitable she didn't turn straight to the jobs but started reading the article on the front page about a flock of sheep that had besieged the garden of some local resident. Apparently the sheep had figured out a way of getting over the cattle grid at the edge of the moor. They rolled over the bars. They'd found a way out. And Flick had always thought them stupid. They had a problem and dealt with it. As she had to. There was always a way out. She just had to find it.

The phone rang, she jerked and spilled coffee all over the paper. Flick leapt for the kitchen roll before the brown pool swam over the edge of the table. The machine picked it up.

"Flick, are you there?" Kirsten asked. "I've got something to tell you. I want to see you happy again so I made Josh drive past Giles' place this morning and post that letter you'd written to Beck. I'm sure things will be okay between you if he knows how you really feel. I thought I'd better tell you so if he rang you'd know what he was talking about. See you tonight. We're bringing wine and I'll cook."

Flick's blood stopped moving in her veins. The letter had not been for Beck's eyes. It had his name on the envelope but it wasn't for him. She'd meant to put it with her collection of letters-never-to-be-sent. She had a box of them under her bed; pleading letters to a couple of ex-boyfriends, venomous letters to the rest, a vitriolic diatribe to a hairdresser who'd wrecked her hair the day before the school dance, biting letters to teachers who'd picked on her, a furious letter to Grinstead's, a sad goodbye to her parents and a no-holds-barred invective to selfish Stef.

With them should have been a letter to a guy who'd made her heart stop the first time she'd seen him, a guy who only a few days ago had looked at her as though she

was the most special person in his world and the next time he saw her he'd behaved as though she wasn't fit to breathe in the air he breathed out. A letter full of love and hate. God, why hadn't she burned it?

Flick tried hard not to panic, but little surges of terror seemed hell-bent on invading every organ of her body. She couldn't keep still and paced around the kitchen chewing her nails. Maybe he hadn't seen it. He'd have gone to the dig first thing. So it was possible—probable it would be waiting for his return.

Waiting unopened in an empty house.

They were all at work. So she could go over there, break in and get it back. Why bother? He already hated her. How much worse could the letter make things? A lot worse for her. She didn't want him to know how she felt. That was the whole bloody point of her box. It was the way Flick opened and emptied her heart but not for others to see.

She couldn't let herself be hurt anymore.

Couldn't stand it.

She'd break into the house.

What was she thinking?

She couldn't do that.

Then she thought about what she'd said in the letter.

Yes, I can.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Celia headed straight for him, her face bright red with excitement.

“Alexander, Alexander!”

Beck sat in the entrance to the tent, sweltering in the heat, writing furiously in his notebook. He was in such a bad mood no one dare speak to him. Any little thing that had gone wrong he’d treated as a major catastrophe. He’d snapped at Isobel when she’d made a joke about him misidentifying an artifact. He’d told Dina she was an idiot and she’d burst into tears. He’d poured scorn on Matt after he’d announced he also had phobias about frogs and flip-flops. He’d decided to keep out of everyone’s way and write a new murder scene – a stripper strangled with her rubber snake.

“Alexander? There you are. Such wonderful news.”

He’d been dreaming since Thursday night? Maybe it was only Wednesday. He’d never laid eyes on Felicity Knyfe? He was in Italy instead of Rich? Beck waited. Celia would get there in the end. If she didn’t, he doubted he’d have missed much. On the other hand, if she didn’t shut up soon he might have to throttle her. If he’d had a rubber snake handy, he might have tried.

“I’ve had the most fascinating telephone conversation. It’s such thrilling news I had to rush straight down here to tell you. Yorkshire Television is coming to do a news item about the dig.”

She waited – presumably for him to scream in excitement. He didn’t. Sadly it didn’t put her off.

“They want to interview me too. I’ve always thought I’d be a natural on the screen. Good bone structure, you see. I’d have been a perfect partner for that good-looking chat show chappie, had he not married the walrus in a suit. Anyway, they’re coming this afternoon and you, of course, have the starring role.”

“Isobel can do it.”

“Isobel can do what?” Isobel asked as she came back to the tent carrying a tray of dirt-encrusted pottery.

“A TV interview,” Beck said.

“Not in my job description. You’re in charge, you’re the boss, as you so clearly let us know earlier today. You can bloody well do it.”

Beck chewed at his lip. He started to speak and Isobel glared at him.

“Don’t bother trying. I’m not going to do it,” she said.

“Somebody has to.” Celia stared at him.

Beck clenched his fists. If he hadn't lost his temper with Isobel, she'd have done the interview, now he'd have to.

"They'll be here around four thirty. Perhaps you ought to go and change Alexander, darling," Celia suggested, looking in a pointed way at the rings of perspiration on his shirt. "And maybe have a shave?"

* * * * *

Flick parked well away from Hartington Hall and crept through several fields in order to reach Giles' house unseen. On the way she snapped a branch from a small tree and stripped off the side shoots and leaves as she walked. She was chewing a whole packet of bubble gum, watermelon flavor, because she was going to copy an idea she'd seen on TV. Stick the gum to the end of a stick, push it through the letterbox and poke it down to the pile of post. Letter gets stuck. Pull it up. Run away. Couldn't fail.

Except when she got there, the letterbox sat at ground level. Sprawled flat on her stomach, her eye pressed against the opening, Flick could see nothing on the mat. On the other hand, peering through the frosted glass in the top half of the door, something on the hall table looked like her letter. She stuck her arm through the letter box and tried poking the stick up toward the table but couldn't reach far enough.

Flick walked round the house. No windows open at ground level. The good news — one small first floor window at the back stood ajar. The bad news — a shiny new box on the front of the house said Adamson Alarms. Disappointing but not disastrous. If it was like the security system at Timble, the motion detectors would be confined to the downstairs rooms and maybe one on the landing with nothing in the bedrooms. She could at least get inside upstairs without setting bells ringing. In theory.

A dangerous assumption. It was quite possible Giles had gold bullion on the upper floor and the alarm would sound as soon as she pushed open the window. Flick paused to think for a moment or two. How important was this? Very. What if she got into trouble with the police? Since she was already on their naughty list that hardly seemed relevant.

Before too much thinking talked her out of it, Flick put the stick between her teeth and climbed on top of the wheelie bin. From there she scrambled onto the flat roof of the kitchen extension. The window frame was reachable with one hand but it would leave her dangling while she brought over the other hand. It would still be difficult to pull herself up, despite her legendary skills as Cat Woman. Fortunately the window opened away from her so she could knock it back before she leaned across. If the alarm went off, she'd run. If she fell, she'd run, barring the intervention of a broken ankle or death.

Flick reached over with the stick and pushed the window ajar. She'd expected the stick to stay in her hand so she almost fell when it stuck to the window. The bubble gum idea had worked, sort of. The stick now hung down from the glass like some defunct wind chime. Flick grabbed the frame with one hand, letting herself swing out

so she could reach up with her other hand. So far so good. She hung onto the wooden sill with both hands but when she tried to pull herself up, she couldn't.

The words of the letter jumped into her head. Pig-headed bastard who couldn't see the truth if it was tattooed on his penis. She scrabbled against the wall with her trainers and tried to walk herself up. To her intense relief, her toes caught on the brickwork and she rose about a foot. It was far enough for her to get her elbows on to the window ledge. She panted heavily, more from fear than exertion.

Wedging one arm inside, Flick grabbed the internal sill with her fingers and forced her shoulders through the gap. For a few moments she feared she'd get stuck with half of her inside and half out. This was too hard.

So it's okay to leer at women's breasts so long as you don't know them? You pathetic, hypocritical wanker.

Flick flinched as she remembered what she'd written. She exhaled deeply to collapse her chest and little by little squirmed through. Only when she lay in a quivering heap on the bathroom floor did Flick realize she couldn't go out the same way. No possibility of her swinging back to the roof and too far to drop.

New plan.

Rush downstairs, grab the letter, hope she could open the front door and then leg it. If she couldn't open the door, she'd try the back door. If she couldn't get out that way, she'd break the kitchen window with a saucepan. A plan, not a good plan but Flick didn't waste more time.

She bolted downstairs, slipped on the last but one step and careered into the hall table, sending a vase of flowers crashing to the floor. As she scrambled through the debris she took in two things. One—what she'd thought was a letter was a flyer from "Clean as a Whistle" and two—the alarm was not deafening her. Her heartbeat returned to a thousand beats a minute.

Flick stopped moving and looked for the motion detector. It winked at her from the corner of the hall. So the system was either confused by her speed of light descent or not armed. She waited until she was breathing normally and then stood up. The little white box winked again. Armless. Flick groaned at her joke.

No sign of her letter in any room downstairs so she went up. She opened the door to Giles and Willow's room and closed it. No need to look in there. Beck's room was neat and tidy. The bed made. No socks or pants littering the floor. All his clothes hung in the wardrobe, his shoes lined up below. Anally retentive. Perhaps it had been a lucky escape after all. But he was reading a book by Mo Hayder and Flick loved her.

She grabbed Beck's pillow and pressed her face into it, inhaling traces of soap, aftershave, er...sweat. She could have been in that bed with him. She could have lain there while his fingers touched every part of her. She wondered what he'd do if he came back and found her lying in his bed like Goldilocks, only naked. Would he eat her in a nice way? Flick thrust the pillow back in place and stared in disbelief as a glass of water toppled over the book.

“Fuck.”

She rushed to the bathroom and returned with armfuls of toilet tissue, leaving a trail behind her like the puppy in the advert. When she pulled open the top drawer of the bedside table to make sure no water had gone inside, she found her letter.

Flick picked it up with shaking hands. Sealed. She never sealed the special letters. Maybe Kirsten had. That’s what Flick would have done, if she’d been stupid enough to take a letter that didn’t belong to her and send it to someone who was never intended to receive it.

Beck hadn’t read it.

He wouldn’t have read it and then sealed it, would he? Her heartbeat slowed to five hundred beats a minute. Flick pushed the envelope in her back pocket, realizing she hadn’t thought this through. If the envelope had gone, he’d know who’d taken it. Did it matter? She’d prefer that he didn’t know.

So Flick did the only thing she could come up with and began to trash the room. Not really trash it, but she pulled the covers off the bed and pushed the mattress askew. She tossed Beck’s shoes around and threw his clothes on the floor. As a final flourish, she tilted each picture on the wall to imply she’d been checking for a safe. Flick thought that a clever touch.

If she left now it would look as though a burglar had come, been disturbed and left without taking anything. Except the letter. Umm. Not such a good plan. Better if she actually took something valuable. She tried to pluck up enough courage to steal. Maybe if she removed all his socks the police might think it was someone with a fetish.

A door slammed and Flick fled to the bathroom before she remembered she couldn’t get out that way. She looked through the window sporting the stick and bubblegum. It was still too far to drop, even though she was desperate. She didn’t really want to die, although she’d thought about it plenty since Friday night. So she got into the bath and hid behind the shower curtain.

* * * * *

Beck saw the flowers all over the floor and the broken vase and thought—burglar. He glided through the downstairs rooms, but there were no other signs of disturbance. The front door had been locked and the back door still secure. The alarm was off but he hadn’t been the last one to leave that morning. Reassured to see Giles’ laptop sitting on the kitchen table, Beck felt more confident he was alone in the house. Maybe the vase had tipped over when Giles or Willow had slammed the door. He cleaned up the mess before he went upstairs. He went straight to the bathroom and reached behind the curtain to turn on the shower. He’d let the water warm up while he picked out some clean clothes.

Flick yelped as the jet of freezing water hit her in the face.

Beck dragged back the curtain and stared at her in astonishment. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She leaped out of the bath before she got soaked. Beck turned off the shower.

"I asked you a question. How did you get in?" His eyes darkened.

Flick opened her mouth. Nothing came out so she shut it again.

"Well?" he demanded.

How could she still like him when he was so furious with her? His brow was furrowed in anger and he needed a shave but he looked so wonderful—only he hated her and if he'd read the letter he worse than hated her, whatever that was.

"The window," she admitted.

"You didn't tell me burgling was up there with drystone walling and stripping."

"I'm a pole dancer, not a stripper and I haven't taken anything that doesn't belong to me," she managed to say.

Flick wanted to go. She took a step toward the door.

Beck grabbed her arm. "Not so fast."

She twisted to get out of his grasp and Beck grabbed the letter from her pocket.

"I thought you said you hadn't taken anything that wasn't yours?"

"It is mine."

"That's my name on the envelope."

"But I didn't write it for you. I wrote it for me. Kirsten took it from my room and brought it here without my knowing."

"I'll read it first."

He'd not read it? "No," Flick said. "Please, just give it back to me and let me go."

"What don't you want me to read? What have you said that you're ashamed of?"

"It's my letter. It's personal."

"I think when you decided it was acceptable to let men pay to see you dance naked, there was nothing personal left." He waved the letter in front of her. "Begging me to forgive you?"

The look on his face made her feel as though she'd fallen on a sword.

"Want me to forget it ever happened?" Beck said. "Want me think about how I'd feel if the situation was reversed?"

"Fuck you," Flick muttered, now knowing he'd read it.

"Yeah, I think you did." Beck released her arm as though he'd been holding something dirty.

"So it's okay to pay to watch, is it?" Flick asked. "How am I worse than you? It was a well-paid job. I needed money. End of story."

"One thing you did get right. It is the end of the story. At least I got a shag out of it."

Flick bit back her whimper, snatched the letter from his hand and fled. She thought he'd come after her but he didn't. As she wrenched open the front door she heard him yell and guessed he'd seen his room.

* * * * *

By the time Flick got back to Timble she no longer felt hurt, she felt angry. Being angry always made her hungry. She needed energy to fuel her fury. She needed energy so she could kill sanctimonious Beck. She grabbed the tub of coconut ice cream from the freezer and wrenched off the lid, breaking her favorite nail. She swore and slammed a spoon into the ice cream. The spoon ricocheted across the table. Flick picked it up and forced it into the container, bending it in the process until it twisted so far, it snapped.

When the table resembled the results of a Uri Geller extravaganza, she stopped and put the container in the microwave. Drinking ice cream was not as rewarding, but it enabled her to get through more at a faster rate. By the time Henry knocked on the door she felt very ill indeed.

* * * * *

When Beck arrived at the dig, the television people bustled around setting up their equipment. Celia was waiting. She'd changed into a formal green suit with a matching hat and handbag. She looked as though she planned to open a summer fete.

"You look lovely, Alexander." She waited, clearly expecting a compliment in return.

Beck said nothing. He stared in the direction of the dig. Every one of the students and Isobel had changed clothes. They must have raced back to the house as soon as he left. Dina wore a slinky dress and high-heeled shoes. The boys were in clean T-shirts and had combed their hair. Even Jane had put on fresh shorts and a pretty pink top. Isobel had swapped her khaki shorts and shirt for a pale blue linen skirt and a white blouse and was talking to a tall, tanned guy. She stood too close to him. Beck recognized her technique. She gestured for Beck to come over.

"This is Marcus Bowland. Marcus, this is Professor Beckett. Beck's in charge of the dig."

Marcus and Beck shook hands.

"Fascinating stuff," Marcus said. "Isobel has been kind enough to fill me in." He turned to beam at her and she beamed back at him. Beck gritted his teeth.

"Is it okay if we film what's happening now?" Marcus asked. "We can stand here and do the interview with the students working in the background."

There was an immediate scramble for the place in camera shot behind Beck.

"Let's just have the pretty one. Her." Marcus pointed to Dina.

Dina smirked and people lined up to strangle her.

"I'll start with you, Celia. I'll ask how this all started and then move on to Professor Beckett. We should get it on a first take but if anything goes wrong we can do it again. We're not broadcasting for another hour."

The sooner it was over the better as far as Beck was concerned. He didn't want to do it at all, but the look on Celia's face told him he had no choice. Isobel bobbed in the background with a tray of artifacts. Beck couldn't see why she wouldn't do the interview. She seemed desperate enough to get on camera.

The first questions were for Celia. Once she'd started to speak she wouldn't shut up. Eventually Marcus managed to interrupt and turned to Beck. Beck tried to sound knowledgeable and enthusiastic. Not easy when he felt confused and miserable. The change in direction almost caught him out.

"I understand one of your finds had a somewhat mind-blowing potential." Marcus grinned.

"It's the first time the remains of a stone dwelling of this age and type have been discovered in this particular area. Up until now, the best archaeological evidence of the Roman presence in West Yorkshire has come from Castleford."

"Ah yes, but I wasn't talking about that. Do you often have to get the army to check what you've dug up?"

Beck knew where this was going.

"It happens sometimes, but the item you're talking about was not excavated by any of my team, nor found in this field."

Things slid downhill fast. Beck realized the man knew exactly what had happened.

Marcus turned to camera with a smile. "A local woman, Felicity Knyfe, who unearthed the singing reindeer, is unavailable for comment but she must be thanking her lucky stars that's not because she's lying in hospital, injured by a bomb blast. This is Marcus Bowland for News in the North, at Hartington Hall, Ilkley, West Yorkshire."

He smiled broadly and the moment the camera moved, he reduced the wattage of his grin.

"That was great, folks," he said. "Don't forget to watch."

Beck glared at him. "What was the point in relating the Rudolph incident?"

"Human interest. Bit of humor. Flick's a good sport. She won't mind."

"Do you know Flick?"

"Ex-girlfriend, maybe not so much of the ex."

Beck bristled. "You're the one who went to Australia?"

"Has she been talking about me?" Marcus smiled.

"Her sister mentioned you."

"Stef. Stunner, but even more trouble than Flick."

Beck doubted that. The fact that Flick had gone out with such a wanker had dropped her even further in his estimation. He left Isobel to supervise the tidying up of the dig and returned to the house to put his bedroom back together.

* * * * *

Beck had no intention of watching himself on TV, but Giles and Willow had come home from work early at Celia's request.

"What happened to the vase of flowers in the hall?" Willow asked.

"A rampaging rhinoceros," Beck said.

"Do I need to contact animal welfare or is there another explanation?"

"Flick scaled the back of the house and climbed in through the bathroom window looking for a letter she'd written she didn't want me to read. She emptied my drawers, soaked my book, tossed around my clothes, generally managed to wreck my room and apparently your vase got in her way."

Giles and Willow stared at him like a pair of frozen cod.

"She's not capable of that," Giles choked out.

"It's Flick. She's capable of anything," said Beck.

"Oh look, Giles. It's your mother." Willow turned up the volume on the TV.

When Marcus got to the part about Flick and Rudolph, Beck groaned.

The moment the segment had finished the phone rang. Willow answered it. "Yes, you were great, Celia." She winked at Giles. "Yes, Giles thought you were wonderful. He's just said you have a natural presence."

Giles started to laugh and Willow retreated into the kitchen.

"Isn't she great? She's even beginning to handle my mother. It's amazing."

"Giles, how would you feel if you'd seen Willow dancing in that club?" Beck asked.

"Not so long ago I'd have given my right arm to go out with someone who danced like that," Giles whispered.

"So what's different now?"

"Most of the women I've been out with might have looked good by my side, but they weren't sweet and kind. In exchange for their bodies they expected meals in expensive restaurants and unlimited access to my credit cards. I thought it wasn't a bad deal until I realized they didn't care about the one thing I wanted to give them—my heart. Willow is different. She listens to me. She laughs at my jokes even when I'm not that funny and kindness is a quality I'm not used to. She loves me for who I am, not what I do or how much I earn and you know what? She loves me more than my mother."

Giles had changed. He'd grown up.

"How would you feel if Willow danced in guys' faces while she had practically nothing on? What if Willow ground her hips into my lap? Simulated having sex with me? Let me lick her breasts? What would you have thought then?"

Giles didn't need to say anything. Beck could read it in his face.

"I thought I knew Flick but I don't." Beck leaned back and closed his eyes. "When I finally got her into bed the sex was fantastic. I suppose she's had a lot of practice. I should have got her to do a lap dance for me. Have you fucked her?"

The question hung in the air like a big bluebottle waiting for a fly swat.

"No, I haven't. I haven't even kissed her. Flick didn't do the lap dance."

Beck's jaw twitched. "Are you telling me I was hallucinating? She wasn't cat woman and then snake woman?"

"She was those, all right. I mean she didn't do the lap dance. It was someone else."

Beck stared at him.

"It's the truth. I'm not lying."

"You asked for Flick. We paid for Flick."

"Then you didn't get what you paid for. Go and complain to Trading Standards."

"Forget it, Giles. You're not going to make things right by lying now."

Giles' face hardened. "I'm not lying. Okay, I was wrong about Flick and my father and we both know it was me who tried to kiss her at the Hall and not the other way round but I didn't even know Flick was in Polecats until she kneed me in the balls. I'm sure she didn't do the lap dance. She couldn't have got changed that quickly and her eyes were all red."

"You were so drunk you wouldn't have noticed if Flick had two black eyes."

"It wasn't Flick. I thought you were angry Flick was dancing in the club. I didn't realize you thought she'd done the lap dance, too."

Beck sat up. "So what about the nipples bit?"

"Shut up," Giles hissed. He glanced toward the kitchen door. "Look, the girl that did that dance on my lap had piercings. I caught my bloody tongue. Does Flick have bolts through her breasts?"

"No."

"Then there's your proof," Giles said.

"Fuck," Beck muttered. "I wish I'd never met her."

"You've got it bad."

"Don't talk crap. It's over."

"You think you can walk away? This is a woman who's so desperate for you not to see something she's written, she's risked her neck to get it back. I mean how on earth did she get through the bathroom window? And what the hell was in the letter? You did read it?"

Beck didn't answer.

"Does she know?"

"No. Yes. I'm not sure."

Giles shook his head. "She so wants you, you lucky bastard. She's completely crazy, and apart from my beloved she's the sexiest woman I've ever seen."

He groaned and Giles laughed. "What's the problem? She's mad about you."

Beck sighed. "I think it's too late."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The house turned out to be worth more than Flick thought, but after she'd deducted what she owed, little would remain. It pissed her off that she needed a lawyer to help her fight a charge of theft when she'd done nothing wrong. She wondered about representing herself. She'd have plenty of time on her hands now she was losing jobs at the speed of light. She could go to the library and get one of those "Fake it" books. Fake your way as a barrister. Flick could foresee a little problem in court if the other side found out she'd worked as a pole dancer, unless of course she recognized the judge from the club.

Flick left the house before Kirsten and Josh got back from work. Their friendship had been damaged and she wasn't sure if it was permanent. Part of her wanted to pretend nothing had happened and carry on as normal but she couldn't. She grabbed an apple and five slices of dry bread for dinner and went to work.

* * * * *

The hotel gym had started a new initiative since she'd last been on duty. "Row the Atlantic." Someone had added "or run" after row. Flick presumed they'd realized that with only two rowing machines, people would lose interest before they got out of the English Channel. A chart had been pinned up for members to record their contribution. The one who ran, rowed or walked the furthest would win twenty-four bottles of lager. She wondered who'd thought that one up.

Flick smiled throughout the evening, even at people who didn't deserve it, especially the elderly lady who harangued her about the towels—too thin, too short and according to the statistics in the papers, potentially germ ridden. She didn't smile when five people had come in and whistled "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" on their way to the changing rooms. When her manager asked for volunteers to test the new tanning machine, Flick forgot all she'd been taught by her dad and stepped forward.

She read the instructions as she stripped off. Put on shower hat. Turn this way, that way, hold arms this way, that way. Close your eyes. Don't breathe in. She rubbed lotion on her palms, put sticky pads on the soles of her feet, stood on the spots inside the booth and pressed the button.

At first Flick found it to be the relaxing experience she'd hoped for as the jets sprayed up to her waist and then down again. When they moved higher up her body, she took a deep breath to find the jets seemed to have slowed to the speed of a sloth. Although Flick could hold her breath for a whole length of the pool, she now needed air and as the spray hit her face, the desperation to breathe in overwhelmed her. The jets descended and she filled her lungs. The stuff smelled awful. By the time she'd changed

the position of her arms and gone through the whole thing again, Flick felt anxious, not relaxed. She turned so that the treatment could continue on her back and waited. Waited and waited. Nothing happened.

She stood, arms akimbo, brown liquid dripping down the front of her body as though it had rained black coffee. When the machine powered down, Flick accepted something had gone wrong. She pressed every button in sight but resuscitation proved impossible. The machine was supposed to blast you dry afterwards but it hadn't got around to that. Now she had to get the stuff off before it did dry because otherwise she'd look like a piece of streaky bacon, well cooked on one side.

The showers were in the ladies changing rooms, fifteen yards away down a communal corridor. Flick had no towel, not even a short, thin, germ-ridden one. If she put her clothes on, they'd get covered in brown sludge and she'd have to put them back on again afterwards which would reapply the dye to her body. She had to do something and quickly. There was a roll of paper toweling on the floor so she wiped off some of the liquid with that, then wrapped the green paper round and round her body until she resembled a moldy Egyptian mummy.

Flick expected to bump into someone on the corridor and with her luck, fully expected it to be Beck. So when she unlocked the door, she opened it with considerable care. No one. Three steps toward safety when Marcus walked out of the men's toilet. Flick was so shocked, she dropped her clothes. When she bent to pick them up she heard the paper rip at the back. Bollocks.

She kept her head and body down and keeping her back to the wall, edged sideways along the carpet like an alien caterpillar. Maybe he hadn't recognized her.

"Flick, is that you?" Marcus followed her down the corridor.

Of course he'd recognized her. She was bent over like an old woman, striped like a suntanned zebra, wrapped in pieces of torn green paper and wearing a very fetching shower hat spattered with brown gunk. It was obviously her. As she wondered how things could get any worse, the paper began to disintegrate. The pieces she'd wrapped around her legs already drooped onto the floor. She made a futile attempt to slap a few pieces back in place in the manner of applying papier mache. They didn't stick so Flick gave in, stood up and pulled off the shower cap. She had some dignity.

"Hi, Marcus. Have a good trip?"

"Fabulous."

"Well, I'd love to stop and chat, but as you can see I'm busy. Testing a new product."

Flick knew as she turned that her naked bottom would be in full view but she was so desperate to get to the shower she didn't care. She took the last few steps to the changing room, tapped in the security code and raced to the showers. Flick sighed with relief when the dye ran off her body. Only then did she wonder at the chance of meeting Marcus at that exact moment. What did God have against her? Had He timed

Marcus' return from Australia in order to inflict the maximum humiliation? Did things like this happen to other people?

As the water cascaded over her body, Flick realized that although she'd been embarrassed, something else had been missing. No zing of pleasure at seeing him. Her heart hadn't twanged because she didn't care about him anymore. She'd been telling herself that for weeks but part of her couldn't help wondering if it was because he wasn't around. Now he was and she'd felt nothing, because she loved Beck. Flick gasped and slumped against the shower wall. *I love Beck*. The arrow had gone straight into her heart. Flick stopped soaping her breasts in case she knocked it out.

When she emerged ten minutes later, a lone towel hung on a peg with no one else around.

"Thanks, God. Better late than never."

Grabbing the towel, she locked herself in the only private changing cubicle. One deep breath before she looked in the mirror but there were no streaks, in fact she looked the same as she had before. Flick dried herself off, combed her hair and dressed.

When she stepped into the corridor, Marcus leaned against the wall opposite. Somehow not a surprise.

"Well, what's the verdict?" he asked.

She gave him a blank look. Did he want them to get back together?

"On the product you tested."

"Excellent," Flick said with a bright smile. "Just wish I'd remembered my towel."

"I'm rather glad you didn't." He winked at her and she itched to slap him. "Why don't you have a go? No charge. You take your clothes off and stand there. It sprays you all over. Rather nice sensation. Sexy." *Please fall for it.*

"I think Australia gave me enough of a tan."

Blast.

"Anyway I've only come in for a drink with the crew. Did you see the news? We've been filming locally. I did an item about the dig at Hartington Hall. You featured for a few minutes."

Flick tried not to let her face change.

"Got to get back to work." As she passed him she muttered, "Rot in hell."

"What time do you finish? I'll take you for a drink."

"Midnight," Flick lied and ran up the stairs.

She spent the next hour thinking about Marcus despite trying not to. He kept jumping back into her mind like an annoying computer pop-up. Click to get rid, only it won't go away. Why did he want to take her for a drink? Why didn't she want to go? Her shift finished at ten fifteen but when the cleaner called in sick, she volunteered for the extra hour and a half, and for the early shift the following day. The job wasn't well

paid but at least it paid something and it kept her away from Kirsten and Josh and Hartington Hall.

* * * * *

Flick worried Marcus might be outside in his car waiting for her. He wasn't but when she got back to Timble, Kirsten and Josh sat in the kitchen. Flick wanted to run upstairs to bed without talking to them.

"Still up? I'm exhausted. See you tomorrow." She edged out.

"Flick," Josh called. "We want to talk to you."

She sighed and returned to the doorway.

"We stayed up to tell you we're sorry," Kirsten said, "about the letter. Willow rang and told us."

"Great. Okay. Good night."

"Flick, let's talk," Josh said.

"Too tired."

"Can we take you out tomorrow evening? We could go for a picnic at the Cow and Calf," Kirsten asked.

"No, you go. Don't bother about me. I might be working."

"Okay, you're tired now but we need to talk to you. Properly," Josh said.

"Can't think why. Nothing left to say." Flick plastered a smile on her face. "I saw Marcus today."

"Marcus?" Flick saw the look of concern on Kirsten's face. "Where?"

"The gym."

"What did he have to say for himself?" Josh traded glances with Kirsten.

"Nothing I wanted to listen to."

"Good," Josh and Kirsten said in unison.

Kirsten walked toward her. "Please, Flick. Come on the picnic. We want things to be right again."

And how were they going to manage that, she wondered.

"I'll make those sandwiches you like," Kirsten offered.

"I don't feel like going for a picnic."

But they wouldn't accept anything but yes and eventually Flick gave in. Easier to agree than argue.

* * * * *

When Flick finished her shift at the gym at lunchtime the following day, this time Marcus was waiting for her. He stood by his car trying to look seductive and handsome

and Flick sighed because he did look seductive and handsome. She remembered exactly what she'd seen in him.

"Want to get something to eat?" he asked.

Free food sounded good. "Okay."

He drove her to a brasserie in Guiseley a few miles away.

"Like the car?" Marcus asked. "It's a BMW Z4."

"Is it?" Flick said. "I thought it was one of those kit cars."

Marcus laughed and pulled into the leisure center car park. "Still driving your clapped out deathtrap?"

"Only while the Mercedes is being serviced. The bloody mechanics are so slow."

It was one of the lines Marcus had used the first time he'd met her. She wondered if he remembered. When she looked across he smiled. He had a lovely smile. The rat.

"So, how long have you been back?" Flick asked.

"A week."

"You look good." He always did but he was tanned and leaner.

"So do you. You want a bottle of wine?"

"No. We're both driving."

"We could get a taxi."

Flick shook her head. "Water's fine."

She chose from the menu and hoped they'd hurry with the food.

"It only lasted a couple of weeks," Marcus said.

"Mmm." Flick did not want this conversation.

"She was a mistake."

"Right."

"Why didn't you answer any of my emails?"

"I didn't read them."

Flick felt a shiver of pleasure at his shocked expression. She didn't want to row before the food came.

"Flick, can we try again?"

A million years and a Beck too late.

"Is this because you saw my bum?" she muttered. "It was an accident. I wasn't flirting."

"We were good together. I've missed you."

"Did you see Ayres Rock?" Flick tried in desperation to delay the words "fuck off" coming out of her mouth.

"Yes. Fantastic. I think you're f—"

"Great Barrier Reef?"

"That was fantastic too. The fish were amazing. I went scuba diving. I wish you could have been there with me."

"Didn't Briony want to do things with you?"

"I was wrong about her. She gave me the impression she'd be up for anything but she was up for nothing. The flies bothered her, the kangaroos bothered her and apparently I bothered her. Anything that jumped on or near her she didn't like. Never an issue with you. I seem to remember you did most of the jumping when we were together."

Flick inspected the table. The arrival of the food saved her having to respond. Chicken stir-fry with cashews in teriyaki sauce. Yum.

"I've been thinking a lot about us," Marcus said.

"What us?" Flick asked, more confident now that she had food in front of her. "You dumped me. I moved on and I'm still mad at you." She chewed frantically. She intended to set a record for the fastest consumption of a plate of food.

"It's good you're still mad," he said.

"Why?"

"It shows you still care. I shouldn't have done it. Sorry."

"No, you should. Just not in that way." Flick chose her words with care. "You could have told me you'd met someone, not let me see you with her at the airport. You should have guessed I'd want to come and say goodbye. All that crap about finding yourself when you really meant you'd found someone else."

"But I did want to find myself, Flick. I thought I knew exactly what I wanted out of life. I had it all planned but I made a mistake. I want us to get back together. I see us with a long-term future. We had a lot of fun. We can again."

Flick froze with the fork in her mouth. The words "long-term future" had not been ones she'd expected to hear from Marcus.

"Did you hear what I said?" he asked.

She swallowed, the ball of food struggling down her throat. "But you dumped me."

"I know and I told you I made a mistake. That's what I said in my emails."

Flick looked at her food and wondered if she had time to eat it all before Marcus lost his temper. Was a full stomach worth the price of listening to a guy she simply had no time for anymore? But if she upset him he might get up and walk out, leaving her with the bill. Eat faster.

"Slow down, there's no hurry," Marcus said. "I don't have to be back at work until 3:00."

Flick knew what that meant.

"I missed you, sweetheart. I miss talking to you. I miss the way you used to moan in my ear." Marcus moved his leg against hers under the table. "I want to hear you moan again."

Flick smiled. "Okay. I didn't like the way you squeezed my toothpaste from the bottom. You never cleaned the basin after you'd shaved. You left the seat up on the —"

"I didn't mean that sort of moan." Marcus huffed. "I meant moaning in pleasure."

"Oh, that." Flick put down her fork. Still some chicken left but she'd lost her appetite. "Marcus, you're not a nice person. You lied to me. That's reason enough for me never to speak to you again but I'll make this easy for you. You remember Grinstead's? You remember what happened before you went away? Something you've not even thought to ask me about? Well, I'm going to get taken to court by them and I'll probably end up going to prison. So do you still see a future for us? Will you come on visiting day?"

His mouth dropped open.

"I thought not." Flick walked out. Only when she stood in the sunshine did she remember how far away she was from her car. Shit. She should have waited until he'd driven her back.

* * * * *

Seeing the "For Sale" sign outside the house depressed Flick further. She was hot and miserable and she hadn't forgotten Kirsten and Josh expected her to go on a happy clappy picnic when they got back from work. Flick had lots of jobs she needed to do but she found herself climbing into the attic above the garage to retrieve an old paddling pool. She used the hosepipe to fill it and spent the rest of the afternoon lying in the water with her feet draped over the side of the pool, reading a paperback thriller.

"Aren't you ready?" Kirsten called as she walked into the garden.

"I don't want to go," Flick said.

"Of course you don't, but you'll enjoy it when you get there."

"You sound like my mother."

"Flick, Kirsten has gone to so much trouble," Josh said. "She's put together a delicious picnic. You could at least make the effort."

"You sound like my father."

Kirsten burst into a flood of make-believe tears and rushed back to the house.

"And that's Stef's trick," Flick muttered.

"Stop being selfish. Kirsten and I are worried about you. All we're trying to do is cheer you up. You could be a little bit grateful."

"I'm grateful, now leave me alone."

"No, I'm not going to leave you alone," Josh said. "I know you feel your life is shit, but it could be a lot worse."

"How?" Flick turned to look at him.

"You could...you might..." Josh paused. "Well, you could be dead."

“And how would that be worse?” Flick asked, but he looked so worried she gave in. “Okay, I’ll come but I’m driving.”

Chapter Thirty

By the time they'd carried everything to the top of the Cow and Calf rocks above the town of Ilkley, Flick panted with exhaustion.

"We can sit here." She dropped the blanket on the nearest spot of flat ground.

"No," Kirsten said. "Over there is better." She pointed to a spot about thirty yards away. "We'll be out of the wind."

Flick looked up. What wind? The air was as heavy and flat as a carpet, but because she'd been accused of being selfish when it was the one thing in the world she felt she wasn't, she picked up the blanket and followed Kirsten.

"Not there," Kirsten called as Flick picked another spot.

Her face a mask of resignation, Flick moved again.

Kirsten took the picnic blanket out of her hand and flapped it in the air several times.

"What are you doing?" Flick asked. "Sending semaphore messages?"

"Getting the right feng shui."

Flick laughed.

"Don't mock," Kirsten said in a gruff voice. "Right, you sit here, Josh you're there and leave the sandwiches alone. We can't eat straightaway. We have to absorb the karma."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Flick asked.

"Shhh, close your eyes. For me," Kirsten pleaded. "Sit with your back to the valley and think of a beach."

* * * * *

"Don't pull into the car park in case we get blocked in," Giles told Beck. "Go a bit further along and park on the grass. We can walk up from there."

Beck locked his car and looked down at the ribbon development of Ilkley snaking along the bottom of the valley. His gaze moved up the hill to Middleton and Hartington Hall and even higher to the horizon, because over the hill and not so far away was Timble and Flick. He turned and trudged up the slope after Giles and Willow who showed uncharacteristic energy.

He realized he and Flick been set up when he saw her sitting on a rug with her back toward him.

"So what's your plan," he murmured behind Giles.

"Shut up and keep walking for a start."

"This isn't a good idea."

"We're trying to help you out and besides, having a best man with a face like a monkey's arse is not what we'd planned for our wedding. You'll ruin the photographs. Meet us part way."

Against his better judgment Beck kept walking.

When Flick looked up and saw him, her organs rearranged themselves and left no room for her stomach, forcing it to rise to the back of her throat. She started to get up and Kirsten slapped a hand on her knee. Willow sat next to Josh and Giles sidled up to Willow, so Beck had no choice but to sit next to Flick, though there was room for a couple of sheep between them. Alerted to the possibility of sandwiches by the sound of rustling paper, several sheep already eyed the vacant spots.

The conversation was lively, interesting and awkward all at the same time because neither Beck nor Flick said a word, apart from "please" and "thank you". Willow talked about the wedding and some of the strange presents they'd received. She and Giles were convinced the wedding list company, wrapitupforus.com, had confused them with another couple because neither remembered asking for the recently delivered "Happy Garden Buddha" or the fifteen bags of horse manure.

"Nor that set of four DVDs featuring sex for beginners. *Places, Positions, Pointers and Perversions*," Willow added.

Four of them laughed. Flick and Beck didn't.

Flick caught Giles' eye and he looked away.

Four of them ate. Flick and Beck didn't. Flick sat with a sandwich in her hand. Moments ago she'd been starving and now she couldn't have taken a single bite. One of the sheep edged closer to her and another neared Beck who sat with an unopened packet of crisps in his hand.

Kirsten tried to start up the conversation. "We had an unscheduled stop on the way here. Flick had to check out a bin bag."

Flick shot her a murderous glance but Kirsten ignored her.

"Every time she sees a black plastic bag at the side of the road she has to stop and make sure there isn't a body in it."

"Really?" Willow asked.

"Yep," Josh confirmed. "It used to take her hours to get home on collection day, until the council changed to wheelie bins."

"Flick, you're crazy." Giles laughed. "Ever found anything interesting?"

"No." Not true. She'd once found a shark's head in a black plastic bag out in the middle of nowhere. The whole thing—flesh, teeth and everything. She'd wondered for ages where it had come from. Aliens had been top of the list. Along with a mob hit on a lone shark. Flick sighed. She couldn't even laugh at her own jokes.

Finally Kirsten could stand it no longer. "For Pete's sake, go away and talk to each other or we'll be here all night."

Flick glared at Kirsten and Josh. Beck glared at Willow and Giles. Then they got to their feet and stamped off, alarming the two sheep about to join the picnic. The animals' panicked departure sent a ripple of fear through the rest of the flock and all at once creamy mounds bounced through the bracken in every direction.

"At least Beck and Flick have gone the same way," Flick heard Giles comment. "Let's open the other bottle of wine."

Her mind buzzed. All she wanted to do was kiss Beck and she couldn't because if he pushed her away, and he would push her away, she'd crumble. It was over. He couldn't even bring himself to speak to her. She could say she was sorry, again, but why would it sound any different now? Maybe she should kiss him anyway. One last kiss. But he'd just stand there and not kiss her back and she'd feel worse. But then he was standing there because he wanted to say something, wasn't he? She could help by saying something herself. *You are the most handsome man I've ever stood next to.* That's good. *You are the most infuriating, bigoted jerk I've ever wanted to kiss.* Not so good.

Flick stopped walking and Beck stepped up beside her. He wanted to tell her how he felt, that he didn't like her working at the club, that she was too special to let herself be used in that way, that he'd like her to stop. He also wanted her to know it had been the lap dancing for Giles that had really messed him up, only now he knew she hadn't. How was he supposed to say all that in the right way, so she didn't hate him and think he was a hypocrite?

Beck realized talking about the club was a bad idea. Forget the club. What could he say instead?

"The letter was open. I read it."

Flick's face paled. "It was private. You had no right."

Oh God, why did that come out of my mouth? He could have said almost anything better than that. "I'm sorry but it was addressed to me. I thought it was for me. I didn't want to lie to you."

"Why did you seal it up? Were you going to pretend you hadn't read it?"

Yes. "Does that matter?"

"It's dishonest." Flick chewed her lip.

"And breaking into someone's house isn't?" Beck's voice rose. "Look, think about it. You put my name on the envelope. You wrote it for me. You just changed your mind about sending it. What you did then was stupid. You could have got yourself killed over a silly letter."

"Not silly," Flick snapped. "Writing a letter is what I do when someone hurts me enough to make me cry. I don't have anybody to tell so I write it down and that ends it and I don't have to think about it anymore. I have a whole collection of letters, to all

sorts of people. You came into my life and now you've gone again. I don't have to think about you anymore."

Beck's throat had gone dry. He'd made her cry?

"Well, that's what you want too, isn't it?" Flick stared at him. "Not to think of me anymore? I'm an embarrassment, someone who takes her clothes off and dances for money. A small step then, to sleeping with men for money. Maybe Henry was paying me for that? Did you wonder if Giles had paid me too? Is that what you want to ask me? If I'm a hooker? Men think they want girlfriends who are strippers until they go out with one who is and then that's the last thing they want. Well, don't worry. A couple more weeks and you'll be out of here. I'll just be one of your alphabet shags."

Beck recoiled as if she'd kicked him in the stomach.

"Guess my dad didn't think calling me Xanthe would be so fascinating to some people. Drunk men have big mouths," she whispered, then turned and fled.

She ran down the hill, almost falling on the slope in her haste to get away. Beck came to his senses and went after her.

"Flick! Stop."

She ran faster and he slipped on the grass and slithered to a halt in the bracken. By the time Beck reached the car park she was already in her car. He stood panting as he watched her shoot out on to the road and turn left down the steep hill toward Ilkley.

"Well, it's good he's gone after her," Kirsten said.

"Not if he wants to kill her," Giles pointed out.

"You'd never get so cross with me that you'd want to murder me, would you, smudgy lips?" Willow asked.

"Only if you eat your ice cream from the wrong end of the cornet, slushy chops," Giles said.

"Flick does that." Josh grinned.

"So does Beck," Giles said.

"So they do have something in common," added Willow.

"They're crazy about one another," Josh said. "It's just that they've dug themselves into holes and instead of climbing out, they're digging deeper. Maybe they're too far down to get out."

Kirsten's fingers slid over to his and she squeezed his hand. "I want to help her."

"I don't know what else we can do," Josh said.

It wasn't until they'd finished the second bottle of wine that they realized neither Beck nor Flick was coming back.

"Maybe they're in the car park," Willow said.

But when they reached the edge of the rocks and looked down, they could see neither of them. Flick's car was gone. When they got to where Beck had left Isobel's car, they found it had transformed into a new Subaru.

"We'll call Beck. You try Flick," Giles said.

"Flick doesn't have her mobile. I saw it in the kitchen," Josh said.

"There's no reception." Giles rushed to put his phone away.

"How can there be no reception? We're on top of a hill." Willow snagged the phone from his pocket, pressed a button and then glared.

Giles winced. "I forgot to charge it."

"I didn't bring mine," said Kirsten and everyone looked at Josh.

"Nor did I."

Everyone turned to Willow.

"You're not going to put this on me. Giles had his. That should have been enough," she snapped.

"So what do we do now?" Kirsten asked.

"Hitch a lift from a passing sheep?" Josh suggested.

The two sheep that had followed them down the hill turned and bolted.

* * * * *

Beck wondered what Flick was doing when she suddenly braked. When she accelerated he increased his speed, only to find her braking again. Thank God there was no one behind him. When Flick pulled into the next parking area, Beck drew up several car lengths behind. Flick got out, slammed the door and strode to his vehicle. As she approached at warp speed, Beck jumped out.

"Why are you following me?" Flick demanded.

"I wanted to be sure you didn't do anything stupid."

"I'm supposed to believe you give a damn? Don't worry. I'm not the suicidal type."

"You were going the wrong way."

"I wasn't going back to Timble." Flick glared. "I was going...to talk to my parents."

"And do they approve of what you do for a living?" *God, rip the tongue out of my mouth now.* Why the hell had he asked her that?

Flick didn't answer. She stormed back to her car.

Beck thought about following but wasn't sure he could face meeting her parents. He'd go back. Then he realized he'd forgotten about Giles and Willow. Flick must have left Kirsten and Josh stranded too. He rang Giles, but the call went though to voicemail.

Beck drove back to the Cow and Calf and then back to the town looking for them, and in the end returned to the gatehouse to find the four slumped in the lounge.

"Sorry," Beck said.

"Tell us you're speaking nicely to each other and we'll forgive you," Willow said.

"We're sort of speaking."

"So is she outside in the car waiting to take us home?" Josh asked.

"She's gone to see her parents." There followed a longer pause than Beck liked. "What? Do they live in Scotland?"

"Beck, her parents are dead. They died a few years ago in a car crash," Kirsten said.

"Oh. Then I guess she wanted to be alone."

Beck felt terrible. He was continuing to hurt her. What was the matter with him? Oh God, had she been thinking of suicide? He had to find her.

"I'll drive you back to Timble," he said.

He needed to know Flick was safe and hoped her car would be outside the house.

It wasn't.

Kirsten invited him in but Beck declined. He wasn't sure Flick would want to see him, so he drove a little way, then sat and waited.

* * * * *

The light was failing as Flick walked back to the point where the accident happened. Not even a bend in the road. Such a waste and she still felt angry with them and with herself.

"I'm scared," she whispered. "I want Beck so much. The more he despises me, the more I seem to want him. Every time I think of him, I shiver. If I see him, my head spins. If I touch him, it's like I've had an electric shock. He's the one and I've lost him. I don't know what to do."

She sat on the wall and waited for them to tell her, but she was on her own. And that was the truth, Flick thought. She had to dig her way out of this mess herself. No one else could help her.

Flick turned off the A59 onto the road to Otley and changed into first gear to climb the short, steep hill. As she reached the top, the car coughed and a frisson of alarm skittered down her spine. Any noise other than the bangs and clanks she recognized, screamed money and she had no spare cash for repairs. She needed to sell the car while it still worked. After a mile or so the car coughed again and as it began its death rattle, Flick coaxed it off the road onto the grass verge. The mystery of what was wrong became obvious. The fuel gauge read empty.

"Bugger, shit and fuck."

With no petrol station for miles, only a very long walk would get her home and it was dark. The county council, inconsiderate bastards, hadn't thought to put street lights along the cross-country roads in case people ran out of petrol, so it wasn't merely dark, it was black. No way would she attempt to walk over the moor at night even with the

lure of sleeping in her bed rather than the car. Flick locked the doors, climbed onto the backseat and lay down.

Chapter Thirty-One

The tapping woke Beck. He opened his eyes and flinched when he saw Bob Hulme, the farmer whose drystone wall they'd repaired, staring at him through the car window.

"I need you to move. I want to open the gate."

Beck sat up and groaned as his muscles expressed their extreme annoyance that he'd spent the night in a car. He brought his seat upright and drove down the road past Flick's house. Her car wasn't there. It was 5:30 in the morning. Where the hell was she? His throat tightened when he thought about the Marcus guy. Could they have hooked up again? After Beck had upset her last night, why wouldn't she leap back into the other guy's arms?

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel until his knuckles looked like snowy peaks. He couldn't think that way. He had to start giving her the benefit of the doubt and trusting that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Beck had learned the hard way how unfounded suspicions could damage a relationship. Fighting off the impulse to wake Josh and Kirsten, he turned and drove out toward the A59. She'd said she wasn't suicidal, but she'd made that comment about talking to her parents. Beck's heart pounded. If anything had happened to her, he'd never forgive himself.

When he saw her car on the side of the road his throat seized up. He couldn't see her inside. As he drove past to pull in behind her, he looked for a pipe on the exhaust. Nothing. It made no difference to his heart rate. Beck ran back to find her asleep on the back seat, curled up with her head on her hands. She'd not gone back to the house because she'd seen his car and didn't want to speak to him. What other reason could there be? She didn't want to see him again. Beck swallowed hard and drove on to Ilkley.

* * * * *

Only when Kirsten and Josh were about to set off for work did they realize Flick's car wasn't parked outside. Kirsten shot back into the house, dashed up to Flick's room and then ran back to Josh.

"She's not there," she panted.

"Does the bed look as though it's been slept in?"

"Can't tell. It always looks a mess. What should we do?"

Josh thought for a moment. "Maybe she's at work. Ring the house when we get to Leeds and if she's not back, leave her a message."

"What if something terrible has happened to her?"

"What if something fabulous has happened to her?" Josh countered. "Maybe she's with Beck."

"Willow would know. I'm meeting her after lunch. Don't forget I don't need a lift home today, Josh. She'll bring me back."

"Oh yes, you're collecting the dress. I can't wait to see it."

"Believe me, you can." Kirsten grimaced.

* * * * *

"Don't you just love it?" Willow asked Kirsten.

"Absolutely." Kirsten tried to smile at her reflection. The dress was horrible, quite simply the most hideous thing she'd ever seen. She wore pale pink ruffles while the others were in pale purple. The shoes matched. So did the flowers for their hair. They looked like Barbie's sisters, walking sticks of cotton candy. But it was Willow's day, Kirsten never had to wear the dress again, and she'd have Josh at the reception instead of Pierce so there was a lot to be thankful for. Plus the shoes didn't pinch—not yet anyway.

Willow was in such a great mood, Kirsten didn't like to burst her wedding balloon but she was worried. She'd been calling the home phone all morning and had no reply.

"I don't know what to do about Flick," Kirsten said.

"Well, it's all going to be okay now," Willow said. "They've spent the night together. I should think they've sorted things out."

Kirsten sighed with relief and followed Willow out to the car.

"Giles seems to have had a change of heart about Flick," Willow said. "He thinks she'll be good for Beck."

"So she was at your place?"

Willow glanced at her. "Well no, Beck was at yours."

"No, he wasn't. He left last night before Flick came back and I don't know if Flick did come back. Her car wasn't there this morning."

"Neither was Beck's."

"So where were they?"

"A hotel?"

"Why would they need to go to a hotel?"

Kirsten took out her phone and called the house again. Still no answer. She grabbed Willow's phone and called Beck.

"Hi, Willow."

"It's Kirsten. Willow's driving. Have you seen Flick?"

"At 5:30 this morning she was sleeping in her car near the junction with the A59."

"What? Why was she sleeping in her car?"

"I'm guessing she saw my car near the house and decided not to come home."

Kirsten frowned. "Why would she have driven all the way back to the A59? There are plenty of places to pull in nearer than that. It's more likely she ran out of petrol. It wouldn't be the first time. She runs that vehicle on fumes."

She waited but Beck didn't say anything.

"Which way did the car point?" Kirsten asked.

"Toward Timble. Shit."

"For a professor, you're pretty dim."

"Oh God. Kirsten, when you see her, call me and let me know she's okay."

* * * * *

On the long walk to Timble and then back to the car to top it up with lawnmower fuel, Flick had time to do a lot of thinking. Beck had reached out to her after the picnic. He'd told her the truth about the letter when he could have lied. He'd followed her and she'd pushed him away. He'd wanted to give her another chance and she'd blown it. Maybe it was for the best. She had a feeling her life could be about to implode. Grinstead's kept lurching into her thoughts only she hadn't the energy to do anything about it.

Flick decided to go and dig under Jared's lonely marker. The yellow flag signaled something lurked there, and it was about time her luck changed. She imagined herself running to Beck to tell him she'd stumbled on the lost link he was looking for, a find to make this summer's dig his best ever. Failing that, she might be able to make the hole deep enough to bury herself.

She drove to Hartington Hall, parked out of sight and made her way through the wood toward the marquee carrying a selection of tools. Most of them had belonged to her father and been used for plastering – floats, a set of finger edging trowels, a jointing knife and a paint brush. Flick crouched down, hidden from view by a pile of wooden boards, so if Celia did come down it was unlikely she'd see her.

Flick spent the rest of the day carefully digging and found nothing.

* * * * *

Beck thought Giles looked rather freaked out at the wedding rehearsal. Maybe it had only just sunk in what he'd let himself in for. He'd nipped out three times to go to the bathroom and returned smelling of smoke and alcohol.

The vicar must have had pressing business he wanted to get home to, probably some TV soap, because "blah, blah" dotted the run-through like Morse code.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today – blah, blah, to witness – blah, blah, by the power – blah, blah. Don't forget the rings, best man. Ha ha."

Celia fussed over everything—suggesting different locations for the flowers, trying to get Willow to change the hymns, telling Giles to speak up, the vicar to speak up and Henry to shut up. Beck wanted to talk to Kirsten about Flick but he didn't get the chance.

Giles had arranged transport to and from the Devonshire Arms at Bolton Abbey for the rehearsal dinner. Beck made sure he sat next to Kirsten.

"Is Flick okay?" he asked.

"I had a text message ten minutes ago from Josh saying Flick just got back. She did run out of petrol last night and slept in the car because she was afraid of walking over the moor in the dark."

Beck sighed. This was such a mess.

"What the fuck is she doing building drystone walls, cleaning for Celia Hartington and pole dancing when she has a degree?" he asked.

Kirsten opened her mouth and then closed it.

"Tell me," Beck said.

"You'll have to ask her."

The meal at the Devonshire Arms was declared delicious by everyone except Beck who hardly took in what he ate. Celia sat on his left and she'd spent most of the evening quizzing him about his speech, which still had to be written, though he'd assured her it was finished and no, he hadn't said anything unpleasant about Giles and yes, it was tasteful. On his right, Airy or Mary or it might have been Fairy tried to persuade him to go to with him to her parents' villa in the Algarve at the end of August.

Once coffee arrived, Beck excused himself and went into the garden.

"Beck?"

Dina. He looked round. Sitting next to her was the guy from Yorkshire TV. Flick's ex.

"What are you doing here?" Dina asked.

Beck wasn't fooled. He guessed she'd overheard him talking to Isobel about where he was going. "Rehearsal dinner."

Marcus smirked. "Has Flick provided the entertainment?"

Beck's back stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she'd please the male half of the audience. Guess we both had a lucky escape there. I know how I'd have felt if she'd been sticking her breasts in a mouth other than mine. I mean, if you're going out with a woman, she belongs to you, not a load of randy tossers in a strip joint." Marcus curled a loop of Dina's hair in his fingers.

"How do you know what Flick's been doing?" Beck asked, then saw the look on Dina's face.

"Did you get to fuck her before you dumped her?" Marcus asked.

"What?"

"She might look good but I like my women to do more than just lie there. Fucking Flick was like shagging a rug."

Beck strode over and yanked Marcus upright. "Funny, that's exactly what she said about you." The urge to slam his fist into the guy's face rose like a red tide.

"Then why did she beg me not to leave her," Marcus blustered and pulled free of Beck's grip. "She emailed me constantly while I was away. She took to cyber-sex like a kid in a sweetshop. You know the first thing she did when I got back?"

"I'm not interested." Beck unclenched his fists, turned headed for the door.

"I'll give you a hint. The very first time I saw her again, she was half-naked in seconds," Marcus shouted. "You ask her. She was so desperate for me."

Beck turned and stared at him.

"Don't worry about sex with me," Marcus said, running his fingers down Dina's arm. "I've had lots of compliments on my technique."

Dina hesitated for a moment and then dashed for Beck. "Can I go back with you?"

"No." He made his way down the corridor.

"Please, Beck. He's a creep. I thought he wanted to go out with me but all he's done is ask me about you and Flick. I don't want to get back in his car."

Beck sighed. He had enough upset women on his conscience. He nodded for Dina to follow and introduced her to the wedding party. Despite her protests that she'd sit in the bar until they'd finished, they gave her coffee and invited her to join them.

Henry took Beck on one side. "Make a habit of rescuing damsels in distress?"

"It was that or give the dragon pestering the damsel a thump in the mouth."

"Dina seems very fond of you."

"She's got a crush on me." Almost as though she'd heard, Beck saw Dina glance at him.

"And you're not interested?"

"She's not my type."

"How about Flick?"

Beck stayed silent.

Henry sighed. "She's had a very tough time."

"I know."

"No, I don't think you do. But I'm going to tell you how Flick's world fell apart."

* * * * *

Flick had become skilled at arriving home after everyone had gone to bed and leaving before they woke the next day. Kirsten had propped a note by the kettle asking if she was okay. Flick scrawled *yes* at the bottom.

She reached her hole in the ground before Beck's team started and before the marquee people arrived. The previous night she'd hit something with her plasterer's float but the light had been failing, so she'd no idea what she'd found. Now the sun was out Flick thought it could be some sort of box. The wood disintegrated as she excavated around it although she wasn't certain it was wood. Flick worked in a slow and methodical way to expose as much as she could without damaging what she uncovered.

"What are you up to?"

She glanced up to see Henry walking toward her.

"Hi, Sut," she called. "Digging. Is that okay?"

Henry laughed as he pretended to catch an insect in his fist and eat it. "Demon of Flies. Yes, you can dig, though no more singing reindeer, please."

"I give in with this game," Flick said. "I've run out of names. You should be on Mastermind."

"Well thank you, Felicity."

She sat with her back to the hedge. "Why the fascination with fallen angels?"

"I think it's fairer to hear both sides of a story, don't you? Since God wrote all the books, I decided to look at the Devil's version. Hell's angels turned out to be far more interesting than heaven's."

Flick narrowed her eyes. "I think you do it to piss off Celia."

Henry winked. "She no longer invites the vicar round for tea. Mission accomplished."

Flick smiled.

Henry leaned forward. "I've got you a job for Saturday."

"What? Cleaning the bathrooms?"

"Pushing Gertrude around in her wheelchair once we get back from the service."

"And Gertrude is happy about that?"

"She asked for you. Well, almost. 'I suppose you'll ask that crazy redhead to look after me' were her actual words. I think she has a soft spot for you, Flick."

So had Flick for Gertrude—buried under Lady C's roses.

"What about Celia?" Flick asked.

"I've talked her round. After all, if you don't look after Gertrude, she'll have to. I'll make it worth your while."

Flick gave a small smile.

"I've got a few prospective purchasers who'd like to come and look at your house. When would a viewing be convenient?"

"Whenever you like. What time do you want me to be here on Saturday?"

"Around three. Will you come dressed in a nurse's outfit?"

"No, Henry."

He put a pained expression on his face.

"Looks like someone's come to see you," Henry said, nodding over her shoulder. "See you Saturday."

When Flick turned, Beck stood there. Her heart jumped for joy even though she knew it was wasting its time.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello."

"I've brought you some strawberries." He offered her a bowl.

"Thank you."

Now Flick's heart sank. She hated strawberries. More than hated. She loathed them. They made her ill and she'd have to eat at least one. She took the bowl from his hand.

"I didn't know about your parents. I'm sorry."

"Why should you have?" Oh God, that came out too sharp.

He looked at the hole she'd dug. "Found anything interesting?"

"A piece of wood."

"Can I see?"

She knelt on the dust sheet she'd spread out next to the hole and Beck crouched beside her. As his arm touched hers, Flick's breath caught in her throat. It was hopeless. She still wanted him.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"You want my expert opinion based on years of study? I'd say...it's a piece of wood."

Flick laughed and Beck's gaze never strayed from her mouth. "Have a strawberry," he said.

She picked up the smallest and put it between her lips. Flick knew he was watching. She held the fruit between her teeth and told her brain she had to chew and swallow. It wouldn't kill her. She'd had worse things in her mouth—her lucky appendix, for a start. She wrapped her lips over the strawberry and felt the synapses flashing between her brain and her stomach. *Throw up alert!* Flick spat it out into her hand.

"I'm sorry, I can't eat it."

Beck looked alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"I don't like strawberries."

He laughed. "Then why did you take one?"

"Because you'd bought them specially and I didn't want to say no."

He smiled and if she hadn't been sitting, she'd have fallen. He was so cute.

"Have you always hated them?"

She answered without thinking. "Not until something bad happened."

"What?"

Now she'd have to tell him. "It was the day I took my final history exam at high school. Fairly stressful morning but the question of whether Peter the Great was really great, was sort of there so I'd written reams. That night I was ill. Mum and Dad heard me choking. They came into my room and thought I'd been vomiting blood. I thought I'd been vomiting blood. The room was awash with red. The Timble Chainsaw Massacre." She laughed. "There was a bit of a panic. I panicked. Mum and Dad panicked. An ambulance came. Then one of the paramedics panicked but the other one asked Mum what I'd last eaten. She looked at him as if he was crazy, told him salad and quiche and stood there glaring. Only she didn't know I'd spent the whole afternoon eating strawberries at a 'Pick your own' farm near Pudsey. We'd all tried to out-eat each other. I didn't even bloody win, but now I can't eat them at all."

Beck tossed the strawberries over the hedge. "What other subjects did you do?"

"Geography and Economics."

"So Marine Biologist was going to be quite a challenge." He grinned at her.

"I like fish."

"But not prawns."

Flick winced. "I thought it was a finger."

"What?"

"Or maybe a penis."

Beck laughed.

"Well, not a man's penis, obviously. It was too small, but I thought maybe if a chicken had a penis, it could have been that. It was chewy."

"Stop right there," he said.

"Okay." Nerves made her gabble.

"Flick."

She watched his Adam's apple go up and down.

"Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive you for what?"

"For being a prick."

She smirked. "That might be difficult."

"You drive me crazy."

"Sorry."

"Mostly in a good way," Beck added.

"So do you forgive me for driving you crazy in a bad way?" she asked.

"I'm working on it."

Flick took a deep breath. "I'm not at the club anymore."

"I'm glad."

She wished he'd kiss her, but he stayed where he was.

"Are you coming here again tomorrow?" Beck asked.

She nodded. "In the afternoon. Henry said it was okay. I'm working in the morning."

"I'll bring you something better than strawberries."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Hartington Hall seethed with activity when Flick arrived the next day. Walkways had been erected between the Hall, the marquee, the portable washrooms and the car park. Canopies sheltered the paths in case it rained, their support poles decorated with flowers and lights. Inside the marquee, stiff purple cloths covered the tables and a team of people were busy attaching purple cushions to silver chairs. In the far corner, two guys inflated silver and purple foil balloons with helium. From the sound of high-pitched conversation and giggling, Flick guessed those doing the inflating were aged about twelve.

When she walked around the back of the marquee to her little dig site, Flick found Willow sobbing as though her heart had been ripped out. Willow might not like her, but Flick could hardly pretend she couldn't see.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I can't do it. I just can't do it."

Having cornered the market in persecution complexes, Flick was afraid to ask "do what?" in case it had something to do with her.

"Don't cry Willow. You're supposed to be happy. You're getting married tomorrow." And Lady C is going to be your mother-in-law. Yes, that's enough to make anyone howl hysterically.

"Everything's going wrong."

"Such as?"

"Celia is furious with me. The tablecloths are supposed to be purple," Willow choked out.

Flick thought they were purple. She ran back to the marquee, stuck her head in and hurried back.

"They are purple. They're pretty."

"The wrong purple."

Flick bit her lip and told herself to take this seriously.

"They look lovely," she said in her best soothing voice, the one she reserved for Fluffy – though it never worked.

"But they're not what Celia wanted." Willow almost spat the sentence out.

Flick winced. "It's your wedding, not hers."

Willow looked up, her eyes brimming with tears. "Is it?"

"Course it is."

"It seems more like this will be her day. Once we said we were getting married she took over. She chose the date, food and the church, even what Giles was going to wear and Mum sided with her because she's in awe of her." Willow sighed. "I don't think Celia agreed with any of my suggestions. I didn't argue until it came to the tablecloths and we had this huge row. Celia complained to Giles and he got upset. It was horrible, so I gave in and said they could be the purple she wanted, but I was going to choose the napkins. So we made up and his mother was happy and everything was all right until today."

It had never crossed Flick's mind that you could argue about the color of tablecloths. On the other hand, the way Celia hijacked the wedding didn't surprise her at all.

"So is the problem with the tablecloths or the napkins?" Flick handed Willow a tissue from her pocket.

"I ordered napkins to contrast with the tablecloths. A darker shade of purple but they're the same. They're going to look so ordinary on the table and I wanted them to look special. Celia thinks I've done it on purpose."

"Come and show me."

Willow took Flick back into the marquee and opened up a box of napkins. A team of workers were now putting glasses on the tables. Flick thought it all looked beautiful. Willow picked up a square of material and started to wail.

"Wait," Flick said and started to fold the napkin. "Corner to corner. Other corner to corner. Glass in the middle. Flip over. Bend down. Pull out each little bit," she mumbled. "Voilà. A water lily. Put something like a white flower in the middle and it will look great."

Willow looked at it open-mouthed. Flick wasn't sure whether she was struck dumb by her skill or appalled at the result.

"Hold on." Flick ran out and back up to the Hall. She grabbed a series of flower heads at random – not roses – and dashed back.

Once flowers sat in the centre of the folded napkin it was transformed.

"What do you think?" Flick asked.

Willow stopped crying. "Can you fold a hundred and sixty-eight?"

"Not on my own. I'll show you how. We can do it together."

Or not, Flick thought as Willow messed up the first fold.

"Am I in the right place for origami lessons?" Beck called from the entrance to the marquee.

"Flick has just saved my life," Willow said.

She pointed to the first flower she'd made on her own. Flick thought it looked more like a dead frog than a lily and when Willow picked it up it fell apart.

"I can't do it," Willow moaned.

"Can I help?" Beck asked.

"Watch," Flick said.

He copied each step and moments later, an identical flower sat next to Flick's.

"Bloody hell." Willow whistled.

"He's very good with his hands," Flick said, pleased to see Beck blush. "Tell you what, Willow. Why don't we make them and you put them on the tables and while you're at it, tell those guys that inhaling helium makes you impotent."

She was off like a shot and back just as fast. Willow kissed Beck and then Flick. "Thank you so much."

Once Beck had the hang of it, it became a competition as to who could work the fastest. He licked his top lip when he concentrated. She wished she could do that for him.

"Where did you learn to fold napkins?" he asked.

"In the three months I worked as a waitress. We had competitions for the most beautiful and the most unusual."

Flick picked up another piece of cloth and folded it back and forth. She put it in front of Beck. "I won with this one."

He laughed. An unmistakable penis with testicles. "You are so going to hell."

"Well, I wouldn't be happy in heaven, much too noisy with all those blessed harps. Being bad is more fun."

She felt him staring but didn't look up.

They could hear Willow with the balloon guys. An even higher-pitched voice had joined in. By the time Willow came back, the table in front of Beck and Flick was piled with lilies.

"You guys," she squeaked. "They're fabulous."

"Start putting them on the tables, Miss Mouse," Flick said.

Celia strode in through the opening of the marquee, and Flick could have sworn the light dimmed.

"Felicity!"

"Now what have I done?"

"My flowers."

Flick winced.

"I asked her to pick them. I'm so sorry, Celia. I didn't think to check with you. I wanted to see what they looked like on the napkins. Beck and Flick are helping me. Don't the tables look lovely? You certainly have a good eye for color and design."

"Oh, thank you, dear. Yes, I knew I was right."

"This is going to be a wonderful wedding. I'm so lucky. How are things going at the house? Do you need any help?"

Willow walked Celia out of the tent and returned without her.

"How did you get your lips off her bum?" Flick asked with a smile.

Willow giggled.

"Giles is marrying exactly the right woman," Beck said. "If you can handle Celia, Giles will be a pushover."

"I've learned a lot over the last few months, although I'm still losing more battles than I win," Willow said. "Thanks for helping. I'm sorry I haven't been very nice to you, Flick. I was upset about you and Giles. Jealous. You're so gorgeous."

Flick stared at her in shock. "I'm not, I'm gangly and awkward. My arms are so long that if I had more hair I'd be taken for a gorilla. There has never been anything between me and Giles. I'm sorry I kissed him. He was pushing me away when you saw us." *Don't believe me, Beck.* She beamed the thought at his head.

"That's kind of you Flick, but I know what Giles is like when he's drunk. I wish you were coming to the wedding."

"Henry has asked me to look after Gertrude so I'll be able to see you in your dress, but I have to avoid churches. I'd hate anyone else to be fried by the bolt of lightning God has waiting for me."

"Glad you told me about that." Beck grinned. "I'd better not stand too close to Giles either, then."

"If you like, Willow, I'll drive you into Ilkley later and we can look for something to put inside the lilies," Flick said.

Willow beamed.

"I was thinking about condoms," Flick said, "purple ones to go with the décor."

Willow shrieked.

Once the lilies were done, Flick left Willow and Beck talking about his speech and went back to her private dig. As she knelt down, she saw a little silver heart glistening in the soil at the bottom of the hole. Flick smiled, slipped it into her pocket and carried on excavating. Something lay just below where she'd found the heart. Flick touched it with her fingers. Not metal or wood. She leaned over and put her head down the hole. It looked like leather.

Beck coughed behind her. "What are you doing?"

"Digging. What are you doing?"

"Supervising."

"Supervising, my ass."

"Yes."

She lifted her head from the hole and turned round to see him grinning.

"I've found something," Flick said. "I don't want to disturb it. Want to have a look?"

"I'm sure you can manage on your own."

"So I should pull it out?"

"Yep."

"What if it is a bomb this time?"

"It's okay. I'm sitting far enough away."

"Very funny."

Flick took hold and pulled hard. She flew backward in a shower of dirt.

"Holy shit, it's a body," she gasped.

Beck dropped to her side. No mistaking what she held in her hand. A bone.

"Fuck," he whispered.

"I think it's a foot," Flick said. "Look, this is a strip of leather for a sandal. This must be a toe. A centurion's toe. A centurion's leather sandal and toe. A Roman centurion's leather sandal and toe."

"Are you stopping there? You're not going to tell me where he was going and if he was married?"

"I'm not the archaeologist."

Beck took the bone and piece of leather from her hand and looked at it.

"What do you think? Is it Roman?" Flick felt about to burst with excitement.

"You could have found something."

"What do you mean *could*? Of course I've found something. Now what?"

"You need to keep going," Beck said. "Nice and steady. Don't break anything."

"Don't pull off any more toes, you mean. Anyway, that was your fault. You told me to pull."

"Well, no more pulling."

"Are you going to help?"

"I'd rather watch. It's more interesting. By the way, where did you get your trowel?"

"It was my dad's and now it's mine," Flick said. "Look you can see my teeth marks."

She waved it in his direction and then put her head back in the hole. Flick was hooked. The only thing that could have stopped her now was an offer of sex from Beck, but there were too many people around so she kept digging.

"You chew your tools?" Beck said.

"I chew everything. It's a nervous habit. Pencils, nails, anything plastic and particularly tools required for archaeological digs. At least I know what belongs to me."

More bones. Flick lifted them out of the hole, brushed off the dirt with her paintbrush and carefully laid them on the ground.

Beck made no comment. He opened a bottle of water, leaned back against the pile of boards and watched her.

Flick's excitement grew by the second. "Why do you think he was buried by the hedge? Do you think he was murdered? I want to find the skull and check for dents."

"Not sure the hedge would have existed then." Beck smiled. "Are you sure you got a first-class honors degree in History?"

"Yes," Flick said. "Why?"

"Nothing."

"I really need to find the skull."

"I hope you don't. Not for a while."

"Could that be because you're looking at my underwear?"

"It might be."

She turned and grinned. "The bones are so small." Flick looked at the ones she'd laid out on the grass. "Maybe it's a child. Probably not Roman. Maybe more recent. Victorian. Or even later. Do you think we should call the police?"

"No, I don't think we need to do that."

"Look at this bone. It tapers off to practically nothing. The spine?" Flick ran her fingers along it before she stuck her head back down the hole. There was another strip of something. She twisted it free and brought it up into the light. A rusted disc was attached. She rubbed it with her finger and then turned to Beck.

"You knew. Why didn't you say anything?"

"You were having fun."

"So were you, laughing at me thinking I was digging up a Roman and I was digging up Rover."

"I thought you'd realize when you saw the tail."

Beck flew backward as Flick launched herself at him. He grabbed her arms and twisted her onto her back. The next moment his lips were on hers and after a momentary struggle she kissed him back harder than he kissed her. The taste of her raced through Beck's blood and he grew hotter and harder. He'd had an erection ever since he'd seen her bottom sticking up in the air, tantalized by the edge of her black lace panties. Beck ground his hips against hers. He wanted her. Right now.

But the sensible part of Beck's brain became aware that he was probably hurting her and this was hardly the right time and place. He raised himself on his arms.

"You rotten bastard," she whispered.

"Don't let my mother hear you say that." Beck wiped a smudge of dirt from her cheek.

"Could it be a Roman dog?" Flick asked.

"Doubtful." Beck rolled onto his back.

"So I dug up the family pet." Flick sat up. "Now what do I do? Bury it again?"

"What we normally do is carry on with the excavation, put all the remains together and ask whoever owns the land what they'd like us to do with them."

Flick sighed. "Would you like to find me a box? Make it a big one and you can fit in it, too."

When Beck came back, Flick had most of her body down the hole exposing more of her black pants. He looked the other way and then thought—what the hell.

"Find anything else?" He wondered how deep she'd managed to bury the heart he'd bought.

"Such as?" Flick tossed out another bone and it hit his foot.

Beck laughed. He thought the heart was probably buried under the heap of dirt she'd thrown out. He should have bought something bigger she couldn't miss, something the size of a plate.

"Oh." Flick stopped moving.

"Don't put your finger on anything that resembles a bomb," Beck said.

"Very funny."

"What's the matter?"

Flick pulled herself out of the ground. Her face was smudged with dirt but Beck thought she'd never looked lovelier. Her eyes shone with excitement. She held out her hand. He'd hoped to see the heart, but that wasn't what lay on her palm. Beck picked up a grubby necklace with a large stone fastened in a clasp.

"It is Roman?" Flick asked.

"What is it with you and the Romans? No it's not Roman. It's modern, well, no more than fifty years old. This looks like a diamond."

"I thought it was glass."

"My kind of girl." Beck grinned.

Flick glared.

"Maybe whoever buried the dog, dropped the necklace by accident," she said. "If I keep digging I might find the owner."

"You can learn such a lot from *Murder She Wrote*."

Flick stuck out her tongue. "Maybe it was buried with the dog to ease his path into the afterlife."

Beck chuckled. "Now you're beginning to sound like Janet and John meet the Egyptians."

"Do you have any better ideas?"

"No."

"So should I keep digging or stop?"

"Why did you start?"

"Just a feeling there was something important here. I don't like giving up on things."

Beck's heart pounded. "Are you always so persistent?"

"When I think it's worth it."

She put her hand in her pocket and showed him the silver heart.

"Ah, so you did find it," he said.

Flick peered at it. "Made in Taiwan."

"It does not say that," Beck protested.

Flick laughed. "Thank you. It's lovely." She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Beck pulled her closer. "Not as lovely as you."

"Even when I'm covered in dirt?"

"Even when you're covered in dirt."

* * * * *

Celia's mouth dropped open when Beck handed her the necklace. The first time he'd seen her speechless. It didn't last long.

"My God. This belonged to Henry's grandmother. Where did you find it?"

"I didn't. Flick did. Henry told her she could dig down by the marquee and she dug it up. Along with a dog. The tag said Maisie."

"Maisie was her Golden Retriever. The necklace must have fallen in when they buried the dog. Er, tell Felicity thank you. I should give her a reward." Celia fished in her handbag and handed Beck a ten-pound note.

"Actually, as Flick found a lost item and was working with permission, she's entitled –"

"She was not working with permission." Celia's face hardened. "I told her she was sacked and to leave."

Beck didn't bother arguing. Celia could never be reasonable.

"What do you want us to do with the dog?"

"Just bury the thing again."

Beck walked back to the marquee wishing that he'd spoken to Henry. The law was reasonably clear. Where an item is lost, or stolen and thrown away, and then found by someone who's been given permission to detect and search in that place, then the finder can keep it. If by any chance, Henry had searched regularly for the necklace, then he retained ownership but Beck suspected that legally it was Flick's, if morally Henry's. Since there was no written agreement between Henry and Flick, unlike the one between Henry and the university over the dig, the whole thing could get messy. Beck didn't think Flick would fight for ownership.

He found her still working.

"What are you up to, Ms. Mole?"

Flick's head popped up. "I was wondering what else I was going to find down this hole."

"Australia?" Beck suggested.

"That can only be a few more feet. Go and get a spade. It will save a fortune in airfares."

Beck laughed. "I'm going to have to go. I've had a summons from Giles."

"Make sure he brushes his teeth and washes behind his ears." Flick smiled. "Then tuck him up in bed with a hot drink."

Beck stared at her.

"What?" she asked.

"I was thinking about tucking you up in bed."

"You need a cold shower."

"Come and have one with me," Beck said.

Flick shook her head. "Giles needs you tonight. You'll forget him if I come back with you."

Beck ran a hand over his face and sighed. "You're right. Here." He handed her the ten-pound note.

"Paying me in advance?" Flick asked. "I'm flattered. Only ten quid? I'm insulted."

"Celia sent it. A reward for finding the necklace."

Flick laughed. "I know just what to do with this. I'll spend it on Henry."

"What are you going to buy?"

"It's a surprise."

* * * * *

"What are we looking for?" Willow asked as they entered the party store.

"We'll consider anything if they can supply a hundred and sixty-eight," Flick said.

They wandered together down the first aisle.

"Plastic frogs," Flick suggested. "Grow your own Prince Charming."

"Miniature water pistols," countered Willow.

"Wet your own Prince Charming. Keep looking."

It was Flick who found the little drawstring bags made of silver organza.

"They're nice but what can we put in them?" Willow asked.

"Let's go up to the sweet shop on The Grove. They might have chocolate frogs."

"Give up with the frogs," Willow said.

While Willow went to pay for the bags, Flick picked out her present for Henry. Fifteen pounds but she couldn't resist it.

Willow dithered again in the sweet shop.

"Go for the Jellybeans," Flick said. "They won't melt. Everyone likes them and they're all different."

"I'm not sure." Willow wavered like her name.

"You could have peanut butter flavor."

"I'm going for sugared almonds."

"You do realize that if anyone tries to eat them they'll break their teeth," Flick said.

"I have to go for looks."

"You shallow bride-to-be. I'll tell Giles."

Willow beamed with happiness and Flick wanted to hug her. She hesitated and then threw her arms around her. Willow hugged her back.

"Thanks, Flick. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Yes, I will help you put them in the bags." Flick sighed. It would stop her thinking about how long it would be before she and Beck could get naked again.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Hi, sis, great news. Drew and I are coming for lunch tomorrow. His parents are flying us down so I said they'd come too. See you around noon. Bye."

Flick stared at the phone as if she could make the message disappear. She listened again to check she hadn't made a mistake. What was the great news? That they were coming for lunch? Flick had intended to stay in bed all day with the best man, now she had to cook.

"Shit."

She'd have to go shopping and had precisely eight pounds and fifty pence in her purse. It would have to be another stealth attack on the credit card.

"What the hell are you wearing?" Josh asked.

Flick looked down at the respectable shirt-style, knee-length, blue linen dress.

He raised an eyebrow. "Underneath?"

"Damn. Can you tell?"

"No, I just know you."

Flick unfastened the buttons. Josh gulped when he saw the short cape, light blue dress with a plastic belt and a white apron. A cardboard watch hung from Flick's left breast.

"I'm a nurse. I've got the hat in my pocket."

"She'll kill you."

"I'm going to keep the other dress on. This is a private joke for Henry."

* * * * *

Josh dropped Flick at the Hall on his way to the church. As she walked up the drive she could see the caterers racing around like kids in a playground with occasional collisions and lots of shouting. The scent of flowers and the mouth-watering aroma of well-cooked, expensive food drifted through the air. Dozens of bottles of champagne sat in buckets of ice and water. Young men wearing starched white shirts and black bow ties were setting out glasses on a long table. Violins tuned up in the marquee. The sun shone brightly. Even the sky had been decorated, full of those huge, fluffy white clouds Flick liked to watch while lying on her back in the paddling pool. The forecast said more of the same. What could go wrong?

Even as that thought slipped into her mind she spotted Beck sprinting up the drive.

"I need a ladder," he shouted.

"There's one in the dogs' yard. What's happened?"

"Giles has fallen in the bathroom and banged his head. He's against the door and I can't open it. I need to get in through the window."

"Oh God, have you phoned for the ambulance?"

"Yes. There's one on the way and the fire brigade. Would you go and wait for them?"

Flick ran down the drive. She didn't want to waste time waiting. She assumed Giles was in the bathroom she'd climbed into and dashed to the back of the house. The window was ajar, as it had been before.

"Giles," Flick shouted. "Are you okay?"

No reply. Anxiety surged through her. He could have swallowed his tongue or be drowning in his own blood. Or maybe a poisonous spider had bitten him, having escaped from Roundhay Park's Tropical World. Giles could need heart massage.

"Giles," she shouted again.

Nothing. Admittedly it would have been a long walk from Roundhay to Ilkley for the spider but seconds could count. Flick looked at the wheelie bin, sighed and ripped off her blue shift dress. She'd never climb in that, it was far too tight. All she had to do was repeat what she'd done the other day. After a short amount of scrambling, a large amount of swearing and one loud yelp, she had her shoulders inside the room. There was no sign of Giles.

"Flick, what the hell are you doing?" Beck yelled below her.

She squeezed a couple of inches more of the top half of her body through the window as she tried to run up the wall in her strappy open-toed sandals.

"Stop looking at my underwear and do something."

"Black lace? Ohh, God."

The ladder banged against the wall at her side.

"What idiot thinks about sex at a time like this?" Flick muttered and wriggled forward half an inch.

The sound of sirens filled the air.

"Flick, there's a ladder on your left," Beck said. "Come back down and be careful. I'm going to the front of the house."

She could feel the ladder by her right leg but couldn't swing herself onto it. Her belt buckle had wedged itself into the window catch. At least she wasn't going to fall, although the plastic had begun to stretch.

Flick could hear all the commotion inside the house, but the door of the bathroom remained closed. She wondered whether to shout for Beck. Maybe if she could unfasten the belt she could pull herself in, but she held onto the window sill with both hands and was afraid to let go. Her arms ached and the belt grew longer. She'd have to do something soon.

Beck raced up the stairs followed by two firemen and two paramedics. Moments later the door to Giles and Willow's bathroom had been broken off its hinges. Giles had his eyes open but a trickle of blood ran down his cheek. Beck stood back and let the paramedics work.

One of the firemen tapped him on the shoulder. "You don't need us anymore. We'll be off now, but could I use your bathroom?"

"Second door on the left." Beck winced as the paramedics attached a heart monitor to Giles. Willow was going to kill them both.

Flick froze as the door opened and the fireman came in. Without a glance at her, he headed straight for the toilet, unzipping his fly as he went. Flick coughed. His head shot round and he gaped at her.

"Super Heroes Incorporated. Flying Nurse Rescue Service," she said in a crisp tone. "Only I'm stuck."

Moments later she stood in the bathroom, her legs shaking. She adjusted her cape, pulled her dress over her hips and tightened her belt. The fireman bent over, creased up laughing. Flick opened the door to find herself face to face with Beck.

"I got my belt caught," Flick said. "Henry's present."

Beck gaped.

"Maybe yours too, if you play your cards right. How's Giles?"

"He'll be okay. They're checking him over."

"The wedding car's arrived," the other fireman shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'll go and distract them," Flick said.

"You'll do no such thing. Wait here, I'll get your dress."

"I'm not sure there's any point. I sort of ripped it off, like Wonder Nurse."

Beck laughed and then the smile died on his face. "You're bleeding."

Flick looked down. She'd scraped her knees and toes.

"I'm all right."

"You could have killed yourself climbing in like that."

"You're too big to get through the window. I thought I'd save time."

"But I wasn't going in through that window. The one in their bathroom is huge."

"Oh." Flick sighed.

By the time Beck came back with the dress, the paramedics were walking down the stairs supporting Giles, who only wore underpants, black ones with little red hearts all over them.

"He should go to hospital to be checked out but I think I can understand why he'd prefer not to," the paramedic said. "I've put a butterfly strip on the cut. But if he has a headache, feels dizzy or unexpectedly falls asleep, he needs to be seen by a doctor. He knocked himself out so you need to watch him."

"Flick! My very own nurse," Giles mumbled. "Come and give me CPR."

"Yes, definitely concussed," said Flick as Giles lurched toward her and grabbed her round the waist. "Or you soon will be, if you don't let me go."

Beck pulled him away.

One of the paramedics crouched down to peer at Flick's legs.

"I could give you a concussion too," Flick said.

"She means it," Beck warned.

The paramedic opened his bag. "Let me clean you up first."

Flick winced as he wiped her knees and toes with antiseptic pads.

"You'll live," he said with a smile and got back to his feet.

"Thank you. You don't know how happy that makes me."

"If you'd like a bit of job experience, I'm based in Menston." He winked at Flick as he left.

"Maybe I could be a nurse," she mused.

"No, you couldn't," Beck said. "Sit still and don't move while I help Giles get ready."

"Is my tie straight?" Giles asked.

"Fine. How do you feel?"

"Headache but otherwise all right."

"You need to get a non-slip mat on that bathroom floor."

"Yep."

They both knew that the mat was non-slip. Giles had been nervous and fainted.

"Can I ask you a favor?" Giles said as Beck struggled to fasten Giles' cufflinks.

"What?"

"Are you and Flick okay now?"

"Why?"

Giles hesitated.

"What is it?" Beck asked.

"Can I kiss her?"

Beck stared at him. "Is this that fucking game?"

"X, that's all I want and then it's over. Just a kiss. I don't want to...I don't want anything else."

"No," Beck said.

Giles sighed. "Well, can I ask her?"

"Go ahead."

When they emerged, Flick smiled and did a wolf whistle.

"How do we look?" Beck asked.

"Like a pair of artful dodgers."

"Our reputation precedes us." Giles smiled. "Give me a kiss, Flick. One last unmarried kiss."

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"I want a proper kiss," Giles said.

"No. Get Beck to kiss you," Flick said.

"He won't use his tongue."

"Neither will I." She grinned. "Not with you anyway. Now hurry up or Willow will have to go round twice and you know what traffic's like in Ilkley."

They were late setting off but not so late they had to ring and let the vicar know. By the time Flick had waved goodbye and thought about the way Beck had kept looking at her, she realized they'd locked her blue dress in the house so she'd have to manage with the nurse's outfit. It didn't look too bad. The dress wasn't as short as the black skirt she'd worn as a waitress, though the top gaped more, her black lace bra clearly visible. Fuck it, Flick thought, she just didn't care. She didn't care about earning the money, she didn't care what Celia thought. She and Beck were okay again and that was all that mattered. She set off back up the drive to the Hall, carrying the ladder.

* * * * *

Beck sat next to Giles on the front pew and stared in fascination at the way his friend's hands were shaking. Giles clenched his fists and then unclenched them but his fingers still trembled.

"You okay?" Beck whispered.

Giles nodded.

Beck glanced behind him. The church was full. He recognized a few faces. A couple of mutual friends from Cambridge were ushers and the stag night lot sat with girlfriends or wives looking as though ice-cream wouldn't melt in their mouths. Celia was in an enormous pink and black hat with a swathe of black spotted pink net billowing in every direction. Behind them Willow's mother was in a hat so small it looked as though she had a teacup on her head. One red feather stuck straight up in the air. Beck wished Flick was with him, though not in that nurse's outfit.

He thought they were all right now, though there were still issues to be sorted, the business about her arrest for a start. He wished she'd talk to him about Grinstead's.

He'd made a few enquiries of his own and it was as Henry had told him—forty thousand had turned up in Flick's bank account with another hundred and forty still missing. Beck had checked who'd left the company after Flick had been sacked. Four people, including her boss. On Monday, that was what Beck was going to be working on. They could manage without him at the Hall while he did a different sort of digging.

As the wedding march started, Giles looked panic-stricken and grabbed Beck's arm. Beck pulled him to his feet, standing close enough to support him without looking as though he was holding him up. They moved in front of the altar and turned to look down the aisle. Willow walked holding her father's arm, such a blissful smile on her face, it made Beck gulp and Giles sag. Beck kept a firm grasp on the groom's arm and then had his eightieth reassuring feel for the rings.

Giles thought Willow looked so beautiful he wanted to cry, only he knew he shouldn't otherwise his bloody nephew manning the video camera would have the tape off to some funniest video program before the reception ended. So Giles took a deep breath, stood up straighter, moved away from Beck and thought about how much he loved Willow and how happy she made him.

The ceremony was a bit of a blur. He spoke out in a clear voice. Beck hadn't forgotten the rings. No one shouted "I object" when the "just impediment" bit came up though a loud cough from someone in the congregation made his heart jump and a few vicious sods laugh. The vicar didn't get their names wrong. Nor did he subject them to an overly religious address, which Giles thought was decent of him. Everyone sang nicely, though he couldn't for the life of him remember what the hymns were and that was it. Married. Willow's dad had handed responsibility for his daughter over to him and Giles intended to love her and look after her until the end of his life.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Flick watched from a quiet corner as the car with Giles and Willow pulled up at the Hall. Willow looked like a fairy-tale princess, her hair curled in twists and laced with pearls and silk flowers. The dress was an off the shoulder ivory sweep of shimmering material that trailed away to nothing. Giles kissed Willow with such tenderness it made Flick sigh out loud. A long-haired photographer leaped around but the pair took no notice. Flick could see that they were both somewhere else.

Beck and the bridesmaids arrived in the next car. The bridesmaids' dresses were as hideous as Kirsten had described and Flick grinned. They made Willow look even more beautiful which was exactly the point. Considering the size of the dresses worn by Willow's four attendants, Flick was surprised Beck hadn't suffocated. He was the last to emerge. He looked dark, delicious and dangerous, and Flick wanted to push him back in the car and suffocate him herself.

Celia and Henry arrived smiling at each other, which made a change. Gertrude was helped from the same car looking miserable. No change there then. Celia glanced around, saw Flick and her smile turned into a scowl. No change there either.

Flick delivered Gertrude's wheelchair and helped her into it.

"Was it a lovely service?" Flick asked.

"I need the toilet. My bladder is full to bursting. I think I'm leaking," Gertrude announced in a loud voice.

"Right." Flick propelled her back to the house.

"I blame that doctor who delivered Celia. He wouldn't listen when I told him the stitches were too tight. It was a terrible infection. The worst they'd ever seen."

Flick tried to close her ears but Gertrude continued even in the bathroom. Flick could hear her in real-time and over the monitor. By the time Flick pushed her back down to the garden, everyone held a glass of champagne or orange juice. Flick went to get a glass for Gertrude and then wheeled her chair toward a couple trying, with limited success, to hide behind a bush. They only emerged when Gertrude called them by name.

"There's no need to stand so close, Felicity," Gertrude said. "I'll call you if I need you. The monitor is switched on."

Flick found a quiet spot at the side of a tree and people watched. She was looking for Beck but Henry caught her eye. He handed her a glass of champagne.

"Hello, Nurse Knyfe," Henry said with a smile.

"Hello to you, Ksiel."

Henry frowned. Flick gasped.

"Nope, you've got me," Henry said.

"Rigid one of God."

He burst out laughing. "Right, I owe you fifty quid."

"Henry, I'm sorry I'm in this stupid outfit. I was wearing something respectable over it, but it sort of got lost. How's Giles?"

"Headache but otherwise he seems fine. I think he's rather pleased he's done this while he's got concussion. He'll be able to claim he can't remember a thing. If only I could do the same."

"You don't mean that."

"Don't I? Enjoy yourself while you still can, Flick."

Moments after Henry walked away, Celia approached with a face like a plate of mashed potato and gravy. She wore the excavated necklace. It looked lovely now it had been cleaned. Celia snatched the glass out of Flick's hand and tipped the champagne on the grass.

"I'm paying you to look after my mother, not help yourself to our alcohol and what on earth are you wearing? How typical of you to go over the top. Take Mother into the marquee before there's a rush. There's a blanket on her chair. Wrap it around her legs and be careful. She has delicate skin."

Flick wheeled a protesting Gertrude down the wooden pathway and into the marquee.

"You're pushing me too fast. It's too bumpy. I'm going to need the toilet again."

The marquee was full of fresh flowers and looked fabulous. A string quartet played in one corner and serving staff lined the perimeter waiting for guests to take their seats. The folded napkins had the little organza bags at their hearts and Flick thought Willow must be pleased with the way the tables had turned out. The theme of purple and white ran throughout the marquee, from the striped awnings lining the roof, to the balloons and name cards tied to the chairs with purple ribbon, right down to the heart-shaped confetti on the tables.

"Push me past the cake," Gertrude demanded.

It was a towering monster of a confection, tier upon tier of beautifully iced layers, decorated with purple flowers and an edible bride and groom on the top that actually looked like Giles and Willow.

"It looks too good to eat," Flick sighed.

"Cost a bloody fortune," Gertrude said. "It better be delicious."

"The marquee is lovely," Flick tried again.

"I'm cold."

Yes, you are, Flick thought. *Like an iceberg.*

As the marquee began to fill with people looking for their tables, Flick wrapped the tartan blanket around Gertrude's legs.

"You don't need to stay. You're not a guest. I'll call you on the monitor if I need you."

"Fine."

Flick slipped out of the tent, now teeming with the well-dressed and well-heeled. No sign of Beck but she did catch sight of someone she hadn't expected to see. Her former boss at Grinstead's, Gordon Lowe, headed for a table at the other end of the marquee. He didn't see her. Flick felt the gloom descend. She stepped out of the marquee and although the sun still shone, for her the light had been snuffed out. She'd half-joked to Henry about running away. Maybe she should give it serious consideration. If she had money she could go to Greece and find work in a taverna or go to Italy and work on an archaeological dig. Beck would come and find her. Yeah, right.

Flick sighed. Just as she and Beck looked as though they might get somewhere, her past was going to rear up and bite them. Maybe she should try and talk to Gordon, only it wasn't fair to do it today. Talking of biting, there was a ton of food a few feet away, but Flick suspected the moment she sank her teeth into a bread roll, Celia would materialize in front of her. Flick could hear one hundred and sixty-eight people chomping and slurping their way through a banquet. Torture. She could hear Gertrude eating and drinking which was worse than torture.

Beck had Celia one side of him and a brides-troll on the other. He couldn't remember which one she was. If he was ever again asked to be someone's best man, he'd think of the bridesmaids and say no. As far as Beck was concerned one was more than enough. Four was truly terrifying.

"Do you ride," the fluff asked.

"No," Beck said and tried to sound interested when she launched into a description of her horse.

The sooner this was over, the sooner he'd have Flick in his arms.

The monitor around Flick's neck crackled continuously. She could hear Gertrude talking, though it wasn't distinct above the general buzz of conversation, strains of Vivaldi and continual chinking of glasses. She wanted to hear Beck's speech so once it went quiet she'd slip back into the marquee. Gertrude mumbled something about cake and there was a roar of noise. Flick licked her lips. She would love a slice of wedding cake.

Gertrude coughed. And coughed. Flick hoped she'd shut up for the speeches. It took a moment before it sank in that this was more than "Give me some attention". She raced inside and pushed her way through the people who'd gathered to watch the cake cutting to find Gertrude red-faced and gasping for breath.

Flick wasted no time. She hoisted Gertrude to her feet, turned her around and brought her hands up under her diaphragm. After two thrusts, a piece of food shot out

of her mouth to hit Celia on the back of the neck. Flick lowered a trembling Gertrude into her chair and stroked her hand. She hoped she hadn't hurt her, though knowing her luck she'd probably broken her ribs. As she bent to ask Gertrude if she was all right, Celia grabbed Flick's arm and dragged her out of the marquee.

"What on earth do you think you are doing, throwing food around? This is a wedding, not a school canteen."

"Gertrude was —"

Celia smacked her so hard across the face it made her eyes water. Flick gaped at her.

"Get out of here. You're dressed like a cheap whore and you behave like one. I don't care what arrangements you've come to with my husband. I never want to see you near him again. And you can stop looking at this necklace. You might have found it but it belongs to me."

"Flick found it?" asked Henry, who had come up behind his wife. "Celia, you told me Paris had dug it up."

"Did I?"

"Why's your face red, Flick?" Henry asked.

"Hot," she said.

"On one side? That looks like a hand print."

Flick pressed her lips together.

"Celia, I can only hope that you've come out here to thank Flick," Henry said.

"What?"

"Gertrude was choking on a grape. Flick saved her life. She did the Heimlich maneuver."

Celia whimpered.

"Quick thinking, Flick. Well done," Henry said. "Now give me the necklace, Celia."

He held out his hand and waited. Celia unfastened it and handed it to him. Henry gave it to Flick. "A token of our thanks and apologies for the slap."

"Henry, have you lost your senses? That necklace is worth thousands." Celia glared at him.

"And how much do you value your mother's life? Some of us no longer have our mothers and we'd do anything for that not to be the case."

He glanced at Flick and smiled.

"Are you sleeping with her, Henry? Is that what this is about? Our son's wedding and your whore —"

He spun back to face her. "No, I'm not. She's done nothing to deserve being spoken to like that. But my God, if I were thirty years younger, I might not be able to resist her."

Flick slipped away. They were tuning up into an ear-blasting concerto of a row and she'd had enough. She didn't want to be the cause of problems between them. She went back into the marquee and keeping low, worked her way around the side until she reached Willow.

"Psst." Flick touched her shoulder. "Hey, you look fabulous. A midsummer night's dream. Oberon would have difficulty keeping his hands off you."

"Yeah, he is," Willow smiled, glancing at Giles who held her hand.

"I've got a present for you," Flick said. "Hold out your unattached hand." She pressed the necklace into Willow's fingers.

"What's this?"

"Family heirloom I dug up. Henry gave it me but you should have it."

"Is it real?" Willow gasped.

"Probably. Willow, did you invite that guy over there with the orange bowtie?"

Willow peered across. "I don't recognize him. Who is he?"

"Gordon Lowe."

"Oh, yes. He's some relative of my mother. Compiling the guest list was like walking on a tightrope. Invite this one and I had to invite these other two. Offend this one and I'll be cursed for all eternity. I've been very careful today not to prick my finger. I couldn't invite you but I had to invite Gordon Lowe who's a complete stranger. How do you know him?"

"I used to work for him."

Flick backed away as she saw Henry and Celia returning. She'd intended to shuffle down a few more yards and speak to Beck but when she saw Celia's pale face, Flick left the marquee. She listened to Beck's speech from the doorway and smiled when she heard people laughing. There was a loud round of applause when he finished. Flick was wondering if she dare slip in and grab a piece of cake when she saw Gordon walking toward her.

"Felicity?"

She straightened up. "Hello, Gordon."

"I thought it was you I saw earlier. What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking after the groom's Grandma." Flick tried to hide the cardboard watch on her chest.

"So is that full-time?" he asked.

"No, I'm studying for a PhD in molecular biology," Flick snapped back and then wished she hadn't. "What about you? I hear you're no longer arse-licking at Grinstead's."

"I left them five months ago. I'm working for a private health care trust now. I was surprised about what happened."

"So was I. Well, I'll get a chance to tell my side in court."

"What do you mean?"

"Grinstead's were hardly likely to ignore the fact that they thought I'd stolen a hundred and eighty thousand pounds from them."

"I thought they got the money back?"

"Only forty thousand."

"Gordon, what are you doing out here? Come and dance."

A brown-haired woman in a red dress slunk up to them and slotted her arm through Gordon's. Sally Greene, the graduate trainee taken on the year before her.

"Hello, Sally," Flick said. "You're looking well." She'd been positively anorexic when Flick had worked at Grinstead's. Now her figure had filled out and she looked almost voluptuous. The two of them had never hit it off. Flick was an instant hit at Grinstead's and Sally had resented her.

How much? Flick's heart began to beat faster.

"Gordon, what's she doing here?" Sally asked in a shrill voice. "I know what she's trying to do. Wheedle her way back into your life. You're making a fool of yourself, Felicity. Look at you. What are you supposed to be, a nurse? Everyone knows you're a thief and a cheat."

Flick felt as though a bucket of cold water had been dumped on her head.

"Sally, leave it." Gordon took hold of Sally's arm. "This is not the time or the place."

"What are you talking about?" Flick said. "Back into his life? When was I ever in his life?"

"Are you all right?" Beck came up behind her and put his arm around her waist.

"Come on," Gordon said and yanked Sally back to the marquee.

"What was that about?" Beck asked.

Flick shivered and he pulled her into his arms.

"Dance with me," he whispered.

Flick pressed her face into his shoulder and slid her arms around him. He held her tight and they swayed to the music emanating from the marquee. The appearance of Gordon had upset her. A further reminder she had to sort out the mess she was in.

"I wish you'd been sitting alongside me, wearing a lovely dress," Beck said.

"What, like Kirsten's?"

She felt him shake as he laughed. "No, not like Kirsten's. I've been stuck in that marquee thinking about you, wishing you were with me. Celia treats you like shit. If I didn't have an obligation to Giles, I'd whisk you out of here. I want to take you to a place where you can dress up and be the princess you are."

Flick smiled. "You think I'm a princess?"

"You must be if I'm Prince Charming."

She rolled her eyes.

"Are you going to tell me what all that was about? Why did those two upset you?"

Giles tapped Beck on the shoulder. His father stood behind him. "The bridesmaids are looking for you. You need to hide in a better place than this."

Beck squeezed Flick's shoulder. "Well?"

"Leave it," Flick mumbled.

"What's the matter?" Henry asked and turned to Beck. "Have you upset her?"

"Not me. The couple who were just talking to her," Beck said.

"My former boss at Grinstead's, Gordon Lowe, and his girlfriend who for some strange reason seems to think I'm trying to worm my way into his life."

"What's her name?" Henry asked.

"Sally Greene."

"I thought I recognized her." Henry nodded. "She won the lottery. She backed out of the purchase of a modest terrace in Menston and suddenly produced a large deposit for a luxury flat in Ilkley."

"She told everyone her Grandma had died." Flick perked up. "Can you remember how much she put down and when?"

"Not offhand. But it was a lot. Why?"

Wheels turned and cogs clicked in Flick's head. "Was that about the same time that I was accused of stealing?"

The three men exchanged glances.

"This is what we're going to do," said Beck. He turned to Flick, "And I want you to do nothing."

Flick was thrilled they were trying to help her, though she didn't know what they'd achieve. Beck had made her promise not to speak to Sally or Gordon. She huffed. Anyone would think things went wrong when she got involved. Flick sat on an empty beer barrel outside the wedding marquee and came up with a plan of her own. It involved a ladder, an open window, Beck's bed and a nurse's outfit, so she thought it would work. She grinned and stood up.

"You've done as you were told." Beck sounded far too surprised.

"Go away. I'm dancing with the invisible man," Flick said and put her arms around an imaginary body. "He tells me he's ugly but I'm desperate."

"Is he enjoying himself?"

"I'm not sure. I keep stepping on his feet and have to grab hold of him so I don't fall over."

"Which part of him are you grabbing?" Beck asked with a smile. He ducked under her arm, killing her imaginary partner with a twist of his hands around an imaginary neck.

"Anything I can get my fingers on."

"Like to try that with me?"

Flick kissed him. Beck's arms wrapped around her body and pulled her close. It was several moments before the pair came up for air.

"Hold out your hand," Beck said.

He put a set of keys on her palm.

"I planned to use the ladder."

"Don't you dare. You can keep on the nurse's outfit. I want to take it off."

Flick smiled.

"As soon as Giles and Willow have been whisked away, I'll be all yours."

"I'm supposed to be driving Josh and Kirsten back to Timble."

"They can get a taxi or sleep in the spare bedroom."

"I don't have my toothbrush."

"Borrow mine."

"I don't have any underwear for tomorrow."

"Good." Beck grinned. "Now stop making excuses. After we've finished dancing, I want you to drape yourself over my bed and try not to fall asleep. I'll be there as soon as I can. And I mean what I said about the nurse's outfit. Leave it on."

* * * * *

Giles was exhausted. He thought weddings were supposed to be fun. Well, it had been fun but tiring. He'd had to be nice to relatives he didn't like and some he didn't even know. The food looked great but he'd hardly eaten more than a couple of mouthfuls. His mother had thrown a hissy fit over something to do with his father, Flick and that necklace. But Willow looked like a dream.

By the time Beck had told them all what they had to do, Giles' hope of an imminent departure to the four-poster bed in their wedding night hotel had dwindled to nothing. Sherlock "Beck" Holmes had given them all roles in the drama to come and Willow bounced with excitement. Her breasts were wobbling. Giles wanted to bury his face in them.

"Giles, are you listening?" Willow asked.

"Of course, sweetie pie."

"Gordon's got a new watch, a Rolex," Willow said. "He's taking Sally to Jamaica in November – all inclusive at a posh resort. She's paying."

"Your turn, Giles," Beck said. "Go get her."

Giles nodded. He let Willow pull him across the dancefloor. Willow grabbed Gordon's arm and put her mouth to his ear. "Like to dance with the bride?"

As Willow whisked Gordon away, Giles persuaded Sally to go outside for a breath of fresh air.

"We've been lucky with the weather," Giles said.

"Yes."

Giles opened his mouth and shut it. He couldn't flirt anymore. What was wrong with him?

"How long have you known Gordon?" he asked.

"Two years."

"Wedding bells on the horizon?"

Sally blushed. "Well, we've not been going out together for two years but we've known each other that long."

"Nice chap, Gordon." Giles had never met him before. He could be an axe murderer. "Seems very..." he struggled, "solid and dependable. Nice chap."

"Too nice sometimes," Sally said.

Giles had an inkling of hope he could achieve something. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

Damn. Only married a few hours and he'd lost his touch. "I like Gordon's watch. Wouldn't mind one like that myself." He pulled down his sleeve to hide the fact that he had a better one.

"I bought it for him."

"Really? I wish Willow would buy one for me. You must have a good job. What do you do?"

"I work in the accounts department of a medical equipment company."

"Accounting must be so interesting." He'd lost it, Giles thought in dismay. He was boring.

"It's okay."

"You must be really good at mathematics," Giles tried again.

"Not bad."

"I like your dress. It looks very...stylish." He wanted to say sexy but it wasn't and he couldn't force the word out. What the hell had happened to him in church?

"Thanks. It's a Missoni."

Out of the corner of his eye, Giles saw Willow leading Gordon in their direction. He had to time this perfectly. He was good at timing. Share dealing was all about timing.

"Grinstead's must pay well," Giles said. "Expensive watch and designer clothes. Or did you win the lottery?" He put a laugh into his tone.

"I wish. No, I have money of my own. My grandma died."

"Sorry to hear that," Giles said, thinking it was the best news he'd heard since Willow had said "yes".

Beck waited for Kirsten to whisk Gordon away for the dance he'd promised, Willow escaped back to Giles and then Beck had his little accident. His beer went all over Sally's dress.

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry. Let me clean that off for you."

"This is silk," Sally wailed.

"I'm so clumsy." Beck looked contrite. "I'll pay for it to be cleaned. I'm sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going. My bloody girlfriend has just dumped me. What timing. I really thought Flick loved me."

"Flick?"

"You know her?" Beck hoped his hours of rehearsals for *Death of a Salesman* in high school would at last prove useful.

"I used to work with her," Sally said.

"You're a friend of Flick's? She's never mentioned you."

"I don't suppose she would. She wasn't a friend. You know she was sacked for stealing."

"She told me she didn't do it."

Sally snorted.

Not attractive, Beck thought.

"The money was found in her bank account. She's a thief in more ways than one."

"Sounds like you're talking about more than money," Beck said.

"I am."

Beck waited but she didn't say anything else. Expecting them to be bosom buddies in the space of a few minutes was asking a lot, but he kept going.

"Flick's treated me like shit." He sighed. "The bitch doesn't seem to care who she hurts."

"Tell me about it," Sally sympathized.

God no, you tell me. "It's too painful."

"Forget about her. Find someone else."

"I can't let her get away with this. She uses people."

"You're right." Sally nodded.

"She's telling people," Beck lowered his voice and bent toward her ear, thinking he wanted to strangle Kirsten for this idea, "I was hopeless in bed."

Sally gasped. "What a cow. Well, she'll be getting her come-uppance. She embezzled thousands from Grinstead's. She'll have to sell her precious house to pay them back."

"How did she manage to take the money?" Beck asked. "She's not that bright."

And Sally told him. He tried not to look too interested while inside he fizzed like a firework. He wanted to take his Dictaphone out and hold it to her lips, but instead he

prayed it recorded what Sally was saying, just as it had recorded what she'd said to Giles.

After Beck played the tape for him, Gordon had to sit down. By the time Henry and Beck had finished speaking to him, he looked as though he might be sick. When Willow brought Sally up to the house and she saw Gordon's face, he wasn't the only one who looked sick.

"What is this?" she asked.

"You told me you won the lottery," Henry said to her.

"You told me your Grandma had died," Gordon said.

"She did," Sally said.

"And you won the lottery?" Gordon asked.

"Yes."

"So if I check, that's what I'll find?" Beck asked.

Now Sally looked worse than Gordon.

"You stole the money," Beck said. "You put some of it in Flick's account to make it look as though she'd taken all of it. You've spent the rest on presents for Gordon and bought yourself an expensive flat."

"This is ridiculous," Sally blustered.

"It's over Sally," Beck said. "I have you on tape saying how it could be done. Grinstead's couldn't even figure it out, so how come you've never explained it to them seeing as you knew how Flick supposedly did it? She hasn't got a clue about money and she's broke. Don't make things worse. Just tell the truth."

Sally looked around in desperation and then her shoulders slumped. "I did it for you, Gordon. It was all for you."

He shook his head. "No, Sally, not for me."

Chapter Thirty-Five

In the end, Josh and Kirsten got a taxi back to Timble. By the time Beck had performed all his duties, and was able to return to the house, it was almost midnight. He went straight upstairs and found Flick lying face down on the bed, fast asleep, but still wearing the nurse's outfit and the little white hat. He kicked off his shoes, tossed his tie and jacket onto a chair and sat beside her, stroking the back of her leg with a bottle of chilled champagne. She shuddered and rolled onto her back but didn't open her eyes.

"I bet I can wake you up," he said.

"Don't bet more than a quid," she murmured. "I'm exhausted."

Beck slid his hand into the top of her dress, down the front of her bra and squeezed her nipple between two fingers.

"Ooh, that works." She opened her eyes.

"I have a huge surprise for you."

Flick smiled. "I've already seen it. It's not that huge."

Beck laughed. He bent his head and gave her a long kiss. As Flick began to deepen it, he pulled away and looked her in her eyes. He was too excited to wait any longer.

"Sally's admitted she took the money from Grinstead's and put it in your bank account. We have her confession on tape."

Flick's mouth fell open.

"Don't tell me I've rendered you speechless?" Beck said with a laugh.

"How did you know about Grinstead's?"

"Henry told me, but I wish you had. No more secrets between us. I want everything out in the open."

"Okay, I'm the love child of Ozzy Osbourne and Hilary Clinton."

"You can keep that one quiet. Want a drink?"

"I'd rather have a kiss."

He bent his head, gently brushing her lips with his. Flick responded by caressing his tongue with hers and moments later they were entwined in each other's arms, with Beck tasting any place his lips could reach.

Flick caught hold of his wrists. "Professor Beckett, your health's going to take a turn for the worse if you don't get some rest. You're my patient and I feel responsible for your welfare. I insist you get ready for bed." Flick rolled him onto his back. "But as you're clearly incapacitated, I'll help."

She slowly unfastened the buttons on his shirt and moving the material aside, dropped her mouth to his nipple. Beck groaned. She teased him—tasting, licking, sucking. Beck raised himself up so he could take off the shirt. Flick sat astride his thighs and took his wrist in one hand, her fake watch in the other and pretended to check his pulse.

“Will I live?” Beck asked.

“Only if I let you,” Flick said. “Maybe I’ll have to give you an injection.”

Beck tensed and she smiled.

“That’s why you made me leave you at the hospital. I thought you said no secrets.”

“I’m not good with needles.”

“That’s all right, neither am I.”

Sliding her body down his legs, Flick moved her hands over his erection. Beck’s groan got trapped in his throat. Her fingers trailed around his waist and stopped to unfasten the button at the top of his trousers.

“There’s been a very worrying development in your condition,” Flick said in a grave voice. She eased down his zip.

“You’d better check it out.” Beck found it difficult to speak.

Flick pulled off his trousers and socks and came back up the bed to remove his boxers.

“Oh dear,” she muttered. “Advanced rigor mortis. A huge problem.”

“Is there nothing you can do?”

“I suppose I could try some unorthodox remedies.”

“Such as?”

“Kissing it better?” Flick suggested.

“That might work.”

“There are a few other things I’d like to try first.”

“Really?” Beck moaned.

“Umm, I could distract you by talking about urban heat islands. Did you know that the center of a city can be several degrees warmer than the surrounding area?”

“I don’t think that’s going to work. Nope, look, no effect at all.”

“How about the importance of dendrochronology?”

“Stop teasing.”

He slid his hand under the bottom of her dress and brushed his fingers over her panties. Flick quivered like an erratic bath bomb.

“I don’t think you’re wearing regulation underwear, Miss Nightingale.”

“Then I suppose you’d better remove it,” Flick said.

Beck’s brain told him to do it slowly but his hands paid no attention. Within seconds Flick was naked. He winced and sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I was trying to make the pleasure of undressing you last longer than that and I have a feeling that's not the only thing that isn't going to last long."

"Shall I get dressed again?" Flick said with a glint of mischief in her eye.

"Not yet. You've not cured my problem."

She dropped onto the floor at the end of the bed, put her hands under his taut backside and pulled him forward toward her mouth, licking the inside of his thighs.

"Fuck." He moaned as she ran her tongue around the top of his cock.

"I'll stop if you're not enjoying it."

"Don't you dare," Beck gasped.

He looked so handsome, Flick faltered for a moment. His mouth was slightly open and he made shaky noises as he breathed in and out. She dropped her head and ran her tongue up the hard, smooth length of him before she took him in her mouth, pushing down so that his cock pressed against the inside of her cheek. His fingers tightened in her hair.

"God, Flick," he groaned.

Flick sucked hard, then moved her mouth up to his chest and kissed first one nipple and then the other. When she felt them tighten to little buds something tightened in her too. As she lowered her head, his hands slid on to her back. He was even harder now, hotter in her mouth.

"Flick," he murmured again. "You have to stop. You're proved your point. You're more skilled than me."

He pulled her to her feet and stood with her in his arms, holding himself against her so their hip bones pressed together and he was hard between their stomachs.

"I like it that you're tall. We're made for one another," he whispered. "We fit."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," he said and fell backward on the bed, taking her with him.

* * * * *

When Flick opened her eyes, she was so tangled in Beck's body she couldn't tell where she ended and he began. She'd spent the night in his room. Ahhh. It was now Sunday. Was something happening today? *Oh shit*. She lifted her head from beside his, peered at the clock and panicked.

"Oh no. Fuck. Look at the time. Bollocks." Flick tried to get out of bed and Beck pulled her back.

"What's the rush?"

"I have to get home. Stef, her boyfriend and his parents are coming for lunch. I have nothing to feed them and the house is a mess. She left a message. I forgot. Bugger."

She slid out of Beck's arms onto the floor and grabbed her pants. He leaned against the headboard and watched her in amusement as she hopped around.

"What time are they due?"

"Twelve. One. I can't remember. Damn it."

"I'll help."

Flick stopped for a moment and turned to smile at him. "Will you? That's kind."

"Self-interest. They won't stay all day, will they?"

She grinned. "I expect we can invent an emergency if they try to."

* * * * *

They called at supermarket on the way back to the house. The nurse's outfit caused a few raised eyebrows particularly when Flick pretended Beck was her patient on day release from a mental hospital.

"If you don't stop it, I'm not going to pay," he said.

"You can't pay," Flick protested but Beck insisted.

He'd piled the cart with all sorts of stuff she would never have bought, including wine that cost more than five pounds a bottle. They loaded the car and set off again.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Flick asked.

"A brother. Chris. He's a geologist and works in Scotland."

"Perhaps—" Flick began.

"No," Beck said in a firm voice. "You don't want to be a geologist. Anyway, you're never going to meet him. He's not married. He's better looking than me and he'd love you."

"Do you ever wish you were an only child?"

"No. Chris can be a pain but as brothers go, he's all right."

"I wish I didn't have a sister. To be more precise I wish I didn't have Stef as a sister."

"Why not? What did she do?"

"Things like deliberately shake the needles off the Christmas tree, then tell Mum I'd done it. She stole stuff and hid it my room, scribbled on my homework, helped herself to my boyfriends and she still nicks my clothes."

"I had a dog called Bruno. He could open the fridge and he used to help himself to food. Mum would never believe it wasn't me or Chris," Beck said.

"I bet sometimes it was." Flick stroked the back of his neck.

Beck smiled. "Maybe."

"I thought when Mum and Dad died Stef would need me more, because I needed her more, but it's all one way. Dad spoiled her and all I've done is encourage her to continue to expect to be looked after. And the worse she behaves, the more I try to be nice to her." Flick sighed. "I just wanted her to love me."

"Why do you feel so responsible for her?"

She hesitated.

Beck glanced at her. "Tell me."

Flick could feel the secret bubbling inside. "No one knows," she whispered and her fingers gripped her seat belt.

"I said no more secrets." Beck pulled off the road.

"What are you stopping for? We only have an hour before they arrive."

He turned off the engine. "This is more important than feeding your sister."

Flick thought of what she should have told him before, how so much could have been avoided if she had. Now she had to open her heart.

"The day they died, they were rushing because of me." Flick could hardly speak. "I'd locked myself out. I rang them and asked them to hurry home because I wanted to get ready to go out. Hurry. I told them. Hurry. And I killed them." She wiped a tear from her cheek.

"You didn't kill your parents, Flick. You know you didn't."

"If I hadn't rung them, they wouldn't have been on that road at that time. So it's my fault Stef lost them."

"You lost them, too."

He took hold of her chin and turned her face to his.

"I miss them," Flick whispered.

Beck pulled her into his arms and pressed his face into her hair. "You're not alone anymore."

Flick clung to him as if he was the only steadfast thing in a raging flood.

"I won't let you go," Beck said, as though he knew what she was thinking. "You don't have to be strong all the time. It's okay if you don't like Stef. I told you I didn't much like her either. But she's young. One day she might tell you how grateful she is."

"I'm not going to hold my breath."

"And you're not going to waste any more of your life worrying about her. You're not responsible for her. You have better things to do. Making love with me for a start."

"We don't need the whole hour to cook, do we?" she asked.

Beck grinned and started the engine. "Yes, but you can thank me later."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Flick dragged Kirsten and Josh out of bed and in three quarters of an hour they worked a miracle on the house. The windows were opened, fresh flowers stood in every room, the bathroom gleamed and the dining table laid with the best of everything. Josh had even made a sponge cake and filled it with strawberries and cream. Flick stared at it in disgust.

Beck took charge of the cooking and gave Flick a salad to prepare. She kept casting sneaky looks at him as he worked. He was organized and methodical. He could chop properly.

"What are you staring at?" Beck asked.

"You can cook." She beamed at him.

"I can do lots of things you've yet to discover."

Flick tasted the dressing she'd made for the pear and nut salad and coughed. Hot, hot, hot. She reached for the cold tap.

"What is it?" Beck asked.

"Bit spicy." She panted.

"It's not supposed to be. What did you do to it?"

"I thought I'd add —"

"Flick, throw the dressing away and follow the recipe."

"Maybe I could add sugar."

"Fine and then we'll throw it away."

It didn't go unnoticed by Flick that she had produced one item while the others, including Kirsten who had spent much of the time cleaning, had covered the work surfaces with bowls of interesting-looking food. Beck had salmon steaks marinating, chicken cooking and *hors d'oeuvres* sitting on a tray, ready to be heated. A bowl of tiger shrimp waited in the fridge and he'd made a tomato and horseradish dip and a fresh fruit salad. Flick was in awe.

At ten to twelve Josh and Kirsten went off to have lunch with her parents and Flick bolted upstairs to get changed.

Beck cleaned the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher. There was a lovely view out of the window. The garden seemed endless because it looked out onto open fields and down toward the reservoir. He could live here. He needed to persuade Flick to take the place off the market. From his home in York Beck had a view of a concrete yard. He'd tried to brighten it up with a few potted plants but this vista made him realize what

he'd been missing. He turned as Flick walked into the room, his breath caught in his throat and he knew what else he'd been missing.

"Come here," he said and held out his arms.

She wore a dark blue sundress that looked suspiciously restrained, and when she moved into his arms Beck realized it had no back. His fingers slipped down her bare skin.

"Thanks for doing all this," she said.

"Thank me properly later. They've just arrived."

* * * * *

"Why is the house on the market?" Stef demanded as she strode into the hall.

"It's too big for me. I doubt you'll ever come back and Kirsten and Josh will be getting their own place soon." Flick was trying to get Stef to introduce her to Drew and his parents but Stef ignored her eye signals.

"You should have asked me. It's half my house."

Beck squeezed Flick's hand and she bit back the response on her lips.

Drew's parents, Nancy and Donald Westinghouse, were kind and friendly. They'd bought chilled champagne and Flick wondered if Stef would announce her "great news" before they drank but she didn't. Drew clearly worshipped the ground Stef walked on and Flick was glad to see that Stef was kind to him.

Flick was on her best behavior. She didn't say much. She listened. Nancy and Donald had more money than they knew what to do with. They had homes all over the place. They took cruises and went skiing and loved Europe. Drew would work for his father's company once he'd finished at Cambridge. Flick uttered a silent prayer Stef didn't mess this up.

When they'd finished eating, Stef tapped on her glass with a spoon and smiled as everyone stopped talking.

Please don't be pregnant, Flick pleaded and wondered if that was the thought burning in the minds of Nancy and Donald.

"I'm really glad you've had the chance to meet Flick. I wish you had the chance to get to know how great she is. After our Mum and Dad died, it was Flick who held everything together. She's gone without things so that I could have them. Whenever I asked for money, she always gave it me. She's done brain-numbing jobs just so that I could avoid having a student loan. She's looked after my hamster even though she's scared to death of her and I don't think I've often said thanks."

Actually Stef hadn't said any of that.

"We wanted to tell all of you our news at the same time," Stef began. "Drew's asked me to marry him and I said yes."

Thank you, God.

There was a lot of kissing and hugging.

"Congratulations," Flick told her sister.

"Is that it? No lecture on finishing my degree, getting a job?"

"So long as you take the hamster, whatever you do is fine," Flick said.

"We're going to live in America."

"Lovely. I'll get a passport."

When Flick went into the kitchen to make coffee, Stef pounced. "I thought you and he weren't together?"

"Did you?"

"By the way, you owe me an Armani sweater. I found the one you'd shrunk. It was my favorite."

Of course it was. "Did you bring any of my clothes back?" Flick asked.

"No."

"Then we're more than even, Stef."

Flick breathed a sigh of relief when they left. She relaxed against Beck as they waved goodbye. Stef would join Drew's family for the rest of their whistle-stop tour of England. They still had to do London and Wales. They'd given themselves four days. Flick doubted she'd see Stef before the end of September.

Beck closed the door.

"At last." He groaned and pulled Flick into his arms. "I thought they'd never go. I can't believe how much I want you."

"Want me where?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere. The stairs look pretty good right now."

"You're incorrigible."

"And you're beautiful."

She looked at him.

He took a deep breath. "I should have told you that before. I should have told you the first time I saw you, when you were dancing with that sheep. I should have pulled you into my arms and made you dance with me."

He moved his hands up her legs under her dress and suddenly stopped. "You're not wearing underwear," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Couldn't find any clean pants," she whispered.

"Thank God I didn't know that before."

"You don't have to know everything about me."

Beck unfastened her dress. It dropped away to leave her naked except for her shoes.

"Yes, I do," he said. "And I should warn you that in my line of work, processing and analyzing what I find, takes longer than the initial discovery."

By the time they reached Flick's bed, Beck was naked too. Between the pair of them they spent several hours discovering, processing and analyzing. Only exhaustion caused them to stop. It was quite a while before they talked in complete sentences.

"I could live here with you. Share the mortgage and commute," he said.

"No."

"Am I moving too quickly?"

"It's not that. You'd have to use the A59. Go past where my parents died. I'd worry every time you drove on it."

"So do you want to come and live with me?" Beck offered.

"Do you have a mansion with a swimming pool and a helicopter pad?"

"No, a little house but I'll buy a paddling pool, particularly if you like skinny dipping. The yard isn't overlooked."

"I still need persuading." Flick smiled and Beck began to kiss her neck.

"The whole place needs repainting and I think you're the woman to do it."

"Do you share your house with any pets?"

"My Doberman, Satan, and my two boa constrictors, Squeeze and Throttle."

Flick laughed and Beck caught her smile with his mouth. She felt herself dissolving in his arms. He dropped his head to her breast and she groaned.

"So what do you say?" Beck asked. "Only I don't think I can live without you."

"You're a dangerous man." Flick sighed. "I'm not sure I'd be safe with you. Your students have told me about this book you're writing. You appear to have a rather warped mind, Professor Beckett."

"In what way?"

"Full of murder, torture and grisly secrets. Is there room for me?"

"Since you frequently make me mad enough to commit murder and I'd actually like to tie you up right now and do grisly things to your body, I think the answer is yes. There's plenty of room for you."

"I might be up for a bit of bondage."

"How tight can I tie you?" Beck growled.

"No, I meant I'm going to tie you."

He laughed and then the smile died. "Flick, I...I love you," he whispered.

She started to speak and he put his finger on her lips.

"Let me talk. I didn't recognize what I felt. I didn't think it could happen so quickly. I can't believe I've found you. I've spent all my life digging holes, looking through broken and discarded things, hoping to come across something exceptional, a special treasure and all that time what I was really looking for, was you. I could never find anything more special."

"I love you," she said. "I loved you from the moment you saved me from that manic sheep and if you promise to send Satan to the pound and the snakes to the zoo, I'd love to live with you, love to love you."

Beck ran his fingers over her lips. "I was kidding about the pets."

"Good."

"You are exactly what I've been looking for all these years."

"Someone whose name begins with X?"

He groaned. "That was Giles. I don't care what your name is. I only care about you. I want you in my life."

Flick smiled.

"I'll never find anything more precious or more important," he said in a quiet voice.

Flick basked in the comment for a moment.

"I take it that will be true unless you discover the skull of the missing link," she pointed out.

"Goes without saying." Beck ducked as Flick threw the pillow.

She didn't miss.

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.

Barbara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.cerridwenpress.com.

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Also by **Barbara Elsborg**

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