# ELLORA'S CAVE Moderne



#### **Kiss a Falling Star**

#### Barbara Elsborg

How far can you fall? Caspar had once shone brighter than any star in the sky. He led an exciting life, had a good job and the love of his family. Now he barely survives in a village where he's shunned by everyone, even his parents. Unemployed, unemployable, he consoles himself with stringless sex—lots of it.

How hard can you land? Ally escapes death by a whisker when she falls in front of a train. Not an accident, someone pushed her, and she doesn't hang around to give them another shot. But she finds herself falling in a different way when she meets Caspar, and she plummets hard and fast. He's dark, he's brooding, he's hotter than any man she's ever met, and she wants him—bad.

How high can they soar? With Ally's adversary closing in, plus Caspar's tendency to screw things up, if they don't open their arms and catch each other, they'll burn up in an atmosphere determined to keep them apart.

#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Kiss a Falling Star

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## KISS A FALLING STAR

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#### **Chapter One**

Ally Everton didn't want to believe she was cursed, but she was seriously beginning to wonder.

Day One.

A flowerpot crashed to the pavement in front of her, spraying her with wet soil, geranium petals and shards of painted terracotta. Ally thanked her lucky stars she hadn't been walking any faster otherwise there might have been fragments of her on the pavement too.

Day Two.

She arrived at Paxton's Precious Metals to find three fire engines blasting water over the smoldering remains of her place of employment. Ally was out of a job.

Day Three.

A few steps onto the escalator at Angel Station, the steepest in Europe, Ally's legs tangled with someone's bag. Only the quick reaction of a guy standing below stopped her falling all the way to the bottom. When she looked behind, there was no one anywhere near her.

Day Four.

A car clipped Ally's bike, sent her sliding into traffic and the guilty driver raced off without stopping. Not unusual when cyclists and motorists waged a daily war of attrition on London roads. Ally escaped with cuts and bruises, but two cars collided trying to avoid her and one of them ran over her bike. She threw the pieces in a Dumpster.

Day Five.

In search of her neighbor's lost cat, Ally spent four hours locked in the basement of her building after a door slammed behind her. Why would someone remove the handle from the inside?

Day Six.

Jack, her married boss—ex-boss now that he'd decided not to start up the business again—had asked to meet her for lunch and made a pass at her. Ally spent the next twenty hours bolting between her bed and the bathroom. She must have eaten something dodgy.

Ally had never thought of herself as unlucky, but the incidents of the last few days had changed her mind. Maybe she'd broken a mirror and not noticed. Invisible black cats could have crossed her path or perhaps she'd been reckless with salt.

The police had been called to the traffic accident and she'd told them about some of the other stuff. Mishaps, they'd said. Coincidences. Simply accidents. When Ally babbled to her friends—after showing due concern—they'd laughed and nicknamed her Calamity Ally.

So on *Day Seven*, when commuters jostled for space behind her on the platform at Angel Station, and Ally glanced down to see her toes being edged over the cross-this-and-you'll-get-eaten line, she dug in her heels and pushed back into the crowd. This wasn't the place to have an accident. A rush of warm wind tousled Ally's blonde hair, heralding the arrival of the underground train.

Thank goodness for that, she thought, but as the train emerged from the tunnel, Ally found herself flying into its path. Her shocked scream morphed into a gasp of pain as she slammed into the gap between the rails.

Oh God. I'm going to die.

The sound of squealing brakes filled her head and Ally turned. With seconds remaining before she was splattered by two hundred tons of screeching engineering, she struggled partway to her feet and raised her hands in a futile attempt to stave off the inevitable.

I'm dead.

The slowing train caught her arm, knocked her into the drainage channel and the wheels missed her flailing limbs by inches. As death passed over her face, Ally lay trembling on her back. Bright blue sparks flew in the darkness as metal grated against metal until the train came to a shuddering halt. She took a gulp of thick, oily air and counted to three before she dared let herself have the next thought.

I'm not dead.

Amazed to find her arms and legs still attached, let alone her head, Ally squirmed over in the tight space and crawled toward the front of the train, taking care not to touch the live rail. She emerged to gasps of astonishment, though no one was more astonished than she was. Ally pushed herself up on wobbly legs and twisted 'round to see a white-faced train driver staring at her through his window.

"Here!"

She turned toward a man's voice and hands reached to haul her up to the platform. Ally wobbled when her feet touched safety.

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"Are you okay?"
No.
"Sit down."
Can't.
"What happened?"
Pushed.
"Did you trip?"
I was pushed.
"Did you jump?"
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I was pushed.

She cowered under the press of questions, unhappy to be the center of attention. No one had seen what happened. There was no hue and cry for whoever shoved her. She wanted to shout out that someone had deliberately pushed her in front of the train, but she kept quiet. Ally didn't want it to have happened. She preferred to run away. If she didn't muster energy from somewhere, she'd be carted off to the hospital, forced to give a statement to the transport police and probably have to convince a psychiatrist she didn't have a death wish.

Uniformed employees of London Transport pushed through the crowd to reach her. The questions started again.

"Are you okay?" asked a man.

"What happened?" asked a woman.

Ally opened her mouth but nothing came out.

"Did anyone see what happened?" asked the woman.

"She just seemed to throw herself in front of the train," said one of the men who'd pulled her onto the platform.

The female employee took Ally's hand. "We've called for paramedics."

"I'm okay," Ally blurted. "I didn't jump. I was pushed."

But no one backed up her story. No one had seen anything. The train moved on. Commuters continued on their journey. CCTV cameras showed only her flight, no hands behind her. By the time she'd been checked over and told she could go, Ally accepted there was no point making a fuss. If anyone had seen what happened, they'd long gone. The person who'd pushed her was hardly going to hang around to admit it.

Once Ally emerged at street level, a whimper of relief burst from her mouth. She clamped her lips together in case something louder escaped and kept moving, heading home, back the way she'd come a short while before, her heart racing, her head pounding.

Only when she was safe inside her little bedsit with the door locked did her legs finally give way. She slithered to the floor and curled up, her teeth chattering so loudly she could almost make out what they were saying.

"Ohmy Godbloody hell what the fuck ohmy God."

Someone just tried to kill me.

She tried to swallow the lump in her throat and failed. Had those accidents not been accidents at all? The flowerpot? The crash on her bike? This made no sense. *I don't have any enemies. I never let people down. Everyone likes me.* 

Clearly someone didn't.

There was no point going to the police. With no one to back her up, they'd conclude it was the work of the attention-seeking weirdo they'd probably already labeled her.

Ally pushed herself to her feet, stumbled to the bathroom. While she ran a bath, she removed her ruined clothes, ripped and smeared with black grease. Her cheek already sported a bruise and long grazes marred her legs and arms. *Could have been so much worse.* 

She sank up to her chin in the tub, pressing her lips together against the sting of warm water kissing raw skin. As tension seeped from her body, Ally let her worry subside. Perhaps she'd imagined the hands on her back. Maybe it was the chaos theory rippling through the jostling passengers, a feather touch at the rear transformed into a hard shove by the time it got to the front.

Ally sighed. The more she thought about it, it was ridiculous to think someone had tried to kill her. It had to have been an accident. For the first time since she'd dumped him, she wished Mark was there to give her a cuddle, but Ally reminded herself what he'd done and knew *any* strong arms would be better than his.

Perhaps she should put her succession of crappy boyfriends down to bad luck. Easier than blaming her poor taste. Mark seemed blind to the notion that his infidelity might upset her, unable to understand why she was insulted by his confession that he couldn't resist Belinda's breasts. *Bastard*. Unbelievably, Mark had the nerve to ask Ally to go to a dinner party at his boss's and pretend they were still together. What planet was he living on?

By the time she emerged from the bath, Ally had a plan. She needed a job and a new start away from London. Nothing like almost being hit by a train to shake some sense into her. Her brother Finn had left her a key to his weekend cottage in Wyndale in the Derbyshire Peak District while he was in the States for three months. The two months before he returned would give her time to sort herself out. Forget she was a city girl, if Ally could survive being run over by a train, she could survive anything the countryside threw at her. Except snakes, because she had a morbid terror of anything that slithered like her lying, cheating, fucktard ex.

Less than three hours after the incident with the train, Ally was on her way to Euston Station by taxi.

She wasn't running. Just relocating.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The lucky bitch."

After all that fucking effort, it was hard to believe Ally still walked and talked and breathed. How the hell could she be hit by a train and live? Knowing she could have turned at any moment and seen who stood behind her on the platform, it had been surprisingly simple to act without hesitation. A surreptitious shove in the back and she tumbled onto the track. In the melee, no one had observed what happened and it was easy to slip away through the crowd.

Except there'd been no screams of horror echoing around the station, no spray of blood, no traumatized commuters. Ally had been hauled back onto the platform with

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all her limbs attached. Maybe Angel Station had been a poor choice. Seems there'd been a bloody angel watching over her. Ally's good fortune wouldn't last. Couldn't last.

#### **Chapter Two**

"He's a spoiled, lazy, good-for-nothing excuse for a man."

About to open the door to his parents' dining room, Caspar paused at the sound of his father's gruff voice.

"Don't say that," his mother replied.

"Why not? It's his own fault he's in such a mess. He's the only one who can put things right."

Caspar bristled.

"He's trying."

Yes, he was. Thank you, Mother.

"Not bloody hard enough," snapped his father. "And that's the problem, isn't it? He never tries hard enough. Not at school, not at Cambridge, not over..."

Caspar held his breath but his father, Leonard, Earl of Lynham, couldn't even utter Jemima's name. Before Caspar heard his parents say something he found hard to forgive, he pushed open the door and sauntered in.

"Caspar." His mother smiled at him.

The lines on her face grew deeper every day. His fault. It hurt that he'd disappointed her, and while he was not quite the villain his parents believed, neither was he the decent, upright son they wanted.

He walked over to kiss her cheek. "Sorry I'm late."

His father *harrumphed* as Caspar nodded at him. About as much of a greeting as Caspar expected. He sat opposite his mother at the place laid for him at the long mahogany dining table and braced himself. The only reason he came for dinner on Wednesday nights, apart from the food, was for his mother, but it was unavoidable that in pleasing his mother, he also aggravated his father.

While the meal was served by Barnes, their sour-faced butler, Caspar responded politely to his mother's inane chatter about village life and people in whom he had no interest. Her deliberate avoidance of any topic that might enable her husband to use his knife and fork on Caspar's heart was well-intentioned but ultimately doomed to failure. His heat-seeking missile of a father waited until the main course to strike.

"Found work yet?" The tone of his father's voice made it clear he'd guessed the answer. Caspar was tempted to say yes to see what would happen.

"No."

Three more rejections since last Wednesday and seven companies hadn't even acknowledged his application. None were jobs he even wanted.

"We are in a recession, Leonard," his mother said.

His father huffed. "I bought you that laptop to make it easier to find employment. What the hell are you doing with it?"

Caspar swallowed the words watching porn and said, "Looking for a job."

"At least volunteer for the local Mountain Rescue Organization," his father snapped. "You might as well put your climbing skills to some use. Being part of the MRO would look good on your CV. A positive spin to counteract the gap in employment."

Caspar sucked in his cheeks.

His father narrowed his eyes. "Am I wrong?"

"No," Caspar said.

He *had* volunteered for the MRO and was in fact on their books as available for callout but had never been asked to assist in a rescue. Not hard to work out why. They didn't trust him, didn't feel he was a team player, didn't want to have anything to do with him.

"Tom Morton has something to do with the local rescue team, doesn't he?" his mother asked. "Wasn't he at school with you, Caspar?"

"Once upon a time," Caspar said. When they both wore short pants and caps and only fought about football.

He hoped he had a chance to finish eating before the conversation breached his tolerance level. Much as he dreaded these dinners, it was the only decent meal he had all week. Martha, the cook, had been with his parents as long as Caspar could remember and she always prepared something she knew he liked.

"I'll have a word with Tom's father," his father said. "John's a Mason."

"No," Caspar snapped. He could sort out his life himself.

"What do you mean—no? I'm trying to do you a favor here."

The reddening face warned Caspar his father had begun to simmer.

"There's no point," Caspar said. "Nothing's going to change people's opinion of me." Particularly not if you interfere.

"Perhaps if you tried harder to be worthy of A. Better. Opinion?" His father shot the words out like bullets.

What the hell did they want him to do? Give people scourges and lie down so they could whip him?

"You could smile a bit more," his mother whispered.

He had nothing smile about. No job, no prospect of one, no future.

"Do you want people to think you're sponging off us?" his father asked.

Caspar glowered. "I don't give a fuck what people think." Which was a lie. He'd had to accept money from his father when he came back to the UK and hated that he'd been forced into it.

"You ungrateful little sod," his father hissed, coming up to the boil.

"Caspar's trying hard to find a job," his mother said. "Aren't you, darling?"

Caspar shot her a grim smile.

"Not bloody hard enough," growled his father. "He's been lounging around on his backside for months now, doing bugger all."

He found plenty to do while he lay on his backside but nothing he wanted to share with his parents. Caspar fought to keep his voice level. "You were the one who insisted I come up here. There's no work, nothing to do."

"From what I've heard, you've found a way to occupy yourself," his father muttered under his breath.

Caspar opened his mouth and shut it again. He'd have been in the same mess whether he lived in London or Derbyshire, full of anger and guilt, unable to move on.

"You think I should have funded your profligate lifestyle in London? I want you here where I can keep an eye on you. Make sure you don't slip back into your old ways."

It hurt more than he could say that his father believed so little of him, that he neither understood nor trusted him. Caspar had long given up hoping for anything more from his intractable parent.

"If any women come here telling me they're pregnant, I'll disown you," his father said.

"If any women come here telling you I made them pregnant, they'd be lying. I'm not stupid."

Caspar pressed his fingers into his thighs. His father glared at him from the end of the table. Caspar glared back. He'd learned from a master.

"We have some news," his mother blurted, and cast an anxious look at his father. "We had an inquiry from the BBC several months ago about filming in the house and grounds. They've decided to use Wyndale Hall for a television adaptation of Jane Eyre."

"Much against my better judgment," his father muttered.

Caspar held back his groan. He'd come to Wyndale to lick his wounds in private. He didn't want a load of media people wandering around, kicking up dirt. He ate faster.

"They'll start arriving tomorrow." His mother gave him a nervous smile. "Maybe you could get involved in some way."

Maybe he could hide.

"The last time Caspar was onstage was at school. Back legs of a donkey, weren't you?" His father smirked.

Caspar smirked back.

"We're moving into the rear of the house and letting them have the main rooms," his mother said. "I wanted to go on holiday, but your father doesn't trust them to take care of the place."

"I could—"

"You think I'd trust you with this house?"

"Leonard!" His mother's voice echoed around the room.

Caspar's fingers tightened on the stem of his recently refilled wineglass.

"Be sensible, Elinor. He's done nothing to show he deserves to be trusted since he came back. Brawling in public, drunk most nights, playing stupid pranks, sleeping with a succession of women. I'm ashamed he's my son."

Casper counted to five. Ten was too much to ask. He stared straight at his father and rose to his feet. "Thank you for dinner." He drained his glass in one gulp, nodded to his mother and walked out. He'd thought about stuffing the last piece of tender steak in his mouth, but in a choice between that and good-quality alcohol, the wine had won.

Caspar grabbed his coat from the hands of the butler and stormed out of the house. He did not have to tolerate this crap. He was thirty-three, not thirteen. He fastened the buttons of his long, black woolen coat and turned up the collar as he strode down the drive toward the Gatehouse.

His home and his fucking prison.

The small house at the entrance to the drive of Wyndale Hall had been bequeathed to him by his grandfather, except Caspar couldn't sell it because it was part of the Lynham estate. He didn't really want to sell it, but he *did* need the money. He'd starve before he took another penny from his parents, but he grew hungrier by the day.

Casting a single glance at his cold, empty house, Caspar carried on walking toward the village. He might find temporary happiness in a bottle of house red at the Wyndale Arms. Maybe Suz, the middle-aged barmaid, would look more appetizing when he was drunk. He'd long ago broken his rule about not fucking women who lived on his doorstep, though not the one about never fucking the same woman twice. Caspar treated women like new toys he'd been given for Christmas. He loved them to bits once they were unwrapped but quickly lost interest after he'd played with them. There was always something new on the horizon to attract his attention.

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By the time Ally's taxi pulled up outside Stone Cottage, it was almost nine in the evening and she was shattered. She shivered under her thin coat in the September chill. It seemed a lot colder here than in London.

Wyndale nestled in a valley below Curber Edge, a popular area for walkers and climbers. Her brother Finn loved climbing, while Ally freaked out going up a ladder. She'd been to Wyndale once before, over a year ago, when Finn invited her for the weekend to see his new house. It had rained the entire time and Ally had curled up on

the couch with a thick book and not moved while her brother raced around getting filthy on his mountain bike.

Stone Cottage was the end property of a group of five situated on a hill on the outskirts of the village. Constructed of grayish-white Derbyshire limestone, the two-and-three bedroom cottages looked stark from the front, but very stylish at the rear with lots of glass that opened onto woodland. They were arranged around a shared courtyard covered with limestone chippings, and judging by the lack of vehicles and lights, no one was home.

Ally unlocked the door, had a belated thought about a burglar alarm and exhaled when nothing beeped. She dragged her cases inside, sighed with relief again when a flick turned the lights on and sighed once more when water flowed from the taps. Once she'd washed her hands, Ally turned up the central heating, restored the electricity supply to the empty fridge and checked the kitchen cupboards. She hadn't wanted to eat earlier, but now that the adrenaline had worn off, she was starving. Unfortunately, Finn hadn't even left a tin of baked beans.

Before she abandoned the house in search of food, Ally repaired her makeup to ensure the bruise on her cheek was covered, changed into her pale pink pants and matching jacket, and put a smile on her face. She pinned her shoulder-length hair into an untidy knot at the back of her head and slipped on her pink high heels, because, despite everything, her Cinderella complex insisted without the right shoes, she wouldn't find the right man. Any single girl who said she wasn't always looking was lying.

As Ally trekked down the hill into the village, a bitter wind twirled around her, finding the gaps in her clothing and licking her skin with an icy tongue. She should have worn her coat over her jacket, but if she went back, she'd stay home and think about what had happened. The bright lights of a pub beckoned, but Ally kept walking. More important to buy coffee for tomorrow.

By the time she reached the other side of the village, she hadn't found a single shop open. Used to the twenty-four-hour lifestyle of London, Ally had forgotten people here went to bed when she'd be getting ready to go out.

She couldn't face the trek back without eating something and sitting down for a while. Not only was the thin jacket a mistake, so were the heels. Her toes were freezing. When Ally walked into the Wyndale Arms and every head turned, followed by a collective dropping of jaws, she realized her whole outfit was a mistake.

In trendy and crowded London pubs, she could dissolve into the crowd like sugar in coffee, but here, Ally stood out—a strawberry in a bowl of blackcurrants. Not a woman in sight. *Damn*. She refused to leave without food. Even peanuts would do.

A group of boisterous men on the far side of the bar resumed their game of darts and another quick glance showed Ally the only other occupant of the dingy room was a dark-haired guy who sat alone at a table by an open fire. Head down, he nursed a glass of wine, rocking it in his hand.

Ally walked up to the empty bar and a wide-eyed redhead popped up like a jack-in-the-box. Ally squealed and jumped back.

"Sorry. What can I get you?" the barmaid asked.

A new set of nerves? "Do you serve food?"

"Not after nine thirty."

Ally glanced at her watch. Nine thirty-two. *Grrrr*. "A glass of red wine, please. Sure there's no food? I'd eat almost anything." She tried her pleading look, hoping she wouldn't have to resort to tears or settle for the peanuts.

The barmaid laughed and poured Ally's drink. "The chef could probably manage a bowl of chili."

"Brilliant," Ally said. "Thank you."

"Wait until you taste it."

The deep and distinctive cultured voice came from right behind her. Ally turned and looked up into the thin, drawn face of the guy from the fire, and it was as though a storm broke in her body. He needed a shave and a comb pulled through his untidy hair, but thunder rumbled in her heart and lightning fizzled along her veins. His gray eyes, rimmed with thick, black lashes were underlined by dark shadows.

He looked haunted.

She wanted to hug him.

"Another," he said to the barmaid, and put a handful of change and his empty glass on the counter.

Wine poured, he walked back to his table without giving Ally another glance. *Damn*. Her heart continued to hiccup in a way it hadn't for ages. Well over six feet tall with broad shoulders and a lovely backside encased in faded black denim—he was gorgeous. The countryside was looking better and better.

"No please or thank you?" Ally whispered.

"He's the local grouch," the barmaid said. "Sit down and I'll bring the chili over."

Ally would have liked to have taken a chair near the fire, but Mr. Misery's brooding presence overwhelmed that part of the room, plus she didn't want to look too keen, so she chose a table nearer the darts players. She'd hardly settled before the chili arrived. One mouthful and she sucked in a breath. *Hot, hot, hot.* Her eyes watered, and when she slurped at her wine, she heard a quiet chuckle behind her.

"I did warn you," he said.

She turned. "You did, but it was either this or eat my own arm."

His mouth twitched. "You made the wrong choice."

After a few forkfuls, her lips went numb, followed by her tongue. When Ally thought about what that level of spice might be doing to her stomach, she pushed the half-eaten chili aside. The wine calmed the burn, though not much. It *did* help to make her head fuzzy. Maybe getting a little drunk was a good idea.

She listened to the guys playing darts trying to persuade one of the four to stay longer. Instead, the man pulled on his coat and finished his pint.

"We need to practice," said the youngest one.

"Sorry, but I promised I'd be back by ten."

"She's got you pussy whipped, Bill," called a squat, bald man.

"Maybe I like it," he said as he opened the door.

"We always knew you were kinky," said a tall, brown-haired guy.

Ally watched the gaze of the three remaining men pass over Mr. Moody sitting by the fire and settle on her. An elbow in the ribs of the youngest by the bald one and he sidled over to her table. "We need a fourth. Like to play?"

Ally's eyes widened. "I'm not very good." *As in, I'm terrible.* She started to turn. "You could ask—"

"That's okay. We like a challenge. You can be on my team." The lank-haired youth smiled at her.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Ally muttered.

She carried her wine over. The guys introduced themselves as Neil, Tom and Mike. Mike was the youngest. Neil was in his forties. Tom looked to be a few years older than Ally, handsome but too smooth for her.

"I'm Ally."

"Not from round here, are you?" Neil looked her up and down. "You're a bit—flamboyant for these parts."

Ally smiled. "I'm from London."

"Ah, bad luck," Neil said.

Tom handed her a dart. "We won't bother with a warm-up. One throw each. Nearest the bull starts."

That wouldn't be her then. Ally's dart landed in the wall two feet away from the board and she cringed but the guys chuckled.

When it was her turn to play, her first dart was on target but bounced off the board and nearly hit Mike. The second hit the board and stuck in eight. Ally began to jump up and down, clapping her hands in delight. The dart drooped and then fell off.

"Damn," Ally said. "Does that count?"

Neil shook his head. "Has to stay in for five seconds after the last dart is thrown."

Ally huffed. She launched the third dart and it landed in the ceiling. The guys stared up in disbelief.

"That fly never stood a chance," Ally said, and they roared with laughter.

Her gaze flickered to the guy by the fire and she saw him smiling into his wine. *Three wishes,* thought Ally, and conjured up the image of a shooting star.

Let him be single.

### Barbara Elsborg

Let him be a good guy. Let him want me.

#### **Chapter Three**

From the moment the leggy, pink chick had walked into the pub, Caspar was mesmerized. He thought she'd take one snooty glance and walk out again, but she hadn't. She looked like a gangly flamingo, her blonde hair fastened up in a messy swirl at the back of her head with some fluffy pink thing. She had a cute nose and take-me-to-bed eyes, but he didn't think much of the crap she'd smeared over her face. Lipstick was the only makeup he liked, particularly when it ended up on his cock.

Her yelp when Suz had jumped up from behind the bar had almost made Caspar spill his wine. Nervy? Therefore not his type, but when his gaze dropped to her tight pink pants, he changed his mind. She had a fabulous backside, round and firm, and Caspar wanted to squeeze it, kiss it, lick it— *Oh fuck it*. Blood rushed south and he edged his chair closer to the table. The grating noise drew gazes in his direction, and Caspar took a swig of wine.

So she was called Ally. Short for Alice? Allegra? Alley cat?

She was the worst darts player he'd ever seen. Caspar didn't think he'd heard anyone say "sorry" so many times. Except maybe him.

The dart in the ceiling was a first and had even tugged a smile from him he'd promptly hidden in his glass. He watched the guys trying not to laugh at her unusual technique, the way she launched the dart from way over her shoulder as if hurling a javelin. Yet thank fuck for that, because every time it was her turn, she had to bend over to pick up at least two wayward darts.

Caspar wasn't the only one who'd noticed her lovely backside and those fuck-me heels. While Neil gave her pointers in how to throw—which made not a jot of difference—Tom and Mike sidled around to get a better view of her butt. When she reached down, a ribbon of tanned flesh lay exposed across her lower back and, once, Caspar caught sight of a narrow strip of pink lace. *Oh God*.

It took a tremendous feat of willpower to stop his cock from bursting through his zipper. Every time she laughed, the damn thing grew a little thicker, a little harder. Caspar became consumed by the desire to drag her outside, yank down her pants and slide into her slick warmth. Every time she said "sorry", he wanted to bend her over a table and thrust inside her. Every time she laughed, he wanted to press his cock to her lips and spill into her mouth. His body flooded with heat and he jerked his chair back from the fire. More stares in his direction from guys who'd generally rather ignore him.

"That sudden noise put you off?" Tom asked Ally, and glared at Caspar over her shoulder. Caspar glared back.

"Nothing puts me off." Ally's next dart almost hit Mike's foot.

Her appearance this evening was enough to make Caspar believe in the devil. Just as he'd *almost* talked himself into a period of celibacy, totally unconnected with the way Suz had rolled her eyes at him when he'd flirted, this pink cloudburst of temptation waltzed in. And she hadn't even smiled at him—yet.

There was still time.

Neil's wife waited at home. Caspar suspected Mike's widowed mother would be listening out for her nineteen-year-old son's return, but Tom was a different matter. Tom was good-looking, solvent, well-dressed, unattached and had a decent haircut. He ran a residential adventure center to which businesses sent teams of employees to learn what to do if they got caught out in the middle of nowhere with a compass but no mobile phone. *Very likely.* Tom had been a friend once and could easily have given Caspar a job but hadn't. The courses raised self-awareness and self-esteem and tested issues of trust and teamwork. Maybe Caspar needed to go on a course.

Ally laughed at something Tom said, and Caspar took a mouthful of wine to prevent a possessive growl escaping his lips. Sex-maniac-in-training that he was, he didn't remember ever feeling this level of lust for anyone—an overwhelming compulsion to have her. Except Caspar wasn't too drunk to register it was probably his mind playing tricks on him—again. When he told himself he couldn't have something, he wanted it even more. After spending four years desperate for a pint of beer, a roast dinner, a cliff to climb, a kind face to smile at him, Caspar was an expert in unrequited longing. Now he detested feeling so needy and hated that it made him weak.

He listened intently to the conversation coming from the other side of the room, but Ally revealed little about herself, deftly turning topics away from her and onto village life. At least with Caspar sitting, listening, they didn't tell her about Wyndale's notorious black sheep—he cast a wry glance at his black woolen coat—but it could only be a matter of time before he was damned in her eyes.

Not that Caspar's less-than-stellar history generally deterred women from inviting him into their beds. On the contrary, since he'd moved back just under a year ago, it appeared to make him more enticing to many, particularly because he'd had further to fall than most. Son of an earl, silver shovel thrust in his aristocratic mouth from birth, godson of royalty, Cambridge graduate, the world his proverbial oyster and Caspar had still fucked up. The piece of grit hadn't turned into a pearl. Didn't matter that Caspar had done what he did for the right reasons, the end result was what counted. The end result was disaster.

Now he was reduced to this. Unemployed, probably unemployable except maybe as a stud—ha ha—he was a lonely, miserable masochist. He needed to change his life but he was too lazy. He needed to get a life, but there was nothing better within reach. Sex and alcohol dulled the pain. And the sex was free, albeit fleeting. Caspar tried to balance his desire for stringless fucks alongside his resentment at women wanting him because he was a good-looking bad boy. So long as they rubbed each other's itch, where was the harm?

In any case, even if he tried *not* to be bad, his past clung to him like leprosy. A good fuck and callous behavior was what they expected, so why not oblige? If he tried to do something nice, it was misinterpreted. Caspar wasn't quite the shit they believed. He knew some of the women he'd bedded wanted more, that they sat waiting for him to call when it wasn't going to happen, then bad-mouthed him to their friends for being a heartless prick. If he'd *been* a heartless prick, he'd have called and led them on a longer dance to nowhere.

"Are you going to stick around Wyndale for a while?" Mike addressed Ally's backside.

"Depends if I can find a job."

*Join the line,* Caspar thought, wondering what had brought her to a small village in Derbyshire to look for work.

Ally collected her dart from the middle of a plant on the windowsill and walked back.

"What happened with your last job?" Neil asked.

"It went up in flames. No one was hurt but the buildings were gutted."

"Christ. What sort of business was it?" Mike asked.

"Precious metals recycling. I worked in the office."

Caspar imagined her in a smart suit, fitted jacket and tight skirt—giving him a blowjob while he sat at his desk. He'd spread her out on a boardroom table and lick between her legs until she screamed for him to stop. His cock pressed harder against his zipper. No doubt about it, he was his own worst enemy.

"Know of any vacancies?" Ally asked. "I can do almost anything."

Caspar bet she could. The guys shook their heads.

"We could do with someone at Mountain Rescue to organize the files, except we can't pay you," said Neil. "We all work for nothing, but we only volunteered because we like the outdoors. It's like pulling teeth trying to persuade anyone to work inside."

Caspar emptied his glass. They hadn't asked him.

"I don't mind helping out until I find something full-time," Ally said.

Neil grinned. "Great. I'll be at the base all day tomorrow doing an inventory of the equipment. Anyone in the village can point you in the right direction. Pop in and I'll show you what's involved. You might change your mind when you see the mess."

If Caspar hadn't known Neil was happily married with three kids, he might have stormed over and punched him on the nose. *Shit*. The sooner he fucked Ally and got her out of his system the better.

Except he wasn't going to do that anymore, was he?

Caspar felt as if he had a devil on one shoulder and a bigger devil on the other. He might not leap on her right away, but in the long run, he wouldn't be able to resist the temptation. Showing admirable self-restraint or deluded? That was the question.

Ally stayed until last orders. Her dart playing didn't improve. She tried hard, narrowing her eyes and chewing her lip as she concentrated, but the only thing *that* did was make Caspar lust for her more. Each time he spotted the pink tip of her tongue slide over her upper lip his cock gave a hopeful purr.

The wall around the board was speckled with holes, and when Suz got uppity, Ally groveled and Mike offered to patch them up the next day. Ally had charmed the guys, bought them a round of drinks, put up with their good-natured flirting and always had a smile on her face. Well, not quite always. Sometimes Caspar thought he'd seen her wince. Probably pulled a muscle trying to score a bull's eye. He wondered why she wore so much makeup. Reassured he'd found something negative, he kept looking.

And looking.

And came up blank.

When Caspar saw she was about to leave the pub, he put on his coat and slipped away first. He waited out of sight. He doubted she lived in his direction. There weren't many houses his side of the pub, but when the men headed away from him toward the village and she turned up the hill, his heart didn't know whether to sink or swim.

He did a good thing and let her go.

Then he did a bad thing and ran after her.

Not hard to catch up when she wore mouthwatering heels like that. It amazed Caspar women could walk in that sort of footwear.

"Mind some company?" he called.

She gave a muffled shriek and fell over.

Shit.

Caspar reached to help her up, but she scrambled to her feet before he could do little more than brush his fingers over her arm. He looked down at the path in the dim light to see what had tripped her. Nothing there, but he kept his gaze down, anything rather than look at her face in case she saw the raw lust in his and he saw disgust or distrust in hers. One fucking fingertip touch of her jacketed arm and his cock had reinflated. Now it was going to throw a tantrum because he wasn't going to touch her again. No way.

Ally was mortified. Was she going to yelp and jump every time anything surprised her?

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she lied. "Tripped over the invisible man. Again. He keeps throwing himself at my feet. Bloody nuisance." He didn't laugh. "You're going my way," she blurted. "Well, obviously you are, unless you—" *Shut up, moron.* "I'm Ally."

"Yep, I heard. I'm Caspar."

"Oh, lovely name. Master of the treasure. So where are you hiding it?"

He shot her a startled glance and she grinned.

"I like to know the meaning of names. I have this theory they're chosen for a reason. Doesn't mean you necessarily have a pile of treasure buried in your garden, just that there's something important in your life that you're in charge of." *Shut up.* "Well, it's probably a load of bollocks." *Shut up now.* 

"You can't tell me where this important treasure is, can you? I could do with it."

She laughed. "Well, it might not be your treasure, might be someone else's that you're looking after."

He sighed. "Typical. What's Ally short for?"

"Alexandria. That means defender of men or mankind. I'm waiting for an attack by aliens. Not quite sure what my superpower is yet, but I'm probably the only thing that can save us from destruction."

He laughed, and Ally felt that telltale shoot of attraction sprouting leaves.

As they walked up the hill, he kept quiet. Maybe he wanted silent company. Ally didn't. It made her uncomfortable.

"Why didn't those guys ask you to play with them?" she asked.

"They don't like the way I play."

"You can't be any worse than me. It was a miracle I managed to get a dart to stay in for more than five seconds. I know you're not supposed to step over that line on the floor, but I'm fairly sure I'd never have hit the board if they hadn't let me stand closer."

Another long pause. He kept his head down, his hands stuffed deep in his pockets.

Ally sighed. *Not interested in me. Maybe he's married.* "You don't happen to know if there are any jobs going around here, do you?"

"Not that I know of, though Wyndale Hall's about to be used to film Jane Eyre. You might find there's something you could do when the film crew arrives."

"I suppose the role of Jane is gone."

That won her another chuckle.

Ally stopped at the driveway that led up to the cottages. "Well, this is me. Thanks."

"I'll walk you to the door."

"Okay." Her heart lurched all over her chest. Was he just being kind? What if she asked him in for a coffee? Oh damn, she didn't have any coffee. Water was all she could offer. Did she want him to come in? Ally tried to put on her sensible hat but it kept slipping over her eyes. This was supposed to be the place and time to pull herself together and rethink her life, but after this morning, the thought of spending the night in someone's arms tempted. More than tempted, though it would be a first. She'd never slept with anyone the day she met them. Unbreakable rule.

How long until midnight?

"Are you married?" she blurted.

He barked out a short laugh. "No."

One obstacle out of the way, though Ally was mortified to have asked. The bloody question had expanded in her head until it had forced its way past her lips. That might not have been so bad if he'd gone on to ask if she was married.

He didn't.

Because he's not interested, idiot. Except now he knew she wanted him. Her face flooded with heat.

Ally tried for cool. "This is where I'm staying. Thanks very much for walking me home."

No one had ever done that for her in London, and it was far more dangerous there, particularly for her. She thrust the key in the lock, pushed open the door and dived inside, calling "Good night" over her shoulder as she shut him out.

Absolutely the right thing to do. Ally leaned back against the door and released a quiet moan. Absolutely not what she'd wanted to do. "Fuck, fuck, fu

Thank God he hadn't been interested because the merest touch of the tip of his littlest finger against any part of her would have shattered her control. She'd have probably ripped off her jacket and screamed, "Take me!" *Ha.* He'd walked close enough for her to smell his soapy scent, close enough that Ally felt some sort of magnetic pull dragging her nearer and nearer. She'd kept jerking away. He probably thought she was drunk.

"'Night, Alexandria. Sleep tight."

The voice coming through the door, right by her ear, sent her heat index soaring into the hot-enough-to-melt-rocks range. Ally heard his steps crunch away across the limestone chippings and breathed out. She wanted to open the door and call him back. She really didn't want to be alone, but that was hardly fair to him even though she guessed he wouldn't complain.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," Caspar muttered as he trudged back to the road.

His thoughts had scattered like marbles the moment she'd walked into the pub and he'd still not pulled them together. As they walked back, he'd thought about how to seduce his way into her bed. A casual arm slung over her shoulder, a delicate brush of his lips over hers as they stood at her door, a few flattering sentences—he was practiced enough. Yet words had logjammed in his head, and every time he nearly touched her, he'd changed his mind, afraid if he did, she'd lurch away. And she *had* kept lurching away even though he didn't touch her.

Once he saw where she was living, Caspar's heart sank. She'd walked into Finn Everton's place, and since Finn had given him a black eye two months ago for fucking his girlfriend, Caspar didn't want another black eye for fucking this one. To be fair, Caspar hadn't known Melissa was going out with Finn, but he hadn't thought to ask. Just as he hadn't asked Ally if she was married or engaged or otherwise taken. Only this time it was different. Caspar had chosen not to ask because he hadn't wanted to hear her say yes.

Tonight, for once in his miserable life, Caspar had done the right thing and walked away. Finn might not be here at the moment, but he'd be back. Caspar had liked Finn. The guy hadn't acted as if Caspar had the plague. Typical that when Caspar found someone who might have been a friend, he fucked it up.

By the time Caspar had let himself into the Gatehouse, his mood had become even more maudlin. He looked around at the sparse furniture, the work that needed to be done that went beyond his limited DIY skills, and sighed. Yet again he'd wasted money he couldn't afford on booze, and he wasn't even drunk. He thought about checking his emails to see if he'd made it to stage two on any job application but couldn't muster the necessary enthusiasm when he knew he'd be disappointed. He also needed to find something else to sell online, but he couldn't work up energy for that either.

Only one thing he wanted to do that wouldn't hurt anyone or cost him anything, except maybe a little pride.

He stripped as he walked upstairs and left his clothes where they fell. His bedroom was the only one without a leak in the ceiling. By the time he reached the bathroom, he was naked. As Caspar cleaned his teeth, he stared at his reflection in the mirror and gave a short laugh. Why the fuck would someone as gorgeous as Ally be interested in him? His good looks had gone the way of his confidence. He needed a shave. The shadows under his eyes made him look as if he were a walking corpse and his hair showed the effects of him cutting it himself. No way could he afford to go to a barber.

Caspar burrowed under the duvet and closed his eyes. The face of a pixie filled his head, shiny blonde hair curling over tiny ears, that pink tongue sliding over her lips. Her sigh of "sorry" echoed in his head and he smiled as he remembered how she'd thrown the darts. He wasn't going to touch her, but that didn't mean he couldn't think about her while he touched himself.

Rolling onto his back, Caspar reached for his cock. It was still semi-hard. When he wrapped his fist around it, his body shook with anticipation. He squeezed the tip with one hand and cupped his balls with the other then played with himself, exploring the textures of different parts of his tackle, doing what felt good without shifting into any rhythm. He wished it were her mouth on him, her pussy around him.

Blood flowed south, and the outer skin of his shaft tightened as the core swelled and heated until he was fully erect. Caspar brought up his knees so the duvet tented above him and began to pump with one hand while he massaged his balls with the other. Full and hard, they were already drawn up in excitement.

His breathing deepened, his nipples tightened and the muscles of his belly began to contract and release. *Shit, this is fast.* His hips bucked and he firmed his hold on his cock, roughly dragging his hand up over the crest before yanking it back again. He jerked harder, tighter, faster until his lungs labored and the hovering pressure of climax loomed closer.

#### Barbara Elsborg

Caspar could have held off, gone slower, stretched out the pleasure, but like almost everything else in his life, he wanted to grab what he could when he could. Ally's name flew from his lips as cum spurted over his chest. And hit the duvet. *Shit*.

#### **Chapter Four**

This had all seemed so straightforward. Two elements to the plan.

Find Ally. Kill Ally.

Found and lost again. Where the fuck had she gone? Although Ally's disappearance had been the ultimate plan, the not knowing where and why most certainly wasn't. Damn it. Maybe she'd realized someone was trying to kill her and she'd given a statement to the police. What if she knew who'd pushed her but pretended not to? The next knock on the door might be the cops. *Shit*.

Why couldn't the bitch have fucking died?

\* \* \* \* \*

After Ally woke for the third time, gasping for air as she fought her way from under Finn's suffocating king-size duvet, she didn't sleep again. She lay with her eyes open, trying not to think. She'd left on the bedside light, but as dawn broke, the changing shadows in the unfamiliar room sent her scurrying under the covers. Even with the advent of morning, unease smothered her in a breath-stealing smog. She tried to read but couldn't concentrate, though with only Finn's bloodthirsty thrillers to choose from, hardly a surprise. Her mind refused to be swayed from replaying yesterday's incident over and over until she saw herself leaping instead of falling into the path of the train.

Only yesterday?

Was I really pushed?

Did I jump? Am I trying to pretend I didn't?

Ally had no wish to kill herself, even though life hadn't been much fun recently. The "incidents", losing a job she quite liked, coupled with lingering concern about Mark's weirdness had made her uncharacteristically unhappy. But to jump in front of a train?

No. That wouldn't be her choice of exit.

Enough thinking.

She rolled out of bed and padded to the shower, thrown out of her routine for the second time in as many weeks. For nine months she'd risen at six thirty, been out of her flat by seven. On her way to the Tube she picked up a coffee from a well-known chain where the baristas took turns to see who could be the surliest. A quick detour to the mini-mart to choose something healthy for lunch, though after super-fit Mark had been dispatched, something good for her had morphed into a big bar of chocolate. Much more comforting than a banana.

Two changes on the underground and a couple of miles by bus to get to PPM, Paxton's Precious Metals, and during the whole journey Ally didn't look, speak or smile at anyone, just to make sure she fitted in. Since the fire, Ally had been getting up an hour later, making herself a coffee then going out to get the papers to look for a job.

*Fuck.* She blinked under the force of the water as a memory surged back. That's where she'd been going yesterday before the latest...incident, to an interview at a recruitment agency. She'd email an apology.

The shower helped make her feel human, but her bruises looked and felt worse. The smudge on her cheek had turned too dark to hide with makeup. Her body ached as though it had only just realized what had nearly happened.

Ally dressed in jeans and a sweater and hung the rest of her clothes in Finn's wardrobe. When she could no longer ignore the accusatory glare of her mobile, she switched it on. It bleeped to let her know she had messages and then began to ring. Ally checked caller ID—Emma, a friend who worked in advertising, who did everything at full speed and full volume.

"Hi, Em."

"OhmyGodohmyGod," Emma screeched.

Ally held the phone farther from her ear. "What's the matter?"

A long wail of disbelief greeted her question. "Waddayoumeanwhatsamatter? You're on TV. You're in the *Metro*. Probably on YouTube by now. Where are you? I've been 'round to your place and your neighbor said you left yesterday—with suitcases. Are you on holiday? Christ, am I calling America or something? Answer quick. What's happened? Well, I know what happened. You nearly got killed. Bloody hell, Ally!"

Ally gulped. "I was on TV?"

"Yes, but they don't know who you are. Nor does the *Metro* newspaper. Have you seen the headline?"

"I'm not in London."

"Arrggh. America?"

"No."

"Thank God. So you haven't seen the paper. It says—*Miracle at Angel Station. Train gives birth to ditzy blonde*. Well, no, it didn't say that last bit, but my God, Ally, you could have been killed."

Ally took a deep breath. "I know." Cold shivers ran the length of her spine and shot down her legs.

"Did you slip? Were you drunk? Though at that time of the morning you have to have a bloody good excuse for being pissed. What happened?"

"Someone pushed me."

A miniscule pause before Emma rushed on. "Christ. That'll teach you not to stand so near the white line. Bloody commuters are always shuffling around trying to get to the front."

Ally mustered a flat chuckle.

"You didn't say you were going on holiday. Where are you?"

She thought about telling Emma she suspected someone was trying to kill her but didn't. It would freak her out, she'd call the others and tell her boyfriend Geoff, who'd tell Steve, who'd tell Mark, and before Ally knew it, they'd be rolling their eyes at her extreme attempts to win Mark back. *As if.* 

"Is it obvious it's me in the paper?"

"Not obvious, but I recognized that Monsoon jacket I luuurve. The photo *is* kind of fuzzy. I don't know if it came from someone's phone or a security camera. You still haven't told me where you are."

Ally hesitated. If she didn't tell Emma it would be rude, even though she knew telling her would be akin to an announcement on Facebook. But these were her friends. She couldn't expect Emma not to tell her new boyfriend Geoff, who was the sweetest guy Ally had ever met. Emma never let him get a word in edgeways, so Ally always ended up talking to him when they were out as a group.

"Don't tell anyone." Ally could live in hope. "I'm staying at Finn's weekend place for a while."

"The countryside?" Emma's incredulous tone was more than clear. Ally might as well have said the wastes of Siberia. "Why?"

"I couldn't afford to keep paying rent on my bedsit when I don't have a job. It seemed a good idea to get out of London." Ally could have managed another month but it would have eaten into her savings.

"You know, you're right. I think leaving London was a great idea. You can find a job, make a new start, get over Mark."

"Hmm." Such a pain when everyone loved Mark except Ally.

There was a long pause before Emma spoke. "Mark can be a wanker. Even Geoff says so."

Ally's fingers tightened around her mobile. She was *not* going to talk or think about Mark. *End the call*. "Someone at the door. Gotta go. Speak soon. Bye."

Ally switched off her phone and groaned. Emma always gave her a headache. She needed coffee.

When Ally walked into The Rumblin' Tum café, the line snaked almost to the door and every table was occupied. She breathed in the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, smoked bacon and something deliciously spicy, and knew it would be worth waiting. Only one person appeared to be cooking and serving, a harassed-looking brunette about Ally's age. Those in line ahead of Ally were dressed in a mixture of smart business suits and paint-spattered work-clothes.

Ally moved one pace forward and three guys came in to line up behind. She thought about going elsewhere but figured at least some of the customers would have done that if there'd *been* anywhere else. Ally's stomach joined in with the more verbal rumbles of impatience from those waiting.

"Sorry, sorry. I'm going as fast as I can," said the woman serving.

Ally took a gamble and moved to the counter, sensing the glares digging into her back, though no one said anything. "Like me to give you a hand?"

"Oh my God, you're an angel. That would be great. I'm Rose."

"Ally."

She slipped behind the counter, put her coat and purse on a chair in the corner, washed her hands at the sink and dried them on a paper towel. "Can I grab a coffee?"

"Help yourself. There's an apron on the hook."

Ally made the sandwiches and guzzled coffee while Rose prepared the hot food and took the money. Everything sat in tubs ready for use so it wasn't hard. Most of the guys wanted a mug of tea and a bacon sandwich for now, plus a sandwich to go.

"Can I have an extra rasher of bacon with mine, sweetheart?" asked one florid-faced guy in a tight t-shirt that said, *Rabbits*. *Nature's little speed bumps*.

"Not unless he pays for it," Rose said.

"I could give you a kiss, sweet Rose." The man puckered his lips. "Or your new assistant?"

"Oh dear, then we'd have to charge you double," Ally said.

He groaned and took the bag she offered.

"Salmon and cucumber sandwich next," Rose told her then whispered, "He likes his crusts cut off."

"No crusts means your hair won't curl." Ally looked up at a bald, middle-aged man in a pinstripe suit. "Oh sorry. So no crusts because you haven't learned to chew yet?"

He laughed and Ally breathed a sigh of relief.

She cut off the crusts and wrapped up his food. Ally was surprised how comforting it felt to do something ordinary. People here said *please* and *thank you*. They smiled. They passed the time of day. They were all so lovely she wanted to hug every one of them.

Ally could make friends here, couldn't she? She'd met Delia at Paxton's. Delia introduced her to Kerry, and Kerry was best friends with Emma, and so it went on until Ally had become part of lively circle. She'd done it before, she could do it again.

"Any chance you're free to help me out tomorrow?" Rose asked. "My husband usually works with me but his father's been taken ill. I can pay you. Not much but you'd be doing me a huge favor."

"Okay." Wow, her first job had come easier than she'd expected.

Rose beamed at her. "Six until ten."

Ally held back her shriek. Six?

"After that, I'm fine on my own. It's early mornings we get a rush. God, you're not here on holiday, are you? Sorry, am I wrecking your plans?"

"No. I'll be around for a couple of months." Ally reached up to return clean dishes to the shelves behind them.

"Hi, Caspar," Rose said at her back.

Ally's stomach flipped. She turned and saw his eyes widen in surprise when their gazes meshed. When he didn't return her smile, hers wilted.

"Hello again," Ally said.

She watched his gaze settle on her bruised cheek.

"Is that from last night?" He didn't wait for an answer before he turned to Rose. "You've given *her* a job?"

Rose stiffened. "Ally was here, offered help, and I took it."

"But-"

"You weren't here, Caspar."

Rose put a cup of coffee on the counter together with a bacon sandwich and then crossed her arms. Caspar slapped down a handful of coins.

"There's no need—" Rose began.

"Yes, there fucking is," he muttered through gritted teeth.

He grabbed the plate and cup and stomped to a table in the corner. Even angry, he was sexy.

"You know him?" Rose mouthed.

"I met him last night."

Ally saw her glance at the bruise on her cheek. Surely she didn't think Caspar had done that?

"It was an accident," Ally whispered. "Look, does he need the job? I don't mind stepping down."

"No, I want you. Apart from the fact that I doubt he'd be capable of getting up that early, he's too bloody tempting. My husband would have kittens if I let Caspar work here."

Too bloody tempting was right. Ally found it hard not to look at him. A daylight Caspar was even more attractive. He'd shaved and combed his hair, though he looked tired. He picked up a newspaper someone had left and read while he ate. There was a quiet intensity in the way he did everything, a brooding, romantic hero in his long, black wool coat. Except the elbows were threadbare and the collar frayed.

"Don't be fooled by his good looks," Rose muttered. "He even does bad temper with style."

The only free chairs were at Caspar's table but it seemed people would rather stand by the counter than sit with him. What had he done to make people dislike him? The rush died down, and when Ally cleared the table next to Caspar, she noticed him looking at the jobs section of the paper. Guilt surged through her. He'd been prepared to work in a café. Rose had even offered to feed him for free but his pride wouldn't let that happen. *Shit*.

"He's Trouble with a capital T," Rose said in her ear when she returned to the counter.

And Sexy with a capital S.

When he left, just before ten, Rose breathed a sigh of relief and the noise level in the café rose again. Ally wanted to ask about Caspar but something stopped her. If there was a proper reason why he was disliked, Ally preferred to hear it from the source and not secondhand.

"Want to give me your mobile number and then if my husband comes back, I can let you know."

They swapped phones to type in numbers.

"Where's the nearest big supermarket?" Ally asked.

"If you want big, you'd have to go to Buxton. Do you have a car?"

"No."

"There's a bus on the hour, every hour. If you run you might catch the one at ten. Turn right outside. The stop's about fifty yards down the road. Here, take this."

She pressed ten pounds into Ally's hand and Ally thanked her, grabbed her coat and purse, and ran. The bus was already there but a line of people waited to get on, including Caspar.

Ally paid the driver, took a deep breath and walked toward the rear. Caspar sat on his own, his head resting against the window. The seats around him were empty, as if he'd been marooned on an island.

"Can I sit with you?" she asked. *Please say yes*. Ally didn't want to think about what she'd do if he said no.

He looked up at her with his gray eyes, gave a small smile, and Ally felt her pelvic muscles tighten.

Caspar had been playing with something in his right hand. As Ally settled next to him, she caught sight of a thick, red ribbon and a flash of metal before he pushed it in his coat pocket.

"Did you do that last night when you fell?" He nodded at her cheek.

"No."

His mouth tightened. "Ah, you've run away from whoever did it. So you *are* smart. I did wonder when you asked to sit next to me. Just so long as you don't let Finn think I punched you."

Ally sat up straighter. "You know my brother?"

Caspar half laughed and half moaned. "Finn's your brother?"

"His mum and dad fostered me when I was eleven. Finn was sixteen. He's in America for a couple of months."

"Probably lucky for the guy who hit you."

Ally didn't see a lot of Finn but she thought Caspar was right. If a guy hit her, Finn wouldn't sit back. Ally dropped her voice to a whisper. "No one hit me. I...fell in front of a train."

Caspar blinked, opened his mouth and closed it again. He stared at her and Ally's heart began to bang harder against her ribs. She was careful not to touch him, suspecting her hormones might break out into a song-and-dance routine if she did.

"You really had an argument with a train and lived to tell the tale?"

She bent her head toward his ear. "Don't tell anyone, but actually I'm a ghost, trapped in limbo. I hadn't racked up enough credits to get to heaven, probably because of the incident with the fire truck and the nun, so I have to do a few good deeds before I'm allowed to stroll down that tunnel of light."

His mouth twisted in a half-smile. "If you want to save my soul, you're too late. I lost it years ago."

"That was careless. Anyway, I'm not sure I believe you. You seem a deliberate sort of guy to me."

She could see his hand moving in his coat pocket and wondered what the heck he was doing.

He raised his eyebrows. "You're basing this on...?"

"Angel intuition."

"I thought you were a ghost?"

She laughed. "Oh yeah, I forgot." Ally cocked her head to one side. "You're a strange one, Mr. Grinch. People seem to avoid you, yet you don't let that interfere with how you live your life. The pub. The café."

"Maybe I like pushing people's buttons."

Or hiding in plain sight? More fiddling in his pocket. Was he nervous?

Caspar sighed. "You're wrong, you know. It's only men who don't like me." He leaned over and breathed into her ear. "Women love me."

A burst of cream wet her panties. Damn, damn, damn.

"How frustrating when you're so obviously gay," she whispered.

He smothered a laugh. "Ah, you'd like me to prove I'm not. We could find a hotel in town and I promise to fuck you 'til you scream."

You arrogant prick. Ally made sure her chuckle sounded genuine but she'd started to go off him. Yet something told her he was trying to throw her off.

"Wow, let me think when I've had a more tempting offer." She tapped her chin. "Oh yeah, when Kevin Prentiss said, 'Try this. It will be the best thing you ever tasted."

"And was it?"

"He gave me rat poison. I was in the hospital for a week. I was seven. He was twelve."

"Jesus."

"Didn't taste bad, but then it would hardly attract rats if it tasted vile. So no, Caspar, thanks for the offer but I have to go shopping. Finn didn't even leave an ice cube in his place."

Want her, want her, want her, want her.

Caspar had never been more grateful for his coat. He hadn't even touched her and his cock had shot to attention. He wasn't sure what he'd have done if she'd taken him up on his offer of a fuck in a hotel room. He hadn't really meant it. It was a halfhearted attempt to warn her off. Though if she'd said yes, he'd have been forced to ask her to pay. He had no money in his bank account and no credit cards. The fifteen quid in his pocket had to last until his next payment of Job Seekers Allowance. His final entitlement to the weekly sixty-five quid was due soon and that was it. No more from the government coffers. He was fucked in entirely the wrong way.

"The Peak District is really beautiful," Ally said as she stared past him through the window. "No traffic jams and concrete towers. Just hills, valleys, crags and moorland. Oh, and lots of sheep."

"And not a mountain peak in sight."

Ally laughed, her face lit up and his cock twitched.

He wanted to ask her on a date. Caspar gulped and twisted the metal cross in his pocket even faster. When was the last time he'd asked a woman out? Usually he just talked and they either wanted to fuck or they didn't. He didn't have to take them anywhere except to bed. Never his. Always theirs. Though most times they didn't even bother with a bed. A toilet stall, a wall, an alley. Not many places Caspar hadn't used.

He hadn't asked anyone out on a date in years. Only he'd have to think of something that didn't involve him spending a lot of money. Any money, in fact. He wished he hadn't wasted his cash on the wine last night.

Caspar wished a lot of things.

His fingers tightened around the medal in his pocket and he turned the cross back and forth in his palm. He didn't want to sell it, but what use was it sitting in a box?

"Having fun?" Ally nodded at his twitching lap and Caspar's hand froze.

"It's not what you think. I wasn't—" He pulled the medal from his pocket. "It was my grandfather's." He stuffed it back and removed his hand.

"Is it like a good luck charm?"

"I don't believe in luck."

Ally opened her eyes wide. "Really? You're not lucky I sat next to you then?"

Oh God, she's irresistible. Caspar couldn't remember the last time anyone had joked with him, pulled his leg, laughed at him without malicious intent. He opened his mouth to say he felt very lucky, and she spoke again.

"Have you always lived around here?"

"Not always." His parents had lived here forever, but he'd been packed off to boarding school at the age of five.

"I've only ever lived around London. I didn't see a cow until I was eleven. Put me right off milk when I realized where it came from. I've never touched it since. I'd have had a problem this morning if I'd needed to boil the stuff. The smell makes me throw up."

Their backgrounds couldn't be more different. Caspar suspected she'd had nothing while he'd had everything.

"How do you know Finn?" she asked.

"I met him in the pub. Is he still going out with Melissa?"

"No, she cheated on him and he dumped her."

Caspar felt a pang of guilt.

"And I am so grateful to whoever tempted her," Ally said. "I only met her once but I knew she wasn't right for Finn."

Keep your mouth shut. "Why not?"

"She wouldn't give up her cats and Finn's allergic. He said every time he went out with her she made him sneeze."

This was normal conversation and Caspar was enthralled.

"Did you have pets as a child? Maybe you have one now?" Ally asked.

"No and no." He could barely feed himself let alone a dog, though he'd like one because it would be good to come home to someone happy to see him.

Ally sighed. "I was desperate for a dog all through my childhood. In fact, I pretended I had one. A long-haired dachshund called Charlie. But I was in and out of care until I was eleven. I wasn't even allowed a goldfish."

"I was sent away to school, so having pets wasn't practical."

"I longed to go to boarding school," Ally said.

Caspar laughed. "I hated it."

"I liked the idea of uniforms, lots of friends and midnight feasts."

"And shifting staircases, exotic sweetshops and sorting hats?"

Ally laughed so loudly people turned to look at her. Caspar's heart swelled with joy.

"Did you really hate it?" she asked.

"Not all the time, but I was sent away too young. I missed my home, my sis—" Don't ask me. He chewed the inside of his cheek.

"You know what?" Ally said. "If I ever have kids, I'd never send them away to school. I only longed for boarding school because I didn't have a family. When Finn's parents fostered me, I used to follow his mum—my mum—around the house because I was scared she'd send me back. They wanted to adopt me but my birth mother refused. Mum said it didn't matter, that I was theirs in every way other than name. I— Oh God, why am I telling you all this? Sorry. You must have one of those faces that make people want to confess. Not a professional torturer, are you?" She smiled.

"A sideline. You can see how much people like talking to me."

Caspar wanted to tell her the secret everyone else in Wyndale half knew but wasn't sure how. He'd had an opening a moment ago when he'd nearly said Jemima's name and then missed it.

"So, what sort of job are you looking for?" she asked.

Any fucking thing. "I don't know," he blurted. Thirty-three years old and I sound useless. I am useless.

"Me neither. I was hoping something would sort of leap out at me. Huge salary for fascinating job with flexible hours and lots of perks. What would you *like* to do?"

Caspar leaned back in his seat. "Write a book. Build a house. Sail around the world. Climb Everest."

"Wow."

"Except I can't write, I have no clue how to build a house and the only time I was on a yacht I was violently seasick."

Ally grinned. "What about Everest?"

Caspar stood up. "We're here."

He had to get away from her before he said something he'd regret. He'd not talked so much to anyone since he'd gotten back.

Ally exited ahead of him and was pulled into the group congregating on the pavement. He saw Mary Binns, the vicar's wife, tap Ally on the shoulder.

I should have told her.

Now it was too late. Caspar stuck his hand in his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the medal, making it dig into his palm as he walked past the woman who was going to make sure Ally never spoke to him again.

"Be careful around Caspar Sanderson," Mary said, knowing he'd hear. "He's not long been out of prison."

# **Chapter Five**

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Caspar jammed his hands deep into his pockets and gave a loose stone a fierce kick. Why hadn't he told Ally he'd been in prison? He could have just said it, blurted it out. Only he knew he couldn't do that because the next question would be her asking why he'd been in prison, and if he answered truthfully, he wasn't sure he could stop it all from pouring out. And if he didn't answer, she'd think the worst.

Fuck, she already thinks the worst.

Caspar had nursed a tiny hope that despite Mary Binns warning her off, Ally would come running after him, but she hadn't. Christ, he hardly knew her. What was he thinking? She'd been a pleasurable blip in his otherwise shit life and now it could go back to being shit again.

He walked faster through the market town. He'd put this off for long enough. Caspar had told himself he'd wait to see if he found a job—any job—before he sold his grandfather's medal. Twenty-five weeks of Job Seekers' Allowance was about to run out, and with no work looming on the horizon, there was no longer any choice. Not unless he asked his father for a loan and Caspar would rather stick needles in his cock.

In order to change his life, he needed money to enable him to move away and start again. Caspar made for the indoor market and wended his way through the throngs of elderly shoppers, past the stalls selling everything from vegetables to vinyl records and into one of the small shops that lined the edges of the cavernous hall. A bell tinkled to announce his presence and Yves Bouard, sitting behind the counter reading a magazine with a tank on the cover, looked up.

"Morning. What do you have this time?" asked the weasel-faced guy. "More soldiers?"

Caspar had sold him a set of old toy soldiers he'd found in a tin in the attic for fifty quid. That had all gone on sorting out a plumbing problem in the Gatehouse. This medal was worth considerably more. Caspar put his hand in his pocket and placed the cross on the counter. Rather, he tried to. It took a moment before he could unclench his fingers. Guilt raced around his bloodstream in a fiery torrent until he was so hot he could barely breathe. Finally the medal fell from his hand with a quiet clunk. He almost expected it to burn the counter.

"Bloody hell. A Distinguished Service Order." Bouard stared without blinking at the cross with the wreath of green laurel in the center. It hung on a distinctive tightribbed red ribbon with narrow blue edges.

Caspar still had his fingers near it, spread on the counter. The DSO had been awarded to his grandfather for outstanding bravery at the battle of Arnhem in the Second World War and been left to Caspar in his will with a note. Stand tall but don't be

afraid to duck. A lump filled his throat at the thought of his merry-faced, gray-haired grandfather.

*I don't want to sell this.* Caspar's fingers trembled.

"How much do you want?" Bouard never lifted his gaze from the cross.

"A hundred thousand pounds."

Bouard sucked his teeth. Caspar knew it was a fair price.

"You should let it go to auction. You'd probably get more."

"No." Caspar needed this done quietly. If his father found out, he'd - Yeah, well, it wouldn't be pretty.

"I need to get it properly appraised before I contact any of my customers. You'll have to leave it with me."

Caspar hadn't been foolish enough to think the guy would just hand over the money, but he wasn't leaving the medal unless Bouard gave him something.

"Can I have five hundred to be going on with?" Caspar asked.

Bouard raised his eyes. "Two hundred. No more."

Everything screamed at Caspar to pick up the medal and walk away but he nodded. Bouard handed over ten twenty-pound notes.

"Sign here."

Caspar signed. "How long do—"

"A week or so. I'll call you. What's your number?"

Caspar wrote it down with shaking fingers.

As he closed the door of the shop, he angrily swept the back of his hand across his eyes.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally made no response when the woman told her Caspar had been in prison. After a moment of stunned disbelief, Ally set off after him. He'd been near enough to hear, so why hadn't he stopped and explained? But then why would he? It wasn't as if they had any sort of relationship. He'd walked her home and that was it. Ally thought about calling after him, but what could she say? *I don't care you're an ex-con*. The truth was—she might and she should.

A spell in prison had to be the reason people in Wyndale didn't like him. On one hand, whatever Caspar had done, he'd been punished for it, presumably he was sorry, and therefore should be allowed to get on with his life. On the other hand, what if he'd done something terrible that people couldn't forgive, no matter how much he regretted his actions? The fact that he'd raced off told Ally he thought she wouldn't want to speak to him, but Ally was no longer someone who let others make decisions for her.

By the time she'd followed him into the market and spotted him going into a shop called Militaria, Ally had decided not to ask him about prison but wait for him to tell her.

Not hard to guess Caspar was selling that medal. When he came out and strode off, clearly upset, it also wasn't hard to figure out he didn't want to. Ally went straight into the shop. Only a ballsy performance would work. One thing Ally didn't lack was courage. It was how she'd survived foster care and being told time after time that though her mother didn't wish to see her, she didn't want Ally to be adopted. No wonder Ally was insecure, though she did her best to hide it.

"How much did you give him?" she demanded.

"Who?"

"My bloody brother. The guy who just walked out. He has no right to sell that medal. It belongs to both of us."

The man's hesitation was all Ally needed to confirm she was right. "Caspar took it without me knowing. My mother will kill me if I don't get it back." She let her chin wobble as she took out her wallet. "Please. Please."

"How do I even know you're who you say you are?"

Shit. "I've followed him all the way from home. I guessed what Caspar might be up to. You're going to be in serious trouble if you sell it. Half of it is mine." She conjured a tear to trickle down her cheek. One of the most useful skills she'd acquired in care. It had got her out of all sorts of scrapes, though Finn's mother had seen straight through her. Ally suppressed her smile.

"How much did he ask for it?"

"A hundred thousand pounds."

Her knees nearly went from under her. That had to be a joke. She looked at the guy's face. *Shit*. Bang went her plan to buy the thing back. "Uh..." she gulped.

"It could fetch more. There'd be my commission to take out of course, but fifty thousand's a lot of money. Sure you don't want me to sell it? You'd only have to wait a couple of weeks for the cash."

Hope sprang like a fountain in her chest and Ally sighed with relief. Of course this guy hadn't handed over that sort of money. But had he handed over any?

"No, you can't sell it. Caspar had no authority to do this." Ally took her phone from her purse. "I'm not lying. I'll call the police. They can sort it out."

"There's no need to involve the police." The man's Adam's apple bobbed. "You'll have to give back the two hundred pounds I gave him on account."

Did she have enough? Ally counted out her money. She had to make ten pounds of it up in coins. Luckily she'd used a cash machine at Euston station yesterday.

Ally put the medal in her purse. Her heart hammered until she got out of the market. What the hell had gotten into her? Maybe Caspar really *did* want to sell the thing and would strangle her for interfering.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar hadn't gone more than a hundred yards before he accepted he'd made a terrible mistake. Yes, he needed the money. Yes, it would make a huge difference to his life. Yes, it would enable him to start again. But he shouldn't have sold the medal. It needed to stay in the family. His father would never forgive him.

Still, he had two hundred quid in his pocket and a couple of weeks before Bouard found a buyer. Caspar would just tell him he'd changed his mind and give him the two hundred back. If he spent any, he'd find something else to sell, though he had no idea what. His body? Caspar smiled.

"Excuse me."

Caspar turned at the voice and saw a smartly dressed woman in her late thirties staring at him. He didn't know her. He didn't think. *God, have I fucked her?* 

"I wondered if I could have a word with you?" she asked. "Can I buy you a coffee?"

"Do you want money?"

She raised perfectly tailored eyebrows. "No."

Caspar smiled. "Then I'd be delighted for you to buy me a coffee."

He had to make sure she knew she'd be buying. He might have two hundred quid in his pocket, but he had to avoid spending it on anything unnecessary. It was his emergency fund. Caspar followed her into a small café.

"Find us somewhere to sit," she said. "You take your coffee...?"

"Black, no sugar."

Caspar hoped she might buy him a cake too, but when she didn't ask, he slumped at the nearest empty table. What did she want? Some religious nut determined to make him see the error of his ways? A journalist in a slack season? The sister of someone he'd not called back? Someone from his former place of employment? His pulse jumped. Someone who wanted...to hurt him? She sounded English and Caspar was good at detecting accents. No trace of anything European in her tone.

The woman returned with two coffees, a slice of carrot cake, a blueberry muffin and a smile. Caspar swallowed his drool.

She pushed the coffee with no milk in front of him, gestured to the plates and said, "Take your pick."

"I can't have both?" Shit. That had slipped out.

She laughed and took the cake. That was fine. He preferred the muffin.

"I'm Juno Wallace."

"Caspar Sanderson."

"What a perfect name." She lifted her coffee and sipped it.

Caspar hoped this was something simple and that she didn't—one, know who he was, two, want to yell at him for something, or three, want him to sleep with her. He didn't want to go with four—be connected with his former life.

Not that fucking her would be a hardship, but he didn't want to. Caspar wondered if he was ill.

She pushed her card across the table and he picked it up. *Juno Wallace. Catch A Star.* Email and phone number below. Caspar was no wiser. He started to eat the muffin before she realized she'd gotten the wrong guy and told him to bugger off.

"You have the look," she said.

Of what? An ex-con? A guy down to his last few quid if he didn't count the two hundred he mustn't—couldn't—shouldn't touch.

"How old are you?" she asked.

That was a bit personal. How would she feel if he asked her? He opened his mouth to tell her to mind her own business and said, "Thirty-three."

"You don't look it. I bet you were stunning when you were a teenager."

No, he wasn't. He was spotty with greasy hair and braces. He shot over six feet at the age of fourteen and grew feet the size of canoes. He kept waiting for the woman to get around to what she wanted, only he had the feeling she expected him to guess.

She wanted to fuck. He refused to make the first move.

She stared at him intently. "I'm a talent scout."

Caspar sniggered. That *Britain's Got Talent* TV show must be getting desperate if they had to send scouts wandering around small market towns to drum up people to audition. "I don't have any talents." Caspar was fairly sure that being able to consume a muffin in three seconds flat wouldn't count. Nor would bringing a woman to orgasm in less than a minute. Fifty seconds was his record.

She leaned across the table. "You could be a model."

Unfortunately, Caspar heard that as he chewed the last mouthful of muffin and he inhaled at the same time as he laughed. He launched into a coughing fit and she wisely moved back. When he'd recovered, he gave a heavy sigh. Still, at least he'd gotten a coffee and something to eat.

"This isn't a joke." She looked peeved.

Oh. "Why me?"

"Are you kidding? You've got the sulky, downtrodden look off to a tee as well as the just-fell-out-of-bed hair."

His normal self then.

"Your clothes, the way you walk—perfect." She grinned at him. "All I need to do is take a few photos of you outside in the street, get your contact details and then send work your way. I take fifteen percent. The rest is yours. What do you say?"

It had to be a scam. "What's the catch?"

"I'm not asking you for any money," she said.

Not now maybe, but somewhere down the line there would be a request for payment for professional photographs, training courses, makeup sessions — *Ugh*.

"What do you say?" she asked.

Caspar put a smile on his face. "Go ahead." She'd been nice enough to buy him a coffee and a cake, so why be awkward?

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally drew a hundred pounds out of her bank account from the machine outside the supermarket. She couldn't ask Caspar for the two hundred. He needed it badly enough to sell something dear to him, so he'd hardly be pleased with what she'd done. In fact the more Ally thought about it, she'd been stupid. He might not have wanted to sell the medal, but he'd taken the decision to do so and she'd mucked it up.

She tried too hard, that was her problem. After she'd gone to live with Finn's parents and understood it was for good, she was so desperate to be liked at school, she'd given up her chocolate bars, her CDs, her DVDs. She took the blame when it wasn't her fault. She learned the hard way that wasn't the way to make the right friends but the need to please was still there. So was the lack of judgment.

As she walked around selecting groceries, Ally imagined the conversation between her and Caspar.

"I've been trying to pluck up the nerve to sell the thing and, thank God, I finally did. Now I can start writing that book while I build my house before I sail around the world, stopping off to climb Everest."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She'd have to confess. Ally knew he lived farther up the hill but not where, though of course she could ask. No doubt everyone knew.

As she piled more and more into her cart, Ally accepted she'd have to take a cab back to Wyndale. *Oh God.* At this rate, she'd be broke in a week. As she pushed her cart into the next aisle, Ally was hit by a blast of sexual attraction strong enough to make her heart stutter and the cart wobble.

Caspar stood a few yards away with his back to her. When he put chicken breasts in his basket followed by a pizza and a bag of apples, Ally realized he was buying from the reduced section. He put the pizza back, picked up what looked like a pie then put that down. Then he returned the apples to the shelf. Ally backed away. They needed to talk, but now wasn't the time.

While she was halfway through checking out, she noticed Caspar unloading his food on the next conveyor belt. From the way he tensed, Ally felt sure he'd seen her.

"Hey, Caspar," she called. "Want to share a cab back?" Don't you dare ignore me.

He looked up. "Sorry. Got a few things to do."

"Okay."

As Ally packed her purchases into plastic bags, she watched Caspar's cashier peel reduced tickets off every item he'd bought before she scanned it. Nothing wrong in buying things that were reduced, but that was *all* Caspar had in his basket.

"Would you like to come 'round tonight for something to eat?" she asked over her cashier's curly hair.

"Can't, sorry."

*Bugger.* Ally watched him leave the store and her shoulders slumped. Well, that was that. There was only so much rejection a woman could take.

"He's not worth it, love," said the lady serving her.

Except Ally rather thought he was.

She pushed her cart outside to find two elderly women waiting at the taxi rank. Ally tucked in behind them. Maybe she could post the medal anonymously through his letter box. An expensive lesson about sticking her nose in where it wasn't wanted.

Ally didn't have to wait long. Three cabs arrived together, and her cheerful driver loaded all her shopping in the trunk, probably relishing the huge fare. He hadn't driven more than three hundred yards when they passed Caspar standing at a bus stop. *The bloody liar*.

Ally *tsked*. "Pull over, please." When the cab stopped, she opened the door, popped her head out and shouted, "Come on, you idiot."

Caspar didn't move. The three people standing with him looked at each other, clearly wondering who Ally was addressing.

"Am I so repulsive?" Ally yelled. Oh God, he didn't think so, did he?

He looked the other way but she caught the hint of a smile.

"So you lied when you said you didn't care about my wooden leg." Ally raised her voice above the noise of the passing traffic. "Or my webbed feet. Or the squint."

The cab driver chuckled.

"Good thing I didn't tell you I'm a contortionist." Oh God, if he didn't come now, she'd die of embarrassment.

Caspar walked to the taxi. Ally shuffled over so he could get in. His face was blank and she wasn't sure whether he was happy to take the lift or not.

"Which leg?" Caspar said, and every one of her erogenous zones took their pompoms out and did a happy dance.

"Left."

For a split second she thought he might really believe her, and then he laughed. He looked so different when he was happy, and even though the moment didn't last, Ally cherished it.

"I've got a confession to make," she said.

"Not two wooden legs?" He raised his eyebrows and smiled again.

And suddenly, she couldn't do it. The medal could definitely wait.

"I'm not a contortionist," she whispered.

"Damn."

"I don't think. The only time I tried to put my legs around my neck I got stuck and Finn rolled me around the lawn like a ball. I fell in the fish pond."

The driver laughed so hard, his seat shook against her knees.

"So about tonight," she said. "Want to go for a drink after you've done what you need to do while I'm not giving you the meal I could have so skillfully and generously cooked for you? Unless you're a no-carb, lactose-intolerant vegan who doesn't believe in cruelty to soya. In which case, you can cook for me." Am I trying too hard? Pushing too fast?

He hesitated.

"Careful," Ally said. "You're going to make a decision in a moment. Might a thunderbolt strike?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I'll cook. You bring alcohol."

"Great." Shit. The one thing she hadn't bought at the supermarket. "Now you sure you're okay cooking for a no-carb, lactose-intolerant vegan?"

"I'm sure I can come up with something."

Ally grinned.

They teased each other all the way back to Wyndale and Ally liked him more and more. He just needed levering out of his shell. She told the driver to take Caspar back first. Partly to see where he lived and partly because she wanted to pay for the cab.

Caspar directed the driver to an old house on the main road a little farther up the hill from Finn's home. It looked like a tired lodge to something that was probably once grand, but if the house beyond existed, she couldn't see it. Caspar climbed out with his two bags and took out his wallet.

"We'll go halves."

"No way. Not a penny. You were going to take the bus. I *had* to use a cab. I'll pay. By the way, I want pudding tonight. Something with chocolate. I'll be here at seven. Don't let me down."

"I thought you were lactose intolerant."

"You mean I can't eat chocolate? Damn." Ally pulled the door closed before Caspar could insist on giving her money.

# **Chapter Six**

"You're never going to believe this," Emma said into her phone.

"Why bother telling me then?" Geoff asked.

Emma giggled. Ally might have told her not to tell anyone where she'd gone, but that wouldn't include their circle of friends, nor Emma's boyfriend.

"That woman who survived falling under the train, the one who's on the front page of the *Metro*...it's Ally."

"Wow. Is she okay?"

"She's fine." Emma hoped like hell that was true because she hadn't actually thought to ask, but if Ally hadn't been, she'd have said, surely?

"You ought to get her to come round," Geoff said. "Should I go and get her, bring her to your place? Buy takeout?"

Emma chewed the inside of her cheek. Sometimes Geoff worried her. Normal men weren't so thoughtful.

Had Emma called to see if Ally wanted to go to the pub?

Had Ally found another job?

Had Emma invited Ally to their party?

Still, that was at an end now.

"She's gone to stay at her brother's place in Wyndale, in Derbyshire. Ugh, the countryside. How crazy is that? All those horrible smells and scruffy clothes and animal poop all over the place."

"Nothing wrong with the countryside. Be a change to get away from London traffic, the lack of manners, the cost of everything. Don't blame her. I wouldn't mind relocating."

Panic fluttered in Emma's belly. "For a weekend maybe, but you know I couldn't survive without my grande mocha with hazelnut sauce on the top and bottom, heavy on the whip with five pumps of gingerbread syrup." She laughed, but she wasn't joking.

"So she's staying with her brother?" Geoff asked.

"No, Finn's in the States."

"Why don't you suggest spending part of Kerry's hen party in Derbyshire? Ally probably needs cheering up."

"You sweetie," Emma said, thinking the opposite. "Speak soon."

She ended the call before she screamed. Emma didn't want to be jealous, but why did Geoff keep asking about Ally and yet never about their other friends? Did his interest in her explain the large number of nights he said he was busy? Yes, he drove for a living, but why did Geoff always have to do the stopovers? And how about that restaurant receipt in his pocket for the night he said he'd gone to see his mum? Meals and drinks for two. His mother didn't live in Greenwich.

Emma couldn't help but let jealousy eat away at her. Ally didn't even make an effort to look nice. She just pinned her blonde hair up and it looked stylish. Emma couldn't stand the idea of Geoff dumping her for Ally, but who could resist her? She was always taking him off into a corner and talking to him, laughing at his jokes, playing those stupid drinking games, watching football with him and knowing the names of the players. Perfect fucking cow. She'd wished Ally would just disappear.

Oh, she almost had.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark looked up when his boss, Frank, dropped the *Metro* newspaper on top of his keyboard. A quick glance at the front page photo told him nothing.

"Well?" Frank asked. "Is she okay?"

Mark looked harder at the picture. *Fucking hell*. Thank Christ he was fast on the uptake. "Fine."

"Fine?" Frank bellowed. "She was run over by a train."

"Shaken but fine," Mark said.

"You seem very calm about it."

Mark swallowed hard. "Obviously, I'm upset. Don't think it's quite sunk in what might have happened."

"Give me her address. I'll send flowers."

Mark wondered if Frank fancied Ally. She'd woven her magic at a company function a few months ago and wrapped Frank around her little finger. Frank had looked at Mark differently once he'd started going out with Ally and hinted Mark was destined for big things now that he'd found a good woman. It hadn't gone unnoticed by his boss that Mark had been through most of the female employees. So when Ally dumped him after she'd found him in bed with Belinda, the firm's new paralegal who had irresistibly humungous breasts, Mark had kept quiet. When Frank had asked him and Ally to his dinner party, Mark said yes and Ally told him to take a flying leap.

"I'll give the address to your secretary," Mark said.

The last thing he wanted was for his boss to send Ally flowers. If she called to say thank-you, Frank would discover the truth.

"Give it to me now," Frank said.

Mark's phone rang. *Thank you, God.* He snatched up the receiver and mouthed "Later" at his boss. "Good morning, Mr. Bishop. I was just about to call you."

"By my right name?" Geoff asked. "Boss on your shoulder."

Mark watched Frank walk away. "Not quite."

"Have you heard about Ally?"

If only this phone call had come a few minutes earlier. "Yeah."

"You could be in again, mate. Emma told me she's gone to stay at her brother's place."

Later that afternoon, Mark was able to drop the Derbyshire address on Frank's desk. Frank took the opportunity to reinforce his opinion about how lucky Mark was to have met someone like Ally. A pretty woman, easy to talk to, bright and funny, and Mark wondered why he'd been tempted to stray. Then he remembered Belinda's breasts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack wasn't sure who worried him more—the police, the blank-faced loss adjusters from the insurance company, his unregistered business partners or his bloody wife. The one link between them was Ally. Depending on her, Jack would either lose his money, his liberty, his life or his nuts. Maybe all of them.

The police had interviewed him, asking difficult questions. Fire investigators spent a long time huddled in the ruins of his business and emerged with the heater he'd rigged to overheat. The loss adjusters wanted records that had gone up in smoke, but Jack was expected to provide duplicate bank statements and contact suppliers and customers to ask for copies of invoices in an attempt to recreate the situation prior to the fire. Some of that was impossible since a few of the companies didn't exist.

The sooner the insurance paid out, the better. Then those-who-shall-not-be-named would bugger off. Except it had occurred to him that once he had his hands on the money, he could run as far and as fast as he could. Jack was working harder than he did when he had a business to run, and now his wife thought he was hiding something. Well, give the bitch a bone.

One by one, Jack Paxton deleted seven damning emails from his inbox and wished like hell he was wiping them from the face of the earth. He intended to clean his hard drive too, though he had to be careful not to be too obvious. Yet what was the point messing around with *his* machine when the damn things might still be sitting in Ally's sent box?

Any one of the seven messages could destroy him. If she'd sent them from her business account, he'd have been fine, but no, the stupid cunt had used her personal account. Jack had spent hours trying to get into her emails and failed. Apparently he was even muttering Ally's name in his sleep. His wife was thrilled about that. Without Ally's password, he was screwed.

\* \* \* \* \*

After those failed attempts, only four ideas remained on the list of ways to kill Ally Everton. She'd gone to her brother's place in Derbyshire. Why? Had she run or just decided on a change of scene? Had she registered the deliberate push or did she think it was an accident? A visit to see her would settle the issue. There could only be one outcome and it wouldn't be good for Ally.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar's smile stayed on his face until he emptied his shopping bag onto the kitchen table. He'd only bought protein, no fruit or vegetables, figuring he could stave off scurvy for a little longer with an occasional glass of wine. Only how the hell was he going to produce a chocolate dessert? Buy a Mars bar and melt it over ice cream? But then he didn't have ice cream either. He looked around the shabby kitchen and sighed. He'd be lucky if he could find two plates that weren't cracked.

Ten minutes on the internet confirmed Caspar was in trouble. Not much he could do with a chicken breast, a lamb hotpot, a shepherd's pie and a chunk of cheese with apricots, not if he wanted them both to eat the same thing. His hand strayed to his pocket and he felt his wallet. They wouldn't serve him in any of the village shops. He might have persuaded Rose at The Rumblin' Tum to let him have something she'd otherwise have to throw away, but Caspar was reluctant to ask. If he went back to Buxton, that meant using some of the two hundred pounds.

Caspar took out the money and put it on the top of the dresser behind the scalloped edge where it couldn't be seen. He tucked Juno Wallace's card in with it.

He walked up to Wyndale Hall, his body tensing with every step. To his intense relief there was no sign of his father's car, but he still went to the back entrance. Martha was singing along to the radio while she rolled out pastry. Caspar crept up behind her and was about to help himself to a slice of apple when she rapped his knuckles with the rolling pin.

"Ouch." Caspar rubbed his floury fingers.

Martha turned and looked at him over the top of her glasses. "I might not be as quick on my feet but I still have eyes in the back of my head."

Caspar leaned over and kissed her head. "And lovely eyes they are too."

"What do you want?" she asked in soft voice.

"Advice."

Martha raised her eyebrows. "That's easy. Get your hair cut properly, shave more often, don't—"

"Not that sort of advice. I have someone coming for a meal tonight and I have to make dinner out of not very much."

Caspar didn't miss the quiet pleasure in Martha's eyes. Was she pleased he'd asked her for help or because he'd gotten a date? Maybe both.

"What's not very much?" she asked.

She rolled her eyes after he'd told her. "Right. Well, I'm preparing vegetable soup for your parents. You can make some alongside me." She put a handful of carrots in front of him. "Start by peeling these."

"I need a chocolate dessert," Caspar blurted.

"You can make a mousse. When you've done the carrots, go and collect the eggs from the chickens. Strange though, I've noticed they don't seem to be laying quite as many as they used to."

Caspar winced. "I wondered if you'd spot that."

Martha put her hand on his and stared straight at him. "Caspar, you should ask—" "No," he said quickly.

It would be easy to blurt it all out to Martha. She'd always made him feel welcome when he came back from school in the holidays. She washed and ironed his clothes, packed up cakes and biscuits to send back with him and wrote weekly, which was more than his parents had done. His father had told his mother too much contact would make him more homesick. Once he'd grown accustomed to boarding school, Caspar was happier there than at home. His mother always made a fuss of him when he came back but she never stood up to his father, and in any case, her heart was filled with love for Jemima. Even now.

"So who's this special person you're cooking for?" Martha asked.

"Her name's Ally. She's just moved into the village."

"The local grapevine not strangled her yet?"

Caspar's jaw twitched. "She knows I've been in prison."

"Are you going to tell her why?"

"I expect Mary Binns has already done that."

Martha snorted and handed him more carrots to cut. "The only person who knows why you went to prison is you, Caspar. I suspect you haven't told anyone the whole truth yet."

He chopped fast and hard.

"Be careful you don't cut your fingers." Martha sighed. "Don't you think this has gone on long enough? Who are you punishing? Yourself or your parents?"

Caspar could feel himself drawing in, and like a snail tapped on the horns, he backed into his shell.

"Do you need money?" she asked. "I have a sum saved."

"No, no. I'm fine." Caspar swallowed the lump in his throat. "Have you heard when the BBC invasion's expected? I hope they won't make work for you."

"They're media people. Of course they will. You won't remember last time, you were away at school, but it took months to undo what they did. They paid for it, but I've never met so many self-absorbed people in my life. They even dug up your father's vegetables and replaced them with healthier ones. He never did work out why the crop was so good that year. It was fun though. I hope it brings joy back into your parents' lives." She sighed. "Sorry."

"I should leave, shouldn't I?" Caspar asked.

"They just want you to be happy."

If wine, women and self-hatred led to happiness, he was all set, but Caspar feared happiness had died forever four years ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally set off to walk down to the village to find the mountain rescue base and also to buy a bottle of wine. Everyone she passed greeted her, though it took her awhile to translate "eh-up, duck" as "hello, dear" and that she didn't need to look for falling objects.

Not anymore.

Ally loved that people in Wyndale were so friendly, that they all knew one another, smiled a lot and didn't seem to be in a rush. If she could get a job, maybe she could make this her home. Hopefully she'd never see a snake.

When she found a shop with a license to sell alcohol, Ally pushed open the door. It sold everything else as well, from figs to flowers to fairy lights. The wine was on the bottom shelf of a unit near the counter. Ally bent to look at the limited choice. Red or white? She picked a bottle of red, put it on the counter and laughed when she found herself facing Mike from the pub.

"Hi there," Ally said.

"Hi yourself. Excellent choice. A superior vintage at a knock-down price. That'll be four ninety-nine." He gave her a shy smile. "Coming to the pub tonight?"

"Not tonight. I don't think darts is my game."

"I could teach you," he blurted.

Ally recognized the signs, the inability to look straight at her, the flushed cheeks, and knew she had to stop this in its tracks. Mike was too young and innocent. Ally had her eye on wild and dangerous.

"I've got a date tonight," she said bluntly. "He's cooking and I'm bringing the wine."

Mike's face creased with disappointment before he frowned. "I'll feel a lot better about being rejected if you tell me it's not Caspar Sanderson."

Oops. "Sorry."

He slammed the cash register shut with a scowl on his face and put the single penny on the counter. "He's trouble. You know he's been in prison?"

Ally's jaw tensed. "So I heard."

"He's with a different woman every time I see him," Mike snapped.

Bugger. "Thanks for the warning."

He wrapped the wine in paper before putting it in a bag.

"He doesn't give a shit. You'll get hurt," he said in a more gentle voice.

What's new? "Right." Ally kept her voice bright. "I'm on my way to see Neil at the MRO base. Can you point me in the right direction?"

"Keep going past the church, out of the village and you'll see a converted barn. Most of it is Tom's adventure business and the other bit belongs to the mountain rescue."

"Thanks. 'Bye," Ally said.

Ally wondered if the entire village was against Caspar, and if she wasn't with them, she was against them. The place didn't seem so friendly, all of a sudden. There was a disadvantage in knowing everyone else's business. It irked her they were so down on the guy. Ally could make up her own mind, thank you very much. Not that she was surprised to learn Caspar was a player. He had "the look". Ally found him seductively attractive in his tattered jeans and creased white shirt.

Almost irresistible. Ally wouldn't get hurt if she didn't get involved. She almost laughed at that little gem. She didn't do uninvolved. That was part of her problem.

Ally hadn't switched her phone on again after this morning. She dreaded seeing yet another message from Mark. Or from Jack, for that matter. He'd been really weird after the fire, pestering to meet him. She'd met him when he asked, hoping he'd changed his mind about starting up again, but he hadn't. Instead, he'd asked all sorts of questions about stuff that didn't matter anymore, blathering on about the internet and passwords. When he'd suddenly tried to kiss her, she'd picked up her purse and bolted.

Was nothing ever straightforward?

When Ally found someone she really liked, she fell hard and fast, entangling herself so tightly in a Gordian knot that within weeks she'd feel herself slipping into a suffocating panic. She didn't want to be dependent on anyone, didn't want to move in with him, didn't want to go on shopping trips to Ikea and buy stuff she didn't want or like. Settling down scared her shitless because in the long run, it wouldn't work out, and she'd be left on her own. Better to escape before that happened. Of course, all that worry was usually based on absolutely nothing and the guy dumped her for her freaky behavior before she needed to run.

If she did get caught up with a guy who turned out to be Mr. Wrong, Ally's way out was nothing like that of Alexander the Great who'd merely used his sword on the knotty Gordian mess. Ally couldn't sever her relationships by brute force. Instead, she

spent hours trying to be kind and unravel the affair with words while she lied through her teeth.

It's not you, it's me. It's definitely you.

I need time to find myself. And you keep getting in the way.

You're too good for me. You're crap in bed.

Things are moving too fast. You're crap in bed.

Mark hadn't taken any of that very well. He'd been the first one to actually mention Ikea and Ally had ended it. Then, like an idiot, she'd taken him back until he'd cheated on her. She said never again, but he didn't want to listen. Why were the guys she didn't want the ones who wanted her the most?

The barn wasn't hard to find, an attractive freshly cleaned stone building with a large arched window and a sign above saying *Morton's Adventure Center*. A smaller sign at the far end read *Wyndale Mountain Rescue*. Ally walked in to find Neil crouched on the floor surrounded by coils of single and bicolor rope with a messy tangle of harnesses in one corner. For a scary moment, she imagined the room was full of snakes and then gave herself a mental kick up the bum.

"Found you," she said.

Neil waved her in, a broad smile on his face. "Well done. You'll go far. First step Wyndale Village mountain rescue center. Next, Atlantis."

Ally laughed. "That's a lot of rope you're playing with."

"I'm in my element. I love rope."

"Did you hear about the rope that got stopped three times for speeding?"

Neil looked puzzled.

"They said if he did it again they'd unravel him."

He laughed politely. "Clever."

"Ah, but he had an idea how to disguise himself," Ally pressed on, and Neil gave her a "oh there's more" look. "He tied himself in a knot and separated the strands at either end. The police caught him again and said, 'Aren't you the rope who was speeding yesterday?' The rope said, 'No, I'm a frayed knot.'"

Neil groaned. "The old ones are the best."

"Oh, you've heard it. You should have stopped me."

"I know better than to stop women in full flow. My wife has me well trained."

Ally grinned. "I can't help noticing the ropes are different colors. I know, you're amazed at my powers of observation, but does color matter?"

"It might if you thought you were on a static line and it was a dynamic one."

"Oh God, I'm out of my depth already."

Neil stood and massaged his shoulder. "Dynamic ropes stretch a little depending on how much the climber weighs. The amount they stretch is fixed, so for example, on that one, there's a 6.5% stretch on a static load of 80 kilos."

He looked at her, expecting her not to get it, but Ally only played at being stupid.

"Right, so if you fall off, you want the rope to stretch a bit so you don't break your back when it goes taut. A lead climber would definitely need a dynamic rope."

Neil furrowed his brow. "Are you a climber?"

"Only socially."

He laughed. "You can use dynamic ropes for rappelling and hauling gear but it wears them out faster."

Ally pointed to a red coil. "So is a thicker rope stronger?"

"Not necessarily." He picked up a blue coil. "This is 10.2 mm and rated for ten or eleven falls, but that one," he pointed to another, "is 11 mm and also rated for eleven, while the 9.7 mm is only rated to five."

"You mean you have to discard rope after someone's fallen on it a certain number of times?" Ally hadn't known that.

"Depends on the rope and the fall, but yes. Trusting a rope's performance is paramount. We have to keep a log of usage. It's these sorts of records we need to put into better order. Come into the office and I'll show you."

Ally blinked hard when she went in. Magazines, files and sheets of paper were piled on the desk and on the floor. Books were heaped on shelves along one wall. Every chair was draped with an open map.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Neil said. "Ah, damn it, yes it is. I don't have time to sort it out, and the equipment always takes priority. This has gotten out of hand. We're running a training session on Sunday and somewhere are the details of those coming." He ran his fingers through his short hair. "Still want to help?"

"I'd love to. I can spare a couple of hours now. I'll sort stuff into piles and you can tell me what needs chucking away."

"I knew the moment you threw a dart that you must have some redeeming quality."

Ally laughed. "I can make a mean cup of tea too. Go and play with your ropes and leave me to it."

"Three sugars, please."

"How many does your wife let you have?"

"One."

"One it is," said Ally.

After she'd taken Neil a drink, Ally did the obvious tidying—setting the books straight on the shelves, folding the ordinance survey maps and putting them in a neat pile. Dirty cups and plates went into the sink to soak, climbing magazines were stacked

to teeter by the door—oldest at the bottom—and random pieces of paper with scribbled messages went in a box to be checked in case they were important.

In the other room, Neil's phone rang, and after he answered, he dropped his voice. A few minutes later, as Ally tottered across the room carrying a cardboard box full of multicolored metal clips collected from all over the place, the door opened and Neil came in with Tom, their faces tense.

Tom lifted the box from her arms. "Let me take that."

"Wow, we have all those carabiners?" Neil said. "Great." He looked around. "The room looks better already."

"I like making things tidy." An ingrained habit because if she hadn't as a kid, one of her foster fathers had hit her.

"Maybe I can find a job for you," Tom said.

He had a look on his face a little like Mike's. Ally wasn't used to so many men fancying her. She put it down to being a new girl in a small village.

"If you're still looking," Tom added when she didn't say anything.

"What happened between last night and now?" she asked. *As if I can't guess.* And Ally still wasn't sure whether Tom was actually interested in her or more interested in stepping between her and Caspar.

"A group of women have booked in for a hen party, Sunday and Monday. I've not done one of those before. It's usually corporate bonding sessions where everyone is desperate to come out on top. I need to make the activities more lighthearted so a woman's opinion would be useful."

Now she felt stupid for thinking he fancied her. "Okay."

"Like to meet me for a drink tonight and discuss it? I could take you for a meal."

Or maybe not. "Sorry. I'm busy."

Tom's jaw tightened. "You're new around here. If I could give you a word of advice?"

"Caspar has the plague," she said. What the hell had he done that had everyone so riled up?

"You seem really nice," Neil said.

"Seem?" Ally raised her eyebrows.

He blushed. "You *are* really nice, which is why we need to warn you off Sanderson."

She looked from Neil's face to Tom's and forced herself to smile. "I'll consider myself warned. So, what's Caspar done to you?"

Neil pressed his lips together and made an *mmph* sound. "To me? Nothing."

"He pisses me off," said Tom.

"Is that a crime?" She didn't try to hide her annoyance.

"I'll go back to my ropes," Neil blurted, and left her with Tom.

"I was hoping I'd get to you before Caspar," Tom said. "I should have remembered how fast he works. He finds it easy to...entice women. But they never stay with him long. Not longer than a night, at any rate." He looked straight at her. "He's a user, Ally, and you're sweet. I don't want to see you get hurt like the others."

Ally's heart thumped hard. "Thank you for your concern."

Tom sighed. "Sure you won't change your mind about tonight?"

"No, but thanks."

Ally breathed out when he shut the door behind him. So Caspar was trouble—well, she knew that already. She wasn't going to be lured into Caspar's bed. Ally didn't sleep with a guy on the night of the first date. She wouldn't break that rule no matter how tempted.

Oh God, don't let him tempt me.

Sorting out the office wasn't difficult work, and it was rewarding to find a room underneath all the mess. Nothing like the work she'd done at Paxton's because Jack had never let things get untidy. Ally had been a general dogsbody, issuing invoices, paying bills and salaries, checking orders for customers, completing export paperwork. Most of it learned on the job.

Micromanager Jack had been okay to work for, if a touch controlling, but in the last couple of months, he'd started to snap and disappear for long periods. Ally had to field calls from his wife and had begun to wonder if he was having an affair, and if Bella thought the same. He was an idiot if so. Bella was gorgeous. They had three young kids at private school, a huge house in Richmond on Thames and a home in Spain.

The business didn't seem to have any problems. They had a steady supply of circuit boards, mobile phones and computer spares from which to extract the valuable metals. Jack bought scrap gold and silver too. They were smelted on-site and sold on. They tended to deal with the same suppliers and same customers except for a few invoices Ally hadn't recognized and she'd emailed Jack to check that they were okay. Come to think of it, he'd never answered her emails. Well, it didn't matter now.

When Jack's behavior became outright erratic, Ally had wondered if she'd been wrong and the business *was* in trouble. He stopped her from opening the mail, and after the insurance came due for renewal two months ago, Jack had increased the cover. Ally clearly remembered him saying he wanted to be sure he could start up again if anything happened. Yet following the fire, he'd told the staff he couldn't face starting up again straightaway and that to be fair to them he'd have to let them go. They got a one-size-fits-all reference and were paid up to the end of the month.

Ally couldn't help wondering if the fire had really been an accident.

### **Chapter Seven**

Caspar didn't think he'd ever worked so hard in his life. Once he had the meal prepared and waiting in his fridge to be reheated later, he started to clean. He'd never cared about what the house looked like before, but he did now. He washed the sheets and hung them out to dry while he dusted and vacuumed. Not that he was intending—Oh fuck it, yes he was, given half a chance.

The bathroom wasn't bad. Caspar had kept that pretty tidy, but he washed his towel and put out the only other one he had. The sitting room looked terrible. Tatty curtains, a couch and a pile of secondhand paperbacks. Perhaps he'd lure her straight from the kitchen to bed. His bloody cock twitched at the thought.

The kitchen took longest. He finished with the floor and backed out of the room on his knees as he scrubbed. Now he was the one who was filthy. Time for a shower and a shave.

By six forty-five, Caspar had the freezing cold sheets back on the bed and the central heating on. After a series of ominous clanks and rumbles, hot water surged into the pipework of four rooms. No point wasting heat on rooms he wouldn't use.

Caspar stared in the mirror of his wardrobe and sighed. He should have ironed the white linen shirt he was wearing, but otherwise he didn't look bad. He ran his fingers through hair he'd hacked at again with kitchen scissors and felt his chin to make sure he'd shaved thoroughly. He couldn't do much with the shadows under his eyes.

When he heard the knock, Caspar flew downstairs and flung open the door.

Ally held up a bottle. "Wine, woman and song." She opened her mouth and then closed it. "Best without the song in case there are dogs in the vicinity."

The moment she smiled at him, Caspar's cock rose in his pants. He grabbed the bottle from her hand to hold over his groin. "Thanks."

"Wyndale's best. It was a choice of that or me stamping on a few blackberries."

"Come in."

She unfastened her coat, tossed it over the newel post and Caspar heard a strangled whimper escape his mouth despite his best efforts to swallow it. She wore a little black dress, little being the operative word. It clung to every inch of her on the way down to...nowhere decent. Her red high heels sported a sparkling flower over her toes and his cock tried to come out to take a look for itself. Caspar jerked his gaze back to her face. Hardly any makeup but red gloss emblazoned her lips. *Fuck*. He wanted those lips wrapped around his —

"Too much?" Ally asked, smoothing her hands down her thighs.

"You look great, but we're only having beans on toast." Her face fell and he laughed. "I'm joking."

Ally pouted her luscious lips and his cock jerked. "You're not going to disappoint me over dessert?"

"I have chocolate." He gave a little bow.

"Good, I'm starving."

Caspar led her into the kitchen, wondering what he could use to hide his erection after he put the wine down.

"Oh this is great," Ally said. "All this space and it looks lovely."

Caspar turned, holding a strategically placed dishcloth and smiled at the delight on her face. He'd switched off the main light and only left on the one over the oven. After a struggle, he'd unearthed a pair of candlesticks and found a couple of white stumps to force into the sockets. The tableware didn't match nor did the glasses or cutlery, but he'd resurrected linen napkins and twisted rings to hold them. In the semi-dark, it didn't look bad. He wished he had champagne to offer, wished he had a chair to sit on rather than two heaped boxes of books, but Ally's face shone and she was looking at him, not the table.

He hastened to open the wine before he leapt on her. Caspar's hands shook as he twisted the screw cap. *Fuck, I've got it bad.* And there was an elephant in the room with them that he had to give its marching orders before he could relax. Caspar needed to believe she wouldn't walk out after he confessed. She already knew part of it. He handed her a glass, being careful not to touch her, otherwise he suspected he'd have a cock on the verge of explosion.

"May you make it to heaven fifteen minutes before the devil knows you're dead," Ally said, and chinked her glass against his.

"Amen to that," Caspar said, particularly in his case.

Ally took a sip of wine and licked her lips. At the sight of her pink tongue, Caspar took a long blink, his glass hovering at his mouth.

"It's not too bad," she said. "Not that I'm an expert." She put the glass down. "Is there anything I can do to help? Apart from skinning a rabbit. I draw the line there. Mind you, I don't want to eat rabbit either. Oh God, you've done rabbit, haven't you? Me and my big mouth. Well, I'll taste it, but tell me where the bathroom is first in case it hops back up."

She was nervous too, Caspar realized. "No rabbit. Vegetable soup to start. Armadillo to follow."

Tell her, tell her, tell her.

Ally smiled. "No problem at all with armadillo, providing it's free range."

"Naturally. Take a seat. I'll be on the boxes."

Caspar carefully put the bowls of soup on the table and took the rolls from the top oven. He settled on his makeshift seat and only remembered the napkin when he saw Ally take hers from the ring. He'd completely lost his appetite. All he could think about was taking her by the hand and leading her upstairs to his bed, except he wasn't sure they'd make it that far.

"This is fantastic," Ally said after she'd taken a spoonful. "So tasty. You made this herb bread too? You're amazing."

Tell her, tell her, tell her.

"I had a bit of help." Not that, coward. "My parents' housekeeper supervised."

Caspar could barely take his gaze from Ally as she ate, mesmerized by the way she opened her mouth for the spoon, the evident pleasure as she swallowed the soup, her little moan, faint but there. Oh God, what will she sound like in bed?

"Hungry?" she asked.

He looked down at his bowl to find it empty. How had he managed that?

"Starving," Caspar said. Not far off the mark in more ways than one.

His cock was rock-hard now, determined to burst out of his chinos. Caspar hoped it was too dark for her to see the bulge in his pants. He moved the empty bowls from the table and took plates from the top oven. Martha had explained everything to him, written down the timings so he couldn't go wrong. He dropped pasta into boiling water, turned up the heat on the sauce, and while he still faced away from her, took a deep breath and said, "You know I've been to prison."

When she didn't say anything, Caspar turned to look at her.

"So I heard," Ally said. "It's amazing, isn't it, how complete strangers feel obliged to interfere in stuff that has nothing to do with them?"

She seemed unperturbed. Did his record really not bother her?

"I wonder how the lady off the bus would have liked it if I'd told people she pretends her shop-bought cakes are homemade, or that her husband likes to wear a diaper and call her Mummy?"

"She's the vicar's wife."

Ally *tsked*. "She ought to know better then. One problem with a small village, I suppose. I'd been thinking how friendly everyone was, but now I'm imagining seething intrigue lurking below the surface. Hey, do people here get naked on a full moon and dance in the woods? I might be up for that."

He gave a choked laugh. Caspar had expected her to ask what he'd done, but she didn't. Did she know? Flustered, he drained the pasta and stepped back to stir the sauce.

"You don't have any questions?" Caspar put the plates of food on the table and sat down.

Ally had refilled the glasses, and he took a gulp of wine.

She tapped her fingers on the table. "Would you dance naked in the woods?" He rolled his eyes and she sighed. "Did you do what you were sent to prison for?"

"I confessed."

Ally's eyes widened as she stared straight at him. Her jaw fell and her fork froze on the way to her open mouth. "You didn't do it."

Not a question but a statement, and something snapped inside Caspar, a crack splintering the brittle shield he'd erected between himself and the world. She was the first to say that, the first not to assume the fact that he'd confessed meant he'd done it.

"Oh my God. You confessed and you didn't do it? Are you crazy? Why the hell did you do that? Is that what you always say when people ask you if you did it? 'I confessed'?"

Caspar opened his mouth and closed it again. The easiest answer to "Did you do it?" was yes he did. He'd been punished for it. Now it was over. Except it would never be over.

The hardest answer was the truth.

"No, I didn't do what I was sent to prison for," Caspar said, "but you can never tell anyone." Because he deserved to be in prison for what he didn't do.

"Why not?" Ally asked.

"Because there's no point raking it all up. It won't change anything." Not in England anyway.

"It might change people's attitude. Almost everyone I've met has warned me off you."

He gave a short laugh. Good to know the Home Guard remained on active service.

"Don't you care?" Ally asked.

Caspar only cared what she thought. He filled his mouth with linguini so he didn't have to speak.

Ally swallowed another forkful and sighed. "This is delicious. The pasta is perfectly cooked, the armadillo is tender and tastes just like chicken—fancy that. The cabbage delightful—"

"There isn't any cabbage—ah—very funny."

There was a smudge of sauce at the side of her mouth and Caspar couldn't take his eyes off it. He wanted to lick her lips, but her tongue beat him to it.

"So what didn't you do?" Ally asked. "You might as well tell me. I have a gradethree certificate in torture. I got up to the use of thumb screws and caterpillars. You won't last five minutes."

Caspar had never felt such a need to unburden himself. She was easy to talk to, said just the right things, made him laugh. The words piled up in his head ready to flood out. He knew—without understanding why—that Ally would believe him, that she already believed him.

"I had a sister, Jemima, seven years younger than me, adored by everyone, including me, even though she was the favorite child. You couldn't help but love Jem

though she wasn't..." He couldn't bring himself to say she wasn't normal. In many ways she was better than normal. "She trusted too easily." Caspar swallowed hard. "She had learning difficulties. We had to look after her long past the point that she should have looked after herself."

Her sweet face came into Caspar's head and he gulped in distress.

"I went straight into the Foreign Office after university. My second overseas posting was to Albania as an economics advisor. Jem came out to see me when I was in my first post, in Greece, and she wanted to come to Albania. Our parents brought her to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. The day after, while they had a rare evening to themselves, I took Jem to an aquarium then to a bar and I lost her."

Remembering the horror of that moment, the second he realized his sister no longer sat where he'd left her, made Caspar want to throw up everything he'd eaten. He took a deep breath.

"I ran everywhere, trying to find her. The security staff looked. The police came but she'd gone. When I told my parents, my mother collapsed. Jem was a child in a woman's body. She couldn't see danger. She'd have believed any lie. I'd told her to stay put. I made her promise. It was no more than a few minutes, but that was all it took to ruin everyone's life."

He looked across the table into Ally's face. She stared at him without blinking.

"I bribed, threatened, walked the streets and misused my diplomatic status until I eventually discovered who'd taken her. A slimeball called Bekim Hassan. He was known to embassy staff. A trafficker of women, drugs, alcohol, anything that made him money." Caspar bent the napkin ring in his fingers. "I tricked my way into his building, barged into his apartment and found her. When I saw Jem—oh Christ—she was trussed up like a— I lost it. Bekim and I fought. Only one of us survived."

Ally slid her hand across the table and wrapped her fingers around his. "Oh God, Caspar."

"Only you can't do things like that in Albania without consequences. The next day I was dragged out of the police cell and told Bekim's brother had suffocated Jem as she lay in her hospital bed. He'd been shot and killed while attempting to escape. When the police finally let me out on bail, I drowned myself in alcohol, and a woman called Deanna spiked my drink. While I was unconscious, someone injected me with heroin and left more around for the police to find together with a list of girls I'd supposedly supplied with drugs in return for sex. Guess what? They all testified I'd screwed them and fucked up their lives. As if the murder charge wasn't enough."

Caspar couldn't look at Ally. He just wanted to tell it all.

Almost all.

"The murder charged would be dropped and self-defense accepted if I pleaded guilty to supplying. My lawyer advised me that if I didn't plead guilty, I'd get thirty years in jail, which meant fifteen years served if I behaved myself but I'd seen inside an Albanian jail. I wouldn't survive fifteen years. So I confessed. I was sentenced to eight

years and released after four. The judge was lenient because of my diplomatic status and because of the murder of my sister."

"Bloody hell, Caspar." Her hold on him tightened, her fingers digging into his hand.

"I lost everything. My sister, the love and trust of my parents, the respect of everyone who knew me, my job and my future. I was a rising star in the foreign office, destined for big things, and I fell out of the sky."

"But why would they believe you'd take and supply drugs? Surely those you worked with knew what you were like?"

"Deanna Mantel was the ambassador's daughter. She said I'd confessed everything to her, including the murder of Hassan. The embassy went for damage limitation. Better drugs than murder."

"Why would she lie?" Ally asked.

Caspar gave a short laugh. "Because I wouldn't fuck her, because I thought it was more than my job was worth to shag the ambassador's daughter. Maybe that wasn't it at all. Maybe she needed money, drugs or was being blackmailed herself. Sort of destroyed my belief in people." *In women*.

"Surely your parents know the truth?" She squeezed his fingers again.

Caspar's heart clenched. "It wasn't the first time I'd been in trouble. I was expelled from school for smoking pot. I was almost sent down from Cambridge for snorting cocaine. I lived on the wild side in Athens. I don't have a good track record, and anyway, I admitted I'd done it. In the UK, I'd have pleaded not guilty and taken my chances, but not in Albania."

He'd thought they might kill him once he was inside, some relative of Hassan and his brother finding a way to get to him, but being alive was almost a worse punishment.

"Have you ever talked about what happened to you in prison?" Ally whispered.

Caspar smiled. "You know me so well already. It's done and dusted. What's the point?"

He didn't want to think about what his life had been like. He never wanted to relive a second of those four years.

"Why don't you issue a statement to the press or write a book or something to set things right?" Ally asked.

He gave a short laugh. "I did speak to a couple of persistent journalists after I came back to the UK, but they made it look like I was whining about what happened to me when what happened to Jem was a million times worse. And they were right. They also had an ulterior motive. They were looking for dirt on Deanna's father. Mantel's back in the UK and a government minister. He's not going to let that position slip through his fingers. It was made clear to me that if I opened my mouth about his daughter, I'd come off looking worse than I do now. If that's possible."

"Where's Deanna?"

"She died. Fell off a balcony in Tirana. Supposedly an accident, but I didn't believe it. What could I do from prison?"

"Oh fuck."

"That sort of sums it up. So if you want to walk out, feel free. You can take the chocolate pudding. It's in the fridge. I'm not good for women. I'd hate you to end up dead." He gave her a wry smile. He was doing the right thing for once and pushing her away, only it didn't make him feel good.

"Thank you for telling me," Ally said. "I'm sad for you to have all that happen, but I have to tell you, if you were a dying baby seal, I'd be clubbing you over the head right now to put you out of your misery."

She glared at him and Caspar tensed.

"You're wallowing in it, Caspar. You didn't dig all of that hole you're in, but it's not an excuse for staying in it. You continue to live in a place where everyone despises you. Why?"

He tried to wrench his hand from hers, but Ally held on tight.

"You think it's easy?" he snapped.

"No, and I guess that's why you're doing it. You're punishing yourself. You won't allow anyone to get too close in case they make you feel better."

Caspar could feel his jaw twitching. "Got a degree in psychiatry? You've no idea what I went through. I'm not going to run away. Though you seem to think that's the answer." He tugged harder and dragged Ally's hand across the table, but she still clung to him.

"I ran from London because someone tried to kill me," she said.

Caspar froze in shock then made a noise somewhere between a laugh and grunt of disbelief.

Ally stared straight at him. "I didn't fall in front of the train. I was pushed."

He gaped at her. Caspar suspected his mouth was opening and closing like a fish.

"Same way the car that hit my bike didn't clip me by accident but intended to throw me into traffic. And the flowerpot that tumbled from a balcony was meant to hit *me* not the pavement. And the shove on the escalator wasn't from an impatient commuter. And getting locked in the basement was deliberate. Not that the police believed any of it."

Caspar was astounded. "Christ, Ally."

"I've obviously pissed someone off."

"An angry ex?"

"Oh yeah, I drove all my lovers crazy."

Caspar didn't like the word "lovers".

"Or was it the other way around? I found Mark, my ex, with his face buried in the breasts of a naked woman. He had the nerve to look annoyed when I refused to make it a threesome. Dickhead."

"What did the police say?"

"Threesomes aren't against the law."

Caspar glared. "Ally!"

"They said the flowerpot was an accident. Cyclists are always falling into traffic. The shove on the escalator happens all the time. Getting locked in the basement was just one of those things. No one saw me pushed in front of the train, the platform was packed, though my tumble was captured on camera. But I know what I felt. Someone pushed me."

It still sounded farfetched to Caspar. He wasn't a fan of the police, but accidents sounded far more likely than attempted murder. "Why would someone want to kill you?"

She shrugged. "Not for money. Hatred? Because I upset someone, sometime, somewhere? It wouldn't have been deliberate. I go out of my way to make sure I'm liked. Too far sometimes when I interfere in stuff I shouldn't. Maybe it's a guy from my past who I don't remember. I even wondered about my birth father, whoever he is."

"You don't know who?"

Ally shook her head. "My birth mother wouldn't say. She didn't want me but she wouldn't let anyone adopt me. She broke off all personal contact once I was with Finn's parents, as if she wanted to punish me. I don't even know if she's still alive, and to be honest, I don't care. Unless it's her who's trying to kill me." She sighed. "I know it's crazy, but I'm not making it up. I can still feel the shove between my shoulder blades."

Surely she was mistaken. A series of unfortunate coincidences and a vivid imagination rather than attempted murder.

"You're hiding up here?" Caspar asked.

"In a way. No job, no income, no money for rent and someone trying to kill me. A change of scene without telling anyone where I'd gone seemed a good idea. Whereas you've decided to reside in a wasps' nest. If you'd gone anywhere else, maybe no one would have known who you were."

"Anywhere else, I'd have had to pay rent."

Ally laughed. "Snap. I'm not paying rent either."

He smiled. "I feel better."

"So do I."

"It might be my fabulous meal."

Ally smiled. "Or the thought of dessert?"

Or just you sitting there listening to me, not condemning me, talking to me.

#### Barbara Elsborg

Caspar rose to his feet and moved the plates to the sink. He took two pots of chocolate mousse from the fridge and put them on the table.

"You'd better be good in bed," Ally said, and Caspar almost broke his teeth with the spoon.

"What?" he blurted.

"Fabulous food. Gorgeous face. Sensitive, sad and funny with more history than me, which just about makes you the most interesting guy I've ever met. It would be too cruel if you were a disappointment between the sheets."

"Define disappointment," he said, and offered Ally a spoonful of his pudding.

Her eyes closed as she sucked and then licked the spoon. "Leaving your socks on."

Caspar waited. "Is that it?"

Ally shrugged.

"Good thing I'm hung like a cobra."

She grinned.

### **Chapter Eight**

Ally's head whirled. She'd been so nervous waiting for Caspar to tell her why he'd been in prison, and now that he had, she seethed with fury at the way he'd been treated. Ally could imagine what an Albanian jail was like and guessed he'd had a hard time. She ached with the desire to stop his hurting yet wanted to smack him upside the head. Why live in a place where everyone hated him? Why didn't he move? There had to be more to it than self-flagellation.

*Ding.* A light bulb moment. No money. He'd sold that medal because he was desperate. She only had to look around. Mismatched crockery and glasses. Only one chair. The reduced food at the supermarket. *Damn.* Ally didn't dare tell him what she'd done in *Militaria*. She swallowed another spoonful of pudding.

"I'm not hung like a cobra," he said with a groan. "The lie was killing me."

Ally laughed. "Good. I'm scared of snakes."

Caspar looked straight at her. "Will you stay the night?"

"Do you have cold feet?" *Shit, shit.* What happened to her "no sleeping with a guy on the first date" rule?

He laughed. "Not if I keep my socks on."

"I'll find a way to warm them without."

She watched his Adam's apple rise and fall.

"Pudding's all gone," Ally said. "I'd lick the dish but you'd think I had no manners."

Caspar rose to his feet. "One more view of your pink tongue and I'd have been on the floor. You're going to think I'm crazy for asking, but will you come outside with me?"

Ally would have gone anywhere with him. Almost. He held out her coat and fastened the buttons from the bottom up. As he wrapped his scarf around her neck, Caspar brushed her throat with his thumbs and a bolt of pure lust almost took her out at the knees. His own coat on but left unbuttoned, Caspar clasped her hand and pulled her to the back door, flicking off the lights as they went.

"Wow, it's dark and very quiet," Ally whispered. "I'm not used to this. London is all lights and action. Why am I whispering?"

Caspar stood behind her on the decking as they faced the woods at the bottom of the garden. He wrapped an arm around her waist. "Look up."

Ally tilted her head back onto his shoulder and sighed. The sky looked like a sheet of black velvet scattered with diamonds.

"Know anything about the constellations?" Caspar breathed in her ear.

"Not a thing," she lied, anxious he not stop talking. His warm breath caressed her skin and sent ripples of pleasure cascading through her body.

"The trick is to start with one easily recognized signpost and work from there. Look north, see the Big Dipper – Ursa Major?"

"The ladle with the long handle?"

"Ah, so you do know something. Follow the last star at the lip of the bowl down through the sky to Polaris, the North Star." His arm brushed her cheek as he pointed. "Polaris is the last star in the handle of the Little Dipper—Ursa Minor. The Big and Little Dippers swing around Polaris once a day like a slow-motion carousel. Follow the handle to arrive at Arcturus in the Bootes constellation."

"It's like a pentagram."

"Yep. Now imagine a hole in the bowl of Ursa Major. Drop through it into the constellation of Leo. The brightest star there is Regulus."

"Oooh." Ally's knees shook. His fingers caressed her waist through her coat.

"Turn a little. See that line of stars?" Caspar pointed. "Orion's belt. Follow the belt to the left and you get to Sirius. The brightest star in the night sky. Part of the constellation of Canis Major."

"How far away is Sirius?" Ally asked.

"About eight and half light years."

Ally sighed. "So what we see now is the light from eight and half years ago. It might have blown up or disappeared eight and quarter years ago but we can still see it."

"Weird, isn't it?"

"Is that the nearest star to Earth?" she asked.

"No, that would be the sun." Ally elbowed him in the chest and Caspar *oomphed* and laughed. "There are five stars, not counting the sun, closer to us than Sirius. I could name them but I don't want you to fall asleep until I've had my evil way with you."

He slipped his fingers between her coat buttons and Ally sighed as his hand cupped her breast. Her nipple hardened under his caress, and when she groaned, his breathing quickened against her ear. Caspar pulled her back tighter against him, and Ally felt the hardness of his cock through the thickness of her coat. She reached around to pull him against her, rocking into him until he moaned.

"Jesus, Ally," he whispered in her ear. "Did no one ever tell you not to play with fire?"

She turned to face him and all her organs slumped into a puddle at the bottom of her stomach. Lust had fought a swift battle with common sense and annihilated it. Caspar had become the brightest star in her world. No point denying she'd fallen for him. No point trying to play it cool. He'd been hurt and opened up to her, now the need to defend and protect raced through her body like a hungry tiger.

Did he have any idea how sexy he was? 'Course he does, you idiot. But Ally ignored the warning voices—Tom's, Neil's, Mike's, Rose's and her own. You don't sleep with guys on the first night.

Except technically, if she stretched the point, this was the second.

He took hold of the ends of her scarf and twisted them in his fingers. Ally licked her dry lips and Caspar's eyes turned black in the dim light. Little by little he tugged her closer, moving his hands up the scarf until his thumbs stroked her neck and their lips were a breath apart.

"I wanted to kiss you out here under the stars," he whispered. "I wanted this first kiss to be special."

"Maybe we'll kiss and hate it," Ally said. "You might slobber or lunge like a dog or have a rubbery tongue."

Caspar laughed. "No pressure then?"

Ally's heart raced as if she were running. She shouldn't have joked. She was frightened now that the kiss wouldn't work. What if her kiss was crap? She—

"Stop worrying. Stop thinking." Caspar moved even closer. "We can't fail at this. I want you too much."

Their closed lips met and stayed closed, as though by mutual consent they'd take this step by step and savor each sensation. Caspar let go of the scarf and caught her neck in his strong hands, angling her head as he pressed his lips harder against hers. Ally's bones crumbled.

Don't let me fall.

Her blood thickened in her veins as her head swam against the tide, struggling to think when thinking became impossible.

Don't let me faint.

This kiss...

They pushed against each other, chest against chest, grinding their hips together as their sealed lips fused. Ally slid her hands under the open sides of his coat, over his shirt onto his back, his muscles rippling under her touch as his hands moved up and down her spine. Caspar drew back a little so they could catch their breaths, and then painted a lazy line along the seam of her lips with the tip of his tongue. Muscles clenched and released in her core.

This kiss...

Ally copied Caspar and trailed the tip of her tongue from one side of his mouth to the other, but when she felt his lips move apart, she slipped inside. His mouth smiled against hers and as she tentatively explored this new world, he clutched her more tightly and Ally clung to him as if he were the only thing between life and death.

This kiss...

The sudden flick of a moist tongue darting into her mouth made her start, but Caspar kissed liked an angel, like a devil, like no one Ally had ever been kissed by before. Soft and gentle turned firm and passionate. Mouths open, their tongues fought and parried. They kissed until they were gasping into each other's mouth, arms wrapped around each other, bodies rocking together.

Oh God, I could come from just his kiss.

They finally broke apart and gulped air. Caspar stared at her without blinking.

"Damn," Ally panted. "That's it then. We're not compatible. Nice to have met you. Thanks for dinner. See you around."

His mouth twitched. "Maybe it's worth another shot?"

"You think?"

"Oh yeah." Caspar's face widened in a broad smile.

They started slow, finding their way around each other's mouth as tentatively as if they'd stepped onto soft sand and expected to get sucked down at any second.

Slow kisses turned fast. Soft mouths turned hard. They kissed with mouths closed. They kissed with mouths open. Cold air swirled around them while they blazed in each other's arms. Ally threaded her fingers in his hair. Caspar threaded his in hers. He kissed his way down the side of her neck. She licked her way down the column of his throat. Their lips clashed again and they moaned and groaned and sighed.

I could kiss him all night.

I could kiss him for the rest of my life.

Ally's heart was going to explode. His hand slid back inside her coat, over her ribs and down her back, over her butt and he pulled up her dress. Ally trembled as his finger slipped under the lace at her hip and drifted down the damp crease of her groin. His touch, his heavy breathing, his soapy scent drove her wild. Her panties were wet through, and the catch in his breath when he realized was echoed by a hitch in hers. Caspar pulled his mouth back while his finger kept moving. He stared at her, panting into her face as his fingertip circled her swollen clit.

"Oh God," he sighed, and blinked.

His eyes turned soft and heavy as he rubbed and pressed the little nub of nerve-rich tissue at the entrance to her folds, and Ally rocked into him, never taking her gaze from his. Already brought to the brink of eruption by Caspar's kisses, she unraveled under his touch, flooded in heat and moisture as she released a keening cry of pleasure into the night sky.

Then snapped it off when she realized what she was doing.

"Oh fuck," Caspar whispered.

He was trying not to laugh and Ally groaned. "Do you think I sounded like a lesser spotted owl?"

His body shuddered against hers as he laughed. They stood pressed together, his hand still between her legs as her muscles softened and slowed their clenching spasms and finally relaxed. Then he started teasing her again, and Ally's body responded at once, captivated by lust, captured in a master's thrall. Still they stared at each other in

the darkness and neither dared to stop looking in case this wasn't real, in case something pulled them apart.

Caspar's heart pounded all over his body but loudest and hardest in his head. Ally was so responsive. Was it her? Was it him? He had no problem making women come but this was different. Ally was different. He could feel something taking hold inside him, wrapping fingers around his heart. Fear? Panic at the thought that once he had her, he might not be able to let her go?

Something else?

He could stop it now before it went any further. Walk her home and never kiss her again.

Yeah, right.

Then he felt her come for the second time on his hand. The wet heat of her drove his cock into a frenzy of need. If he didn't fuck her, the need for her would always burn in his gut. She wanted him. He could have her. It was the way he operated.

Let her go.

What is my fucking problem?

He brought his hand from between her legs to his mouth, licked his fingers and growled in delight. *Fuck it*.

"Owls and grizzlies in the woods?" Ally whispered.

Caspar felt another feral sound roar up his throat and tried to suck it back down. Fearing he'd fail, he held her tight and buried his face in her hair. This was sex. He'd fucked women before who he really liked and walked away. He could do it again. If he fucked Ally, he'd get her out of his system and they could both get on with their lives.

No, no, no.

That wasn't what he wanted.

Was it?

Her hand crept down between their bodies and his heart went berserk. When she laid her palm over his cock, Caspar tried to gulp air into frozen lungs. If she did more than—*Oh fuck it.* The button of his pants flipped open, she dropped to her knees on the decking and pulled his zipper down. One look up into his face and he trembled. No lipstick left on her lips. It was probably all over his mouth, but who cared?

Caspar issued a threat to his desperate cock. *Not yet or else*. His balls ached. They'd wrestled themselves into a knot the moment she'd walked into the house and taken off her coat. Caspar was amazed he hadn't already gushed like a fountain.

When Ally's fingers pushed down his boxers and his cock sprang out to scent the night air, Caspar fought to lock his knees. She wrapped her fingers around him, breathed on him, and his heart thundered against his ribs. His cock quivered with arousal, the head swollen with blood and furiously leaking pre-cum. Ally licked his scrotum and Caspar clamped his lips together, willing his body to stay calm. He had the

fingers of one hand in her hair, and with the other hand he reached for the base of his cock to add physical persuasion to his mental plea for restraint. He accidentally nudged her jaw and she opened her mouth and enveloped his balls, sucking them into wet heaven.

Oh sweet Jesus Christ. Her tongue pressed and teased with the utmost care, but it was like stirring liquid explosive with a sputtering sparkler. Caspar threatened, screamed, pleaded with his body to wait, hang on just a couple of minutes. Don't let him look like some green schoolboy. She let him out of her mouth and licked up his length, her tongue fluttering over his taut skin. Her warm mouth and the cold night air worked together to weaken his knees. Caspar wanted to watch but didn't dare. His eyes were screwed shut.

When Ally slid her tongue across the little slit at the top of his cock, his hips jerked as if his butt had been hit by a cattle prod. He had both hands on her head now, one trying to pull her back, the other urging her forward. He hoped she could make sense of what he wanted. She used his cock to paint her lips, sucked him against the inside of her cheek, rolled her tongue over the flat of his crest, nibbled her way up and down, pumped, squeezed and teased while Caspar's flimsy control rolled inexorably down the slippery slope to surrender.

One long, hard suck deep into her mouth so that his cock touched her throat and he was gone. Orgasm rushed from his brain and rippled down his spine to ignite his balls in a bath of fire. Cum shot down his cock into her hot, little mouth. Spurt after spurt until he wondered if he could stop and dimly thought he should have asked if she minded.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he gasped over and over.

As the last spasm faded away, he managed to open his eyes. When Caspar looked down at her sweet face looking up at him, his hips bucked again.

"Steady, star boy," Ally whispered.

She licked him clean, tucked him away and zipped him up with such care that Caspar sighed. He pulled her to her feet and slid his arms around her. He wanted to say something sweet, not blurt some clever-dick remark, but words failed him. *Fuck it, say something*.

"I wasn't expecting that," he mumbled. Oh God, that's pathetic.

"I have to go," Ally whispered.

He was so shocked, he froze. What did I do? What didn't I do? What should I do?

She'd almost run back into the house before he moved.

"I don't know your number," Caspar said as he pursued her.

In the kitchen, she picked up her purse and handed him her phone. Caspar gave her his crappy pay-as-you-go mobile. She looked desperate to get away. What should he say?

Stay, don't go. But those words didn't come out of his mouth.

"I'll walk you home," he said.

The tension flooded from her body and she smiled.

He held her hand as they headed down the road. She didn't speak, but he felt reassured by the tight squeeze of her fingers. Caspar searched for something to say. *That was great. When can we do it again? Do you like me as much as I like you?* He couldn't ask her out on a date. Where could he take her that would cost him nothing?

I have two hundred pounds.

And when that was gone, what then? He couldn't sell the medal. Shit, he needed to call Bouard and tell him.

They'd reached her door without him realizing. He still held her hand in his.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," Ally said.

Why wouldn't she look at him? Caspar slid his thumb under her chin and tilted her head up while he tightened his hold on her hand.

"Thank you," he whispered then swallowed hard. "That sounds so meaningless. Oh God, do you want to see me again? Have I blown it? Fuck."

"I'd be devastated if I didn't see you again." She smiled.

The rush of relief made him shake. "Invite me in or come back to my place. I washed the sheets." He really hadn't needed to tell her that.

Ally reached up to run her finger over his lips and then took a deep breath. "I don't sleep with guys on the first date. I don't give blowjobs on the first date either but I couldn't help myself. In the face of such huge temptation, I have no willpower." She quirked an eyebrow and he laughed. "Come for breakfast at The Rumblin' Tum. Rose didn't call to tell me not to come in so I'll be there until ten."

"I'm not sure I can wait that long," Caspar said. "For you or breakfast."

"Yes you can. It's...better like this. We're too desperate."

Did she honestly think he'd be less desperate tomorrow? They stared at each other for a long time before their fingers trickled apart.

"'Night, star boy," she whispered then slipped inside and closed the door.

He pressed his face to the wood. "Sleep tight, star girl."

Caspar walked away wondering how much of his last government check he'd have to blow buying a star to name after her. He'd never forget this night. Caspar had just reached the road when his phone bleeped with a text from Ally. He smiled when he read it.

I can still taste you.

# **Chapter Nine**

Ally woke with a start to the sound of a car engine revving in her ear. She slammed her hand on the alarm. Finn's clock looked like a car but she hadn't realized it would sound like one. She'd slept in fits and starts, dropped off at four thirty and now, an hour later, been rudely awoken. Nightmares about flowerpots, trains and locked basements had prevailed over memories of what she'd gotten up to with Caspar, and in a way, Ally was grateful. Despite the terrible details of what had happened to him, it was how she'd fallen to her knees on his decking that kept sliding into her mind.

What the hell was I thinking?

At least she'd managed not to drag him between the sheets on the first night, but it had been close. Very close. She rolled out of bed and padded to the shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

At six, Ally walked into the café and Rose dramatically sagged with relief. No customers yet, but the sweet smell of something baking filled the air.

"Morning, Ally. You are such an angel. I worried you'd change your mind."

Ally smiled. "Morning. Just point me at what needs doing."

Rose poured her a coffee. "Chop, slice and dice. Start with the tomatoes and cucumbers, please."

"When does it get busy?" Ally looked around at the deserted café.

"After six thirty. People commute to Derby and Manchester as well as Buxton."

Ally raised her eyebrows as she chopped. "That's quite a drive."

"They have to go where the jobs are. There's nothing around here."

Bang went Ally's hope of finding something local.

"No tears then?" Rose asked, shooting Ally a glance.

"Well, if I can't land a job around here, I can always move."

Rose laughed. "I'm not talking about work."

Ally frowned. "Why should I be crying?"

"Our resident heartbreaker?"

The frown turned to a smile. "Oh Caspar. Why would he upset me?"

"I heard through the grapevine he had his eye on you. He's working his way through every pretty woman in the district and some not so pretty ones. Caspar's king of the one-night stands. Their bed, never his, and he leaves before they wake. No phone numbers exchanged, no promises made and he never sleeps with them again." She smashed chunks of egg more vigorously with the fork.

Ally's hand faltered as she sliced a cucumber. "Have you...?"

"Me? No. I'd never cheat, but a friend of mine is one of his victims."

"Hardly a victim." Ally bristled.

"In many ways I like him, but if I were single and available, I wouldn't touch him with a barge pole."

"If his reputation is what you say, then women know what they're getting into."

Oh God, am I like all the rest? She'd been warned and she still fancied him. But Caspar had invited her into his bed. He'd blurted that he'd washed the sheets. They'd exchanged phone numbers. He wanted to see her again. She wasn't like the others. Or was she deluding herself?

"Have you slept with him?" Rose asked.

"No."

Rose nodded. "That's why you still like him."

And maybe why he's still interested in me?

Conversation paused while they served customers, but Ally couldn't let this go. Caspar didn't deserve this level of disapproval. "Caspar told me what happened in Albania."

Rose raised her eyebrows. "He did? And what spin did he put on it?"

"He told me the truth." *But you can never tell anyone.* Ally remembered Caspar's words but didn't understand why she couldn't explain that he hadn't done what he'd been sent to prison for.

"He ruined a lot of lives," Rose said.

Including his own. Ally wanted to help him but didn't know how.

"I bet he didn't tell you what he was doing when his sister disappeared," Rose said.

Ally thought back. No, he hadn't. Caspar said they were in a bar and he'd left her alone for a couple of minutes. A trickle of unease skittered down her spine like a sharp fingernail.

"Be careful, Ally. His parents mean a lot to people around here and what he did destroyed them."

Ally kept her mouth shut in case she was tempted to blurt something she shouldn't. Rose changed the subject and chattered away about the arrival of the BBC to film Jane Eyre. Ally's eyes opened wide at the news that Sean MacAlister had been cast as Mr. Rochester. The blond American movie star would have to dye his hair and stop smiling because Rochester was far more like Caspar—handsome and dark, with a tendency to brood.

"Who's got the part of Jane?" Ally asked.

"Some lesser-known actress. Lina Moon. Lucky thing, getting to snog Sean MacAlister."

"Not sure there's a lot of snogging in Jane Eyre."

"I wonder if Sean will come in here for a bacon sandwich." Rose sighed.

"You might pick up some extra business."

"I think they bring their own catering team."

"Doesn't mean to say they won't call here too."

"That's true." Rose nodded. "Saturday tomorrow and my husband's back tonight so I won't need you, but if we get busy next week, can I call you?"

"That's fine."

The morning was as manic as the day before, but when the noise level dropped significantly after the door opened, Ally knew why before she looked up. Caspar. A knot of lust unraveled in her chest. Her desire for him filled her to bursting point. Ally saw the worry on his face and smiled first. His answering smile made her stomach quiver. But did he only want her because she hadn't yet slept with him?

She nodded toward a table by the window and untied her apron as she turned to Rose. "Okay, that's me finished. I'm going to have a bacon sandwich with Caspar. You can take it out of my wages."

Rose pressed twenty-five pounds into her hand. "Have breakfast on me." She caught Ally's fingers. "Be careful."

Ally put the plates on the table, went back for two mugs of coffee and sat opposite Caspar. "Good morning."

He pressed his knee against hers under the table. "Morning. How come you look so chipper?"

"It is ten o'clock."

"Ah, you haven't been pining for me all night like I did for you?"

Ally smiled as she chewed her sandwich. "Did you sleep in your socks?"

Caspar laughed. "No, in case you changed your mind."

"I slept in mine. I didn't realize it was so cold up here."

"I did volunteer to be your hot water bottle."

"You have to stop volunteering for things and find a job that earns you money. Talking of which, I've got a plan," Ally said.

"Oh yeah?" He didn't look convinced.

She clasped her hands and leaned across the table. "We're going to work on this together, using my laptop. We'll buy the newspapers and look for positions for both of us. We need to make lists for each other of the sort of things we'd like and where we'd work, minimum salary, stuff like that. We can make appointments to see recruitment agencies in the nearest towns and go together. I even wondered about advertising our skills. Multi-talented couple will do anything for cash. What do you think?"

What did he think? Caspar thought she was beautiful, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and completely deluded.

"Sounds great," he said.

"Want to work on the list of what we're looking for here or back at my place?"

Caspar sensed every ear in the café swiveling like radar antennas. "Your place."

Ally finished her coffee and took the plates and mugs back to the counter. When they stepped outside, Caspar reached for her hand and Ally smiled at him.

"Is that in case I trip over a leaf?" she asked.

"Something like that."

Caspar didn't do holding hands, but after he'd realized how good it felt last night, he was converted. Though maybe it was just being with Ally that made him feel...happy. After they'd called in at the newsagents, they trekked back up the hill. Caspar, having paid for the papers, now had less than five pounds in his wallet but tried not to think about it. A line of BBC vehicles passed them going toward the hall.

"Rose told me Sean McAlister is going to be Mr. Rochester," Ally said. "When word gets out, Wyndale will be packed with screaming women."

"Are you are a screaming woman?"

Ally squeezed his fingers. "I thought I did a fair impression of a lesser spotted owl." He chuckled.

"Do you think they'll bring everyone they need with them?" Ally asked. "It might be worth offering our services. You know the area, which could be useful."

"Maybe."

Caspar had his pride but he needed to eat. If he thought anyone would take him up on it, he'd have knocked on every door in the village and offered to do odd jobs.

Ally unlocked the door of her brother's place and Caspar followed her in, bereft he no longer had her hand warming his. Stone Cottage was a complete contrast to the Gatehouse. Warm, stylish, clean. He caught his breath when he walked into the kitchen, a wide open space with room for a white-wood table and six chairs plus a comfortable-looking red couch loaded with cushions. A sloping glass roof made the room light and airy, and a wall of sliding glass doors revealed a small patio that faced the woods beyond.

"Very nice," Caspar said, trying not to sound bitter.

He could never afford a place like this, never afford to give Ally this lifestyle. Even when he inherited Wyndale Hall—and there was no certainty he would, considering the way his father currently felt about him—the place was a mausoleum of antiquity. Apart from the fifty-inch flat screen TV. Caspar didn't even have a TV. He couldn't afford the license and wasn't about to risk getting caught without one.

"I hardly dare touch anything," Ally said. "Every time I walk in here, I think I'm dreaming." She ran her fingers over the polished granite countertop. "My bedsit had a bathroom so tiny you had to sit on the loo to clean your teeth. You could have fitted the whole thing into this kitchen."

"Does your brother know you're here?"

Ally winced. "No. I don't think he'll mind as long as I don't throw a wild party and wreck the joint."

"Have you told him about what happened to you in London?"

"No," she said firmly. "I don't want him to worry. There's nothing he can do from the States. Want to explore the cupboards and make us a coffee while I get my laptop?"

Was she changing the subject? Wouldn't Finn be the first person she'd tell? Caspar couldn't help but wonder if the story about the train and the rest were lies, something she'd made up to make him feel less sorry for himself. He suspected she'd been with a guy who hit her. Caspar could wait 'til she felt able to talk about it. He understood that sort of reticence.

By the time he'd made them a drink, Caspar felt even more inadequate. Cupboards full of stylish crockery, top-of-the-range brushed stainless steel electrical appliances, shining cutlery—he couldn't see how he could ever live like this. He'd never get a decent job, and if he did, he'd be passed over for promotion. Where was the gun for him to shoot himself?

Ally put her laptop, a pink folder and a mini printer on the table next to the newspapers.

"Nice computer," Caspar said. His father had bought him a basic model. He'd probably gone into the store and asked for the cheapest, ugliest and slowest they had.

"It used to be Finn's. Oh Christ, a hundred and thirty-seven items of spam. At least half of them offering to enlarge my penis. Twenty in my inbox. *Ugh*—most of them from my ex-boss. He can wait. Sit closer."

Caspar was happy for an excuse to nudge his chair beside hers. He really wanted to whisk her upstairs to bed but he was trying to behave himself. Not easy when she smelled so sweet and the merest brush against him made his heart flutter and his cock preen. But he wasn't going to touch— *Oh fuck*.

She turned and kissed him. A gentle press of her warm lips against his, and Caspar forgot all his good intentions. On the point of lifting her onto the table and sliding his hand into her pants, Ally pulled away.

"Just wanted to check I hadn't dreamt last night," she said.

"And you could tell from that quick peck?" He twisted a lock of her hair in his fingers. "I'm not sure. I think you need to convince me."

He inhaled when Ally slid her palm over the bulge in his pants.

"Liar," she whispered.

Caspar's pulse rocketed.

"Focus. We need to find jobs." Ally took a sheet of paper from the folder. "My resume."

Caspar wrestled his brain into submission but didn't bother trying to subdue his cock. He took the paper from her. "Want to print off mine? I can get it from my emails."

Ally pushed the laptop toward him. "Help yourself."

Caspar logged into his account. Three items of spam, none of which offered to enlarge his cock and nothing in his inbox. He downloaded the CV that had so far got him precisely nowhere and read Ally's with increasing incredulity as his printed.

"The first one I did was five pages long," she said. "I thought I was supposed to put all my jobs on there, even the stint as a rat catcher. Finn suggested one page was plenty."

He raised his eyebrows. "Rat catcher?"

"One day. Well, no, that's lying. Three hours. I didn't catch a rat. It was the way I constantly worried about stepping on one that made the guy suspect it wasn't going to work."

Caspar lifted his head. "And you used to babysit a chimpanzee?"

"Very weird. The owner, not the chimp. The chimp was cute."

Caspar put the page down. He wondered what she'd left off if she put those things in.

"Why didn't you go to university?" he asked. "You got good A-Levels."

"Mum and Dad died and I went off the rails." She blew out a breath. "I'd been so happy. They made my life something I could never have imagined, though I spent too much of it worried it would get taken away because that's what always happened. And I was proved right when they were killed." Her face clouded and then she smiled again. "Oh wow, you're clever. You can speak all those languages?" She looked up at him. "I don't think you ought to say you were in prison. You could just say you were — finding yourself in a foreign country."

Rather than avoiding getting fucked in the ass by guys twice his size.

"I figured I might as well get rejected outright as partway down the line when I'd started to hope. Anyway, I have to include it. It's the law."

"That's not fair," Ally blurted.

"Yeah, it is. Why should I be given a second chance above others who never made a mistake?"

"The only mistake you made was to take your eyes off your sister. Anyone could have done that. What happened after wasn't your fault."

But it was. If he hadn't left Jem, if he hadn't gone after Bekim Hassan, if... No point in ifs.

"Maybe you should start your own business, and then it wouldn't matter about Albania."

Caspar gave a little laugh. "One problem. No bank would lend me money." Another reason to sell the medal. He wished someone would wave a magic wand and sort out his life.

Ally sighed. "Well what sort of job do you want? Anything you won't do?"

"No. But if I can't live here rent free and have to relocate, it has to pay enough to cover the cost of accommodation."

Caspar scanned the newspapers as Ally checked out recruitment agencies. She was wasting her time as far as he was concerned. Sadly, so was he. The positions advertised in the papers weren't suitable for Ally. They were for him but he'd never get them.

Instead of this being a fun thing to do together, they grew steadily more dejected. Caspar could think of something he'd much rather be doing. His cock agreed with him, but then it had been semi-hard all morning.

"Listen. Found a great job for you," she said. "Wanted – Person who can build up and maintain close relationships and has the ability to balance authority with a large amount of compassion and understanding."

Caspar gave her a blank look. "No one talks to me. No one listens to me and to be honest, I don't give a fuck. What's the job?"

"Prison officer."

He laughed.

"What about this for me?" Ally asked. "A sales position requiring a motivated self-starter, high commission salary."

"What that means is they don't give you any leads, you get no help apart from a telephone directory and you'll be expected to use your own phone. And look at the web address. It's selling glitzy bird tables. You'd be lucky if you broke even."

"Cynic."

"Realist. I've been looking longer than you. I can read between the lines. Able to handle a heavy workload means if you moan, you'll get the sack. Some overtime required means you'll be expected to work most nights and particularly those evenings you have something planned. For competitive environment read—watch your back because everyone who works here hates everyone else."

"A realistic cynic. Well, we're both going to apply for this one. It's the best advert I've read for ages. Would you like to work for an inconsiderate, demanding bastard? For a ridiculously large salary I want someone to work twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Three hundred and sixty-six next year. You'll speak at least three European languages, and it would be an advantage if you were able to do at least some of the following — dive, cook, ski, sail, ride, climb, fly and bench press one hundred kilos. If you don't like being shouted at, don't apply." Ally lifted her eyebrows. "What do you think?"

"You're making it up."

"I'm not. Look."

Caspar read the ad and shook his head. "It's a joke."

"I don't think so. We must be able to do all that between the pair of us. I speak English so that's one language."

Caspar chuckled. "What about the rest of the list."

Ally scanned it. "I can cook, ride a bike, fly a kite and dive off the side of a pool—given the right encouragement."

"A push?"

Ally nodded.

"I think he means scuba dive and fly a plane."

"Oh. How do you know it's a man? Could be a demanding supermodel."

"Okay, we'll apply."

Caspar doubted anything would come from any of their applications. Ally had done lots of things but was qualified to do very little. Caspar had plenty of qualifications but one damning gap in his employment put him bottom of any list. Plus he could never actually admit to part of his former job.

"Right. I've had enough." Ally got up. "Would you check this final application while I make us a sandwich?"

Caspar gaped at her. "Lunchtime already?"

"See how time flies when you're having fun?"

The perpetual anxiety eating at Caspar's stomach had lessened. His problems hadn't gone but they'd reduced in importance. Breathing seemed easier. He'd even managed to fill out applications for two jobs in which he was vaguely interested. One working for a publisher and the other for a translation service. Not that he'd get them. Ally had wanted to apply for almost everything she saw. Caspar checked the latest.

He almost choked when he read what she'd written.

Sex: Whenever possible, wherever possible

Education: Yes

Previous Employment: Slave to sadist

Salary: £120,000 a year

Reason for leaving: Tired of being whipped

Special skills: Fast healing

"Want me to press send?" he called.

"Go on. Why not? It might give them a laugh. There can't be many of those if you work for a company selling plastic grass."

She brought cheese sandwiches and coffee to the table.

"I promised to go back to the MRO this afternoon," she said. "They're having a training session tomorrow."

Caspar clenched his jaw. He didn't want to feel envious of the way Ally had so quickly integrated into village life but he did. "I didn't know."

Ally raised her eyebrows.

"I volunteered ten months ago and have never been called for training." *Oh God, I'm whining.* 

"Neil told me the paperwork was in a mess. Maybe you got missed off the list."

"Or they don't want me around. They have a meeting once a week, I've never been asked to that either."

"Do you climb?"

Caspar nodded. "Do you?"

"No. Finn took me once when he went with his mates and I didn't like it."

"Would you try with me?"

"Sure." She didn't look thrilled.

*Take me outside and shoot me now.* Why the hell had she nodded? Well, she knew why. Because she was a lustful idiot.

"Want to take your life into your hands and let me cook tonight?" she asked.

"So long as it's not rabbit."

Ally laughed.

Caspar rose to his feet. "What time do you want me?"

*Now.* "Seven? No need to bring anything. I've discovered where Finn hid his booze. He won't miss a bottle or three."

"Okay."

"Actually, there is one thing you could bring."

Caspar blinked. "What?"

She gulped. "Your toothbrush?"

He swept her into his arms and kissed her. Ally's head fogged. Caspar dropped his mouth to her ear. "Have you any idea what you're doing to me?"

Yes, because he was doing it to her.

"If it wasn't for the fact that the torment of unrequited lust will make tonight so much sweeter, I'd fuck you right now on this table."

All her organs shivered. Ally licked his neck. "I was thinking of making you wait a little longer but I changed my mind."

Caspar pressed his erection against her thigh. "Why?"

"You might go off me."

"Improbable. Impossible. Intolerable."

She opened her eyes wide. "Such big words."

Caspar dropped whisper-soft kisses around the line of her jaw. "I don't have anything to prove in that department, do I?"

"No, your head is quite big enough."

He growled and let her go. "Tonight."

"Tonight," Ally repeated.

When Caspar had gone, she sang as she cleaned up. She wasn't like the others. Caspar wasn't treating her like them. She knew things about him they didn't and she was going to find him a job if it killed her.

Hopefully no one would actually kill her.

She'd had a few thoughts as she read his applications. Cambridge graduate, Foreign Office, smart guy equals James Bond? Her imagination running away with her?

Ally checked her emails.

Jack's had become increasingly desperate.

Call me, I need to talk to you.

Ally, this is business related. I need to speak to you.

How difficult can it be to pick up the phone and call me?

I've left you several messages and texts. I can't help but think you're deliberately avoiding me.

You think?

Ally, please. Have I done something to upset you? Let me put it right. Meet me for a drink. You name the time and place.

My God, Ally, it was you who fell under that train. Your picture's in the paper. Are you okay? Please call me.

I took flowers to your bedsit but someone else is living there. Where are you?

It didn't escape Ally's notice that Jack never actually said what he wanted. If it was business related, why not ask her by email? But rather than have him continue to flood her inbox and phone with messages, Ally called him as she walked into the village.

"Hi, it's me."

"Ally. Christ, I was beginning to think you'd been abducted by aliens."

"They brought me back because I talked too much."

"What? Oh right, well I need to see you."

"I gathered that. What's wrong?"

Jack cleared his throat. "I need to speak to you face-to-face."

"What about?"

"It's personal. About—what happened at the restaurant."

The kiss. Ally cringed. "I've forgotten about that. It's fine. No problem."

"I haven't forgotten," Jack whispered.

Oh fuck it. "You're married. You have lovely kids. A beautiful wife."

"I'm not happy. While I was your boss I couldn't say anything, but— Please meet me somewhere, Ally. I can get a train up there. Couple of hours and I can be with you."

## Barbara Elsborg

Damn, damn, damn. He knew where she was.

"I don't think so, Jack." Ally ended the call and switched off her phone.

## **Chapter Ten**

Jack had just made a stupid mistake. He put his mobile down on the kitchen table and stared at it. Two mistakes. The first was pressing the idea he was interested in Ally, which clearly freaked her out. The second was more significant. She'd guess he knew where she was. Actually, he didn't know her exact location—yet.

It was bloody tricky trying to cover his tracks. He'd started to erase some of the messages on his mobile and then realized selective deletion would look bad if the phone was checked. Since his mobile recorded incoming and outgoing calls, even if he deleted *his* records the phone company didn't.

So far the fire department investigators seemed to accept the blaze had been caused by an electrical fault in a heater. Jack had researched how to do it and then deleted his browsing history and wiped his hard drive. Maybe he needed to look at adult porn sites and let them think that was what he was trying to hide.

He wasn't cut out to be a criminal, but he should have thought of that before he said yes to the wrong people. In many ways, Jack wished he could turn back the clock, not to before he'd set the fire but before he'd answered that speculative question in a pub and greed had consumed his common sense. So far, his ex-employees hadn't been questioned, but it could only be a matter of time and before it happened, he had to make sure those emails on Ally's computer disappeared for good.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma had made a stupid mistake when she'd called Sal and related Geoff's suggestion they all go to Ally's. She'd expected Sal to be as horrified as her at the idea of spending a couple of days counting sheep. Bloody Sal had bloody booked them into some bloody adventure place.

The moment Geoff walked into the bar to have lunch with her, Emma went straight to the boil without passing simmer. "Boyfriends aren't supposed to come to hen parties. That's the whole bloody point of them. We help the bride-to-be have a final fling and do all sorts of...things without her husband-to-be or boyfriends getting pissed off. That bitch, Sal, shouldn't have asked you to take us. You can't come."

"I'm not coming to Kerry's hen party," Geoff said in a quiet voice. "I'm just driving the six of you up there. I'm the only one with a big enough vehicle."

Emma huffed. "I don't know why I let you talk me into suggesting this. We're having the proper hen party next month. We don't need to do the countryside as well."

"Sal's booked it now and it makes sense for me to drive everyone. It's a lot cheaper than the train."

"Where are you going to sleep?"

Geoff's face hardened under her snappy tone. "I thought if Ally's got a spare—"

Emma held back her squeal of dismay. Just. "You can't stay with her."

"Why ever not? You're not going to be staying there."

That's the fucking point.

Geoff sighed. "I don't see the problem. Why should I fork out money for a hotel if I can stay with Ally? I won't come anywhere near you, I swear. You can do whatever it is you girls want to do, get as drunk as you like and I'll drive you back to London and not say a word."

"But-"

"That's enough, Emma. Give it a rest."

Emma bit down on the inside of her cheeks until she tasted blood. He'd been short with her. Lovely, quiet, unassuming Geoff had snapped at her. He'd been so moody this past week. Now this insistence on staying with Ally. What was she supposed to think?

Back in her office, Emma went on the internet and looked for a local hotel or bed and breakfast. Three phone calls later she gave in. The bad news—everywhere she'd called told her the same thing—there were no rooms. The good—Sean MacAlister was filming in Wyndale. She couldn't wait to tell the others.

Then again, maybe she shouldn't. It might have been her idea to take this quick break, but it was Sal, Kerry's maid of honor, who'd grabbed it and run. Sal had arranged this couple of days in Derbyshire and told them to pack old clothes. Emma didn't intend to meet Sean McAlister wearing anything but her most flattering outfits and the less competition she had, the better.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark had made a stupid mistake and he didn't know what had possessed him. Once word had spread around the office that Ally was the woman who'd escaped death by inches, the rumor mill had suggested he'd pushed her so he could ride off into the sunset attached to one of Belinda's breasts. Mark didn't need that sort of comment getting back to his boss, so he'd started a counter rumor claiming Ally had tried to commit suicide.

Frank called him in and asked if it was true. Aware there was no response that would make his boss happy, Mark had said Ally had no memory of what happened. He emerged shaken from Frank's office with an order to make things right. Now.

*How?* He wished the bitch had gone under the wheels and then he'd have had the sympathy of the office instead of snide comments.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Ally walked into the mountain rescue office, she groaned. There were maps spread out all over the floor and Neil stood in a triangle of space in the corner as if he'd been marooned in a sea of paper.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

"Going over the routes for tomorrow."

"Oh, for the training course. Did you find your paperwork?"

Neil began folding the maps. "Yep. Twelve doing the course, two of us on admin."

"Including Caspar?"

Neil's head shot up and Ally turned as Tom walked in behind her.

"Caspar's not one of us," Tom said.

Ally took a deep breath. "He told me he volunteered but he's never been called in for training. Why not?"

"He's not suitable," Neil mumbled as he kept folding.

"How do you know if you've never let him train?"

"Ally, you know—" Tom began.

"Yes, I know he's been in prison. I also know he deserves another chance." She turned to Neil. "Please let him join you tomorrow."

"He's a lazy bastard," Tom spat.

Ally bristled. She almost expected to see spines shoot out of her clothes. "What makes you say that?"

"He doesn't work. He sponges off his parents." Tom crossed his arms.

Ally fumed. "Did you know you have to declare on a job application that you've been in prison? Which pile do you think that puts him in? Interview or not? He's damned before he even tries. And he isn't sponging off his parents. He can barely afford to eat."

Tom glared. "What the hell do all you women see in him? Is he *that* good between the sheets?"

Ally counted to three before she spoke so she didn't yell. "I have no idea. Not that it's any of your business." She turned to Neil. "Let Caspar train with you tomorrow. Give him a chance."

Neil cast a glance at Tom and then muttered, "Okay."

Tom slammed the door on his way out.

Ally snorted. "Very grown up."

Neil sighed. "My only stipulation is that you have to come too. We need pairs."

"Okay. Thank you." Ally flung her arms around Neil and gave him a hug. "So where shall I start?"

"The filing cabinet?"

Ally opened the bottom drawer, lifted out a pile of papers and reeled. "What the—Neil, what's this?"

He came up behind her. "Oh, I wondered where that donut went. Forbidden, so I hide them."

"I thought some animal had crawled in, crapped and crept out again."

Neil laughed. Once he'd disposed of the offending article, she sat on the floor and began to sort. She made different piles for training, first aid and fund raising, and arranged them in folders by date.

"What exactly is happening tomorrow?" Ally asked. "Will I be okay in my heels?" Neil shot her a horrified look and she laughed.

"Do you have boots?" he asked.

"Some lovely knee-high ones. Black leather."

He chuckled. "Right. Well, it's an orienteering exercise where one of the six...seven teams will come across a casualty situation. The other groups will have to make their way to the primary point to assist. Not a race, but they all treat it as a race." He smiled.

"I wonder if you're the casualty armed with a flask of coffee, a pack of sandwiches and a good book."

Neil raised his eyebrows. "You really are going to go far."

Ally laughed. "Yep, probably in the wrong direction."

"I appreciate you doing all this work, Ally. Sorry I can't pay you."

"You're paying me by inviting Caspar to the training. He won't let you down."

Neil sighed. "We'll see. Seven o'clock. Foot of Tyburn Crag. Bring lunch. And dress appropriately."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally thought about what to cook as she made her way home. Something easy. Enchiladas. She'd bought the ingredients to make them for herself, intending to split and freeze them, so there'd be plenty for Caspar. Finn had an apple tree in his garden, so if Ally could scavenge some blackberries, she'd whip up a crumble for pudding.

Dumping her purse in the kitchen, Ally grabbed a colander and set out from the rear of the house. She climbed over a low wooden fence at the end of the garden and walked along the edge of the woods. When she spotted a likely looking spread of brambles, Ally ventured farther into the trees.

She listened to the trunks creak and leaves rustle, taking in the earthy scent and smiling at the rays of sunlight dappling the forest floor. It was so peaceful compared to the bustle of London. No car horns blaring and sirens screaming. Ally hadn't been sure she'd like the countryside, but she did, though she suspected most of that was because of Caspar.

Oh my God. A tingle crept up the back of her neck.

A deer grazed yards away from her. Ally held her breath. *Wow, a wild animal.* Darn it, holding her breath was stupid. Now she was desperate to breathe. How come it hadn't spotted her and bounded off? Maybe she was downwind or something. Or supernaturally still with no scent. She smiled and crouched.

The gunshot rang so loud in her ears Ally thought she'd been hit. She let out a muffled scream and then groaned when she realized the deer had fallen.

"No, no, no." She ran toward it and then slowed. If it wasn't dead, she had no idea what to do. It was almost a relief to see the animal motionless, its glassy eyes unblinking. She gulped and then looked up at the sound of footsteps crunching through the undergrowth.

A man in his fifties, dressed in a dark green jacket and flat cap strode toward her carrying a rifle, a large yellow dog at his heels.

"You killed it," she said in a stunned voice.

He glared at her. "What in hell's name are you doing in here, you stupid woman?"

"You killed it." Anger bubbled inside her.

He glanced at the deer. "So I did. My deer. My land. You're trespassing, and lucky I didn't hit you. Get out."

Ally turned and fled. It was only when she climbed back over the fence that she realized she'd left Finn's colander behind. *Shit*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar got off the bus in the middle of the village, keeping a tight grasp on the bag he carried. With the final installment of Job Seekers' Allowance paid into his bank account, he'd blown twenty quid of it travelling to Buxton, purchasing a chilled bottle of champagne, and catching the next bus home. He could buy that star for Ally now too.

He couldn't afford it, but he didn't care. As he passed Stone Cottage, he wondered if Ally was home. He decided not to call. He'd never leave and he wanted to have a shower. A tux still hung in his wardrobe unless moths had eaten it.

His mobile vibrated in his pocket as he walked up the hill. Caspar raised his eyebrows when he saw who was calling. The woman from *Catch a Star*.

"Hi, Juno."

"Caspar. I have a job for you."

Good thing he had a tight hold of the bottle because Caspar stumbled. Then he remembered this was a scam.

"A job?" he asked.

"Yep. Nice and simple. One hour's modeling for a hundred pounds."

Caspar blinked. "What's the catch? What do I need to fork out for? Clothes? Makeup? Travel to the Outer Hebrides?"

"No catch. It's a local job. Near Buxton."

"They know what they're getting? You only took a couple of shots outside that café."

"You're perfect and they'll pay in cash."

A hundred pounds? He licked his dry lips. "When?"

"Monday morning. It's in a small village. Wyndale. Do you know it?"

"Yes, I—" Caspar changed his mind about telling her he lived there. "I know it." A coincidence? It had to be. All he'd given Juno was his phone number.

"They want you at eleven Monday morning. Morton's Adventure Center. I'll meet you there. Don't let me down. I see big things for you, Caspar. This is just the start."

Caspar stuffed his phone back in his pocket. No way would Tom Morton want Caspar modeling for his business. Maybe it was some outdoor clothing manufacturer using Tom's premises. Caspar sighed. Did it matter who or what? A hundred quid was a hundred quid.

As he turned into the drive leading up to Wyndale Hall, a limousine with blackedout windows swept past him and slammed to a halt, coughing up a cloud of dust. Caspar pressed his lips together and kept walking toward the Gatehouse.

He'd turned the key in the lock when someone called, "Hey! Wait a minute."

When Caspar turned, he saw the pert backside of a woman leaning into a car. She yanked out her purse and then waved as the vehicle continued up the drive. When she turned, his eyes widened. Sherry Moon. He'd not seen her in— She flung herself into his arms and he staggered into his door.

"Caspar. I thought it was you. I'd recognize that lovely bum anywhere."

"Hi, Sherry." He was so shocked to see her he wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"No, silly." She snuggled closer. "I'm Lina now."

She was a lot leaner. Sherry—Lina Moon had been in the same Cambridge college as Caspar. They'd dated for a while until she'd proved to be a worse influence on him than he was on her. She'd been fashionably thin then, but now she looked almost anorexic.

"You're with the film crew?" Caspar asked.

She preened in front of him and stuck a pose with her hands in the air. "You're looking at Jane Eyre."

He raised his eyebrows. "Congratulations."

"I was so excited when I heard where we were filming. I recognized your father's name and hoped I'd see you. Is this where you live?"

"Yes."

Lina laughed. "Not quite with your mum and dad then. Show me round?" She pushed open the door and went in. Caspar sighed and followed.

"Ah dinky stairs, sweet kitchen." She whirled around like a dervish and Caspar listened to her describe his tatty home in glowing terms, knowing she didn't mean a word and not actually caring what she thought.

She'd been like this in Cambridge, flitting from one society to another, one guy to another. The butterfly, they'd called her. A pretty girl, now she was a gorgeous woman with long dark hair cascading to her shoulders, exquisite skin, pale blue eyes and a button nose. She wore skin-tight designer jeans, an off-the-shoulder fluffy white sweater, and Caspar felt absolutely nothing. My God, what's the matter with me?

He put the bottle of champagne in the fridge while she looked around upstairs, still providing him with a running commentary about his amazing pictures, his darling bed, his sweet bathroom. Hard to believe she had a brain, but then she'd only scraped through her exams because she'd been busy sleeping with her professors, among others. While she was still chattering, Caspar used the downstairs loo.

When he came out, she was *still* talking, though now from the kitchen. Caspar heard a pop and groaned.

"Where are your glasses?" Lina shouted. "S'okay. Found them."

He pushed open the door to find her pouring champagne.

"Don't mind, do you? I thought we should celebrate meeting up again."

Pointless to be churlish now that the bottle was open, but Caspar *did* mind. He minded a lot.

"Are you late for a meeting?" He wondered if he could re-cork the bottle and rush around to Ally's before the fizz disappeared.

"They can wait. I am so excited about this. Such a fabulous role. Well, not the first part when she's miserable but later, after she meets Rochester." Lina released a theatrical sigh.

"How does Sean McAlister feel about having to look twenty years older than you?"

Lina scowled. "Who cares? He's a pig." She sidled closer to Caspar and her face lit with a smile. "Thank goodness you're here." She shoved an empty glass in his face. "Fill me up and fill me in on what you've been up to."

Christ.

\* \* \* \* \*

The encounter in the woods had shaken Ally. Once she was back in Finn's house, she thought she'd feel better, but her heart still raced. Sad as she was for the deer, it was that split second when she imagined she'd been shot that occupied her mind. No way was she going back to get the colander or the blackberries. Maybe she could bake a couple of apples, though she didn't have any dried fruit to stuff inside.

Caspar might have some.

Ally knew she'd invented a reason to go and see him but she needed a hug. She locked the door and ran up the road. If Caspar didn't like apples, she'd go into the village and buy ice-cream and a couple of Mars bars to melt over it.

The door opened and Ally smiled, readying to jump into his arms.

"Yes?" asked a petite, willowy brunette.

Ally's smile died, killed partly by the fact that this was probably the prettiest woman she'd ever seen but more by the fact that she held a fizzing glass of what looked like champagne.

*Fool, fool.* The bottom of Ally's world fell away to leave her teetering on the edge of a chasm of disappointment.

"Sorry for disturbing you," Ally said, proud of the way her voice didn't crack. "Would you give Caspar a message, please? Tell him he's expected for mountain rescue training at seven tomorrow morning at the foot of Tyburn Crag."

Miss Elegant raised one eyebrow. "Seven? He doesn't usually get up that early."

Ally managed a tight smile. She turned away and walked up the hill instead of down, heading toward the dark gritstone crags that overlooked the village. Her head ached. She could make all sorts of excuses, but she didn't have the energy. And yes, she knew she was jumping to conclusions, judging Caspar without knowing all the facts, just as the village had over his imprisonment. But Ally knew that wasn't another sister or his cousin or platonic friend. Knew it was the real thing in that glass. Knew that on her best day, she'd come in a poor second to Miss Quirked Eyebrow.

The lump in her throat made it hard to swallow. Ally stood and watched the climbers for a while. They looked like brightly colored sloths as they made their way up the rock face. Everyone had warned her what Caspar was like. Ally didn't want to be like the others, but maybe she was.

She took the easy route to the top, walking the long way round, and then stood shivering in the wind, looking down on a jigsaw puzzle of fields and villages. Everything fit together, and from up here, it appeared so neat and tidy. The green fields looked combed, the drystone walls ran straight and even. Ally found a sheltered place to sit with boulders on three sides. She slumped down out of the wind and lifted her tear-stained face to the September sun. When she was fit to be seen, she'd go back.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Caspar bounded downstairs in dry pants, having spilled the champagne when Lina grabbed him, the door was closed.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Some woman with a message. You've got mountain rescue training tomorrow at seven. Meet at the foot of Tyburn Crag. Seven? Are they mad? You never got out of bed—"

"What did she look like?"

"Tall, blonde, slight bruise on her cheek."

Caspar's stomach lurched. "Oh shit. Right. You're leaving. I have to go out." Ally would have the wrong idea and the faster he put her right, the better.

Lina pouted. "Well give me a lift up to the house first. I'm late for the meeting with the director and your parents."

"No car."

Caspar bustled her out and locked the door behind him. One pink rose remained on the bush by his garden wall and Caspar broke it off as he went past.

He ran down the hill to Stone Cottage and spotted a florist's van parked on the drive. Caspar passed the delivery guy as he returned to his vehicle.

"She's not in, mate," the guy said. He nodded to the rose in Caspar's hand and smirked. "I think you've been out-classed."

Caspar waited until he'd gone before he took the last few steps to Ally's door. He bent to look at the card fastened to an enormous bouquet of flowers.

I've been an idiot. Forgive me? I know you still love me and I love you. I've something I want to ask you. Get ready to say yes. All my love, Mark.

Caspar felt as if ice water had been pumped into his veins. Ally had lied. She said no one knew she was here, but she'd obviously managed to tell her supposed exboyfriend, who sounded very confident his affection would be returned. Caspar walked home, plucking a petal from the rose every couple of yards and throwing it down. *She loves me. She loves me not.* 

The last one hit the ground. She loves me. Yeah, right.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Once Ally's tears had gone, she made her way back down the hill. This wasn't like her. She had a stronger spine, strengthened by constant disappointments in early childhood. No presents. No party. No friends coming to play because she'd been moved on yet again, passed from one family to another, back to a care home, back to her mum—though that never lasted long. And teased because she didn't know the name of her father.

This was salvageable. She wanted to run but she'd give Caspar a chance to explain, though he had to come to her. Not that he owed her an explanation. Heavy petting aside, she hardly knew him. They were on the verge of something, but they hadn't stepped over the brink into a relationship. Maybe he'd never intended they would. Ally clenched her fists. She'd fought so hard to repress her insecurity and now she could feel its tentacles tightening, making it hard to breathe.

As Ally walked past Caspar's place, she noticed a prickly green stem lying on the path and then a trail of pink rose petals. She followed them all the way to her door with a growing smile on her face and found a massive bunch of flowers wrapped in cellophane.

Caspar? Except that had been awfully quick and he had no money. Her joy wavered. Ally's fingers shook as she removed the card.

Her shoulders tensed. How the hell did Mark know her address? *Bloody Emma*. But it was Ally's fault. She knew Emma was incapable of keeping her mouth shut. Ally had answered text messages from friends wanting to know if she was okay and surviving the countryside, so she already knew Emma had ignored her request not to tell where she was staying. Though friends were one thing, Mark something else entirely.

Ally thought about the trail of petals she'd followed, put two and two together and felt pretty sure she'd made four. After Ally had gone to Caspar's place and seen the woman, Caspar had come here, bearing a rose. He'd found the flowers, read the card and walked away, pulling off petals as he went.

Shit. They'd both jumped to conclusions.

Ally picked up the bouquet and carried it to a fenced-off enclosure near the road where the dustbins were stored. As she reached to pull the gate open, it sprang toward her and she let out a shriek.

"Sorry, sorry," said a tall, dark-haired guy. "I was dumping some trash."

Ally gulped at the American accent and gulped harder at the sight of Sean MacAlister's famous chiseled face.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"You made me jump."

He offered up his trademark grin. "Think I was a thief?"

"Only a big rat would steal from the garbage," Ally said.

He laughed. "How I love English humor." He nodded at the flowers. "You don't want those?"

"The sentiment behind them makes me want to throw up. Would you like them?"

"Why not?"

Ally pulled off Mark's card and tossed it in a bin.

"We're neighbors?" he asked as he and Ally set off back up the drive.

"Are we?" Belatedly Ally realized that all the cottages but hers shone with lights. "Oh right. Somewhere to stay while you're filming at Wyndale Hall."

"So you do know who I am?"

"Of course. How could I fail to recognize Devlin Quinn."

He roared with laughter. Devlin Quinn was a former professional wrestler turned actor, almost seven feet tall and built like a jumbo jet.

"You're not allowed to do that while you're playing Mr. Rochester," Ally said. "Jane Eyre isn't a barrel of laughs."

"Especially not when you've fallen out with your costar," he mumbled.

"Ah. Hence the flowers. What did you do?"

"Hey? Who said I did anything?"

Ally stared at him and raised her eyebrows and he laughed.

"Actors and actresses. How could it ever work? We're far too self-absorbed and constantly need our egos stroked. Much better to find someone not in the business to do the stroking for us." The look he gave Ally was decidedly carnal. "What's your name?"

"Sister Mary Elizabeth Teresa Bernadette."

His shoulders shook as he chuckled.

"Otherwise known as Ally."

"Nice to meet you, Ally. You live in this end house? I thought all five had been booked."

Reality hit like a thump in the stomach. "Oh fuck," she whispered under her breath.

"Watch out." Sean pulled Ally to one side as a car roared up behind them.

A vehicle with blacked-out windows came to a halt outside Stone Cottage.

"The ice-maiden cometh," he said, his gaze fixed on the vehicle.

Somehow it wasn't a surprise to Ally when the woman she'd last seen holding a glass of champagne in Caspar's house stepped from the car.

"Wish me luck," Sean whispered. He plastered a smile on his face and rushed up to the vehicle. "Sweetheart. Lina. For you." He held out Ally's bouquet. Ally sidled around the back of the car and made for the house. *Please let me be wrong. Please, please, please, please.* 

"What are you doing?" the woman called.

Ally didn't want that to have been aimed at her but knew it was. She turned to see Miss Perfect stalking down the path, holding the flowers, followed by a man in a chauffeur's cap and Sean McAlister, each pulling two enormous suitcases.

"I live here," Ally said.

"You can't possibly live here. Stone Cottage has been rented for my exclusive use."

Ally couldn't see any way out of this. Finn hadn't known she was here. He'd probably got some fabulous sum for letting his house out.

"Are you squatting?" the woman asked. "God, you are! Sean, call the police."

"Look, hang on a moment," Ally said. "My brother owns this place. There's obviously been a mix-up. I didn't know he'd rented it out. If you'd just give me a few minutes to pack up my stuff, I'll leave. Okay?"

Ally didn't wait for an answer. She used her key and walked in. She could hear them pottering around downstairs as she packed. Her heart ached. How much more could go wrong with her life? This was supposed to be a new start. She'd found someone she really liked and now she might have lost him to the woman who was throwing her out of her new home. It was like some TV soap.

When Sean saw her struggling with her cases, he came to help.

"Thanks."

"Got somewhere to go?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'll be fine." There could never be any other answer. Ally wasn't a quitter.

Once her cases were by the door, she made for the fridge.

Lina stamped over and glared. "What are you doing now?"

"Taking my food." Ally packed everything into plastic carriers and hauled them to the door.

"Mac? I want this place cleaned," Lina said into her phone. "Get someone here now."

Ally hooked the carriers over her arms and wheeled out the cases.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Lina snapped, and held out her hand.

"What?" Ally asked.

"Your keys."

"I'm not giving you my keys. You have your own and you have my word that while you're staying here, I won't use mine."

The garage was another matter. Finn had private stuff in there—his bike, mountaineering gear and his wine. And possibly his sister if she couldn't find anywhere else to sleep.

The moment the door closed behind her, Ally knew there was no way she could move the food *and* the cases. She shifted things in stages, taking the cases first and then walking back twice for the bags. Luckily, the garage for Stone Cottage stood on its own, facing the main road and not the house.

Ally unlocked the side door, switched on the light and heaved her stuff inside. Finn's sun loungers were propped up in the corner, the cushions wrapped in plastic. In the opposite corner, a tap with a hose would provide water, but with no toilet, Ally couldn't live here for any length of time.

She imagined herself turning up at Caspar's with her cases. Him opening the door and her asking, "Can I move in?" Ally winced. Much too soon. He was far more likely to be amenable to, "Can I stay the night?" Maybe not even that if he and Lina were an item. But then the trail of rose petals didn't make sense. Ally wasn't going to walk away without knowing the truth. It was too easy to think the worst and sink into a decline. She'd find out the truth and then sink into a decline. The thought brought a little smile to her face.

Ally considered donning something smart but figured if she *did* stay the night at Caspar's, she might as well change into what she'd need to wear tomorrow. She tucked her toothbrush and a clean pair of pants into her purse and pushed Caspar's medal farther down with a guilty sigh. She'd pick her moment to tell him what she'd done. Ally locked the door, gathered up the two bags of perishable food and plodded up the hill.

When she stood on Caspar's doorstep, her knuckles about to strike the wood, she paused. In all the upheaval, she'd forgotten he was pissed off about the flowers. Still, they were even now because she was pissed off about the champagne and Miss Lean Machine. She knocked on the door and jumped when it flew open. Caspar stood there with his shirt unbuttoned, his pants not done all the way up and a wary look on his face. For a moment, Ally couldn't speak. *Oh God, could I ever look at him and not feel this surge of pleasure?* She took a deep breath.

"Good evening. I'm working in this area demonstrating a new business concept called Dinner Tonight. The idea is I turn up on the doorstep of a sad, deprived guy and offer to cook a fabulous meal. Of course the answer is yes."

Caspar chuckled. "Yes."

Ally smiled.

He took the carriers from her and went inside. Ally shrugged off her coat, slung it over the banister and followed him into the kitchen. The first thing she did was turn on the oven. As she bent, Caspar slid his hand into the gap between her pants and sweater, and traced a line with his thumb. Ally trembled.

"Fancy a glass of slightly flat but cold champagne?" he asked.

"That sounds enticing."

Ally sighed when he removed his hand. He took the bottle from the fridge and two glasses from the cupboard. She smiled when she saw the cling film fastened around the

top of the bottle with an elastic band. Ally unpacked the things she didn't need into the fridge and laid the rest on the countertop.

Caspar handed Ally a glass. "I went all the way to Buxton and bought this for us but while I was otherwise occupied, Jane Eyre helped herself."

"The staff these days. Give them an inch and —" *Not going down that one.* 

"I knew her at Cambridge."

Ally could guess what that meant. She grabbed a chopping board and attacked the onions.

Caspar sighed. "I wish you'd stayed."

"Ah. Well, I had a hill that needed stamping up."

He laughed. Ally grabbed a saucepan from the rack, added oil and began to sauté the onions.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

"Chop the mushrooms and boil a kettle."

"Right."

"I saw the trail of devastation you left," Ally said. "I don't know what that poor rose had done to you. Please tell me you weren't the sort of little boy who trampled all over his mother's flowers."

"I was angelic."

"Hmm. I gave the bouquet to Sean MacAlister."

Caspar raised his eyebrows.

"I bumped into him in the bin store area. He's living in one of the cottages. I was going to dump the flowers, but he's obviously a great believer in recycling because he took them and gave them to Lina."

Caspar laughed.

"You could have done that." Ally lifted her head and looked at him. "Ripped off Mark's lies and pretended the flowers were from you."

"I'd never do that."

"Good, because I wouldn't have believed you. But I'd have liked that rose."

Caspar moved closer and his hip nudged hers as they worked side by side. "I'm not interested in Lina Moon."

"I'm not interested in Mark."

"Or Sean MacAlister?"

Ally stamped her foot. "Don't make me choose."

When she saw the uncertainty on Caspar's face, she backtracked. "He's not my type. A rich and privileged superstar who doesn't live in the real world? No thanks." Give me a moody, impoverished masochist any day.

She added the ground beef to the onions and stirred.

"How did your ex know where to send the flowers?" Caspar asked. "I thought you said no one knew you were here."

"I told one friend. Sadly she's a blabbermouth. Probably the whole of London knows by now. Did Lina give you the message about tomorrow?"

"Yes. How did you wrangle that?"

"I'm coming too."

Ally emptied the sachet of enchilada mix into a bowl, added tomato paste and poured on hot water from the kettle.

"No one else prepared to partner with me?"

Ally tipped the chopped mushrooms into the beef. "I had to fight them off with a stick."

Caspar poured more champagne into Ally's glass.

"Do you have a dish that can go in your oven?" she asked.

While Caspar searched, Ally added most of the sauce and half a packet of grated cheese to the meat mixture and took it off the heat.

"It smells really good," Caspar said.

"Provided I don't burn it, it'll taste good too. We have to take a picnic tomorrow. Why don't you make sandwiches and put them in the fridge while I stuff the tortillas."

"I don't have anything to make sandwiches."

"I brought bread and fillings with me."

"Ah."

Ally looked up.

Caspar pinned her with his dark gaze. "So I'm not going to have to tie you up to keep you here tonight?"

"I dunno. That sounds interesting." Ally's heart did a loop-the-loop. "I thought the clothes might have given me away. These camouflage pants will be okay, won't they?"

"I didn't know they came in pink."

"In case I need to blend in with a flock of flamingoes."

He snickered.

They moved closer and closer together as they worked so that more and more of their bodies were touching. Caspar buttered bread while Ally filled the flour tortillas and arranged them in the dish. She topped the lot with the rest of the sauce and grated cheese and pushed it into the oven.

"Twenty minutes and we can eat," she said. "Want to open the wine?"

Caspar picked up the bottle she'd brought and winced. "Are you sure Finn won't mind?"

"Why?"

"This is at least fifty quid a bottle."

Yikes. "I'll sip it more slowly then."

Caspar held the bottle in one hand, the corkscrew in the other. "Sure?"

"Yes."

They sat on opposite sides of the table and Caspar filled their glasses.

"We nearly fucked this up before it started," he said, staring straight at her.

"Good thing I'm sensible and mature."

"I thought you stomped up a hill?"

Ally shrugged. "I needed a bit of exercise."

He smiled. "You'll get plenty of that tomorrow."

"I was sort of hoping I'd get some tonight."

Caspar groaned.

Ally took a drink of the wine and licked her lips. "Oh God."

"What's the matter?"

"I can't tell the difference between this and the five quid bottle we had last night. It's wasted on me."

"No, it's not." He reached across the table, took hold of her hand and stroked her palm with his thumb.

"Sorry there's no pudding," Ally whispered. "I was going to make a blackberry and apple crumble but I had a bit of an incident when I went to pick blackberries."

"What happened?"

"I heard a gunshot and worried for a split second it was the person trying to kill me. Only this horrible man had shot a deer almost at my feet."

Caspar's grip tightened on her hand. "Where were you?"

"In the woods at the back of Finn's place. Apparently I was trespassing. He yelled and called me a stupid woman. The bastard."

Caspar sighed. "In his late fifties? Flat cap? Green jacket? Golden retriever at his side?"

Ally gave a nervous nod. "Do you know him?"

"Not well."

Thank fuck his father was a good shot, but Caspar's heart gave a painful lurch when Ally told him what happened, though it worried him she was still harping on about someone trying to kill her. Thoughts about that disappeared under the pleasure of finding her there when he opened the door. Caspar had assumed there'd be no meal, no Ally, no...nothing. If she hadn't come to him, would he have gone to her? He'd never chased after a woman in his life.

Ally put the dish on the table, the melted cheese bubbling. "Enchiladas. Do you want salad as well?"

"No, that's fine." Caspar wanted to eat fast and get on to the more interesting stuff.

She gave him three stuffed tortillas, took two for herself and put the dish to soak in the sink. The first mouthful hooked Caspar, the combination of flavors mouthwateringly delicious. He could almost hear his stomach saying thank you.

Ally whistled. "Good grief you eat quickly. Is that a boarding school thing?"

"Yep," Caspar said, and watched her face fall.

"Shit. It isn't, is it? It's prison. Sorry." She reached for his hand and held tight.

He took a deep breath. "I learned to eat the three meals a day at high speed, whatever they tasted like. Almost. Some things I never did stomach." He didn't talk about this.

"Did your parents come to see you?"

Caspar swallowed hard. "Too far. A difficult journey."

Ally huffed. "Four years and they never visited?"

"It made them think about Jem. I don't blame them. A friend from the embassy came regularly. He brought me extra food and clothes until he was posted elsewhere." Ned had been his lifeline to sanity.

"Did you have your own cell?"

"No. In that respect it *was* like boarding school. We slept in dormitories on mattresses. I was treated no differently from anyone else except I didn't have a wife making monthly conjugal visits." Only his hand making nightly ones until even that had seemed too much to bear.

"Seems very liberal."

"The prison—to be accurate—penal institution was miles out in the middle of nowhere, so they gave couples twenty-four hours in their own room."

"Have you ever spent twenty-four hours in bed with anyone?"

He looked straight at her. "No, have you?"

She gave him a cock-lifting grin. "No, but I'd like to try."

Caspar growled. "Not fair to tell me that when we have to get up at the crack of dawn."

"Better get an early night and go straight to sleep." Ally got to her feet. "I'll just wash—"

Caspar grabbed her arm. "Leave them."

"You're not going to drag me outside and show me the moon?"

"No, I'm going to drag you upstairs and show you my cock."

Ally laughed. "I've already seen it."

"So you have."

Caspar pulled her around so they stood toe to toe and then rested his hands on her shoulders. Ally slipped a hand up his chest, flattening her palm over his heart. He felt

the jump in the rhythm and smiled. She turned her hand and moved it down until her fingers were curled around his balls, her palm lying on his erection. One squeeze and Caspar gave a noisy exhalation. She rubbed and pressed and teased until he groaned. When she trailed her fingertip down his zipper, his hips bucked into her.

He wanted her here, right now, on this spot in the kitchen. He didn't want to waste a moment dashing upstairs. *Oh God*. Caspar needed Ally to take charge before he did something stupid.

"We can undress on the way," she whispered, and tugged him by his waistband toward the door. "First one naked gets to go on top."

Caspar laughed. "And I'm supposed to care either way?"

"Okay. First one naked—"

"Will be me. I'll give you a hand."

He yanked his shirt free and began unfastening his buttons while Ally tried to pull her sweater over her head. Halfway across the hall, she bent to— Well, he didn't know why the hell she'd leaned over, but it was a dangerous thing to do.

"No waving your butt in my face until we get into the bedroom," Caspar said with a growl.

His shirt flew somewhere and he almost fell trying to get his shoes off. *Oh right, that's what she was doing.* His brain focused on only one thing. Caspar had already popped the button on her pink pants, his cock had managed the same feat on *his* pants. They had their hands on each other's zipper and tumbled onto the stairs as they tussled.

"Socks off." Ally slid down to grab one of his feet.

As her fingers massaged his toes, Caspar whimpered. He rested on his side and watched her tugging at his pants. Her tight t-shirt hugged her breasts, the outline of her nipples pressing against it. One lustful groan from her and a burst of pre-cum wet his boxers. His other sock came off and so did his chinos. He sprawled on his back as she clambered up the stairs and over his body to straddle him.

Caspar slid his hands onto her t-shirt and wrapped them around her breasts.

"34B," he said.

Ally gaped and then laughed. "That shouldn't impress me but it does."

He dropped his hands to her hips and tugged at her pants. "Help me here."

Another tussle and she lay on top of him minus pants. Caspar had his hands planted on her beautiful butt, a strip of black lace between his skin and hers, and he wasn't sure he could remember how to breathe. Didn't matter. He wanted to kiss her more than he wanted to breathe.

She peeled her t-shirt over her head and threw it away. Black lace bra to match the panties, and Caspar's mouth watered. Her skin was firm and toned, except— "What?" he blurted as he looked at her arms. And legs.

"The train. From when I fell," Ally said. "Sorry."

Caspar clutched her. "Don't be fucking sorry. It's not your fault." A collision with a train or a shove by an abusive boyfriend? He wished she'd open up to him.

"Looks bad but doesn't hurt anymore. You don't need to be gentle."

If the sight of her almost naked wasn't enough to drive his cock and balls into a frenzy, those final words were. Caspar scooped her wriggling body over his shoulder and carried her into his bedroom. He flicked on the wall light as he passed and threw her on the bed.

Ally bounced and fell off.

## **Chapter Twelve**

"Oh fuck." Caspar leapt to help her up. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

Ally flopped facedown onto the mattress. "Oww, my butt. You'll have to kiss it better." She looked over her shoulder and pouted. "You'll have to kiss *all* of me better."

As if he'd find that a hardship. Caspar lay alongside her and licked her ear.

Ally moaned. "Before we lose our minds, put your alarm on so we're not late tomorrow."

"I don't have one."

Ally turned her head to look at him.

"I've never had anything to get up for."

"There's not an alarm on your phone?" she asked.

"That piece of crap? It's a miracle it receives calls."

"I'll go and get mine."

"Please tell me it's downstairs and not back at Finn's."

Ally laughed. "Back in a sec." She rolled off the bed and walked to the door.

"Don't fall down the stairs," Caspar shouted. "Don't talk to any strangers. Don't accept a lift from one either."

He felt as if he'd been waiting all his life for this one moment, which was crazy. He'd lost count of the women he'd slept with—no, fucked. He hadn't slept with any of them, except for a brief post-coital snooze if he'd been energetic. He'd never relaxed enough to fall into a deep sleep. Not that he ever slept deeply.

"I'm back," Ally said in the doorway. "Miss me?"

Yes. "Who are you again?"

She rolled her eyes and sat with her back toward him as she pressed buttons on her phone. "Six thirty okay?"

"Mmm."

Caspar knelt behind her, his knees pinning her hips. He took her phone from her hand and put it on the box of books that served as a bedside table. Wrapping his palms over her shoulders, Caspar slid his hands down her slender arms until his large hands blanketed her small ones.

He nuzzled her neck. "You smell good."

Ally flipped their hands and pulled them to her breasts. Caspar's cock discovered another degree of hardness, another level of desperation. He could feel control slipping through his fingers and he was shocked. This wasn't him.

While he kissed and licked and nipped Ally's back, he caressed her hands as they covered her breasts, threading his fingers through hers, squeezing and brushing her nipples. Ally's choppy breathing matched his. When he unfastened the clasp of her bra with his teeth, she shook as she laughed. "Mr. Smooth."

Except he'd never done that before.

Caspar pulled the lace free from her body and rested his chin on her shoulder. He held her breasts, her fingers now resting on top of his. His cock twitched in impatience and heat pooled low in his belly.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered.

She reached over her shoulders to loop her hands around his neck and tipped her head back so their lips met. The kiss electrified Caspar, his veins transferring sizzling current to every part of his body. The feel of her tongue riding his, the pressure of her sweet mouth on his as she arched back against him sent Caspar's head spinning into bliss. If he'd thought their kiss under the stars was the best, this proved him wrong and he knew, deep down, that every kiss with Ally would be more perfect than the last.

They twisted on the bed until Caspar lay on his back with Ally above, her hands resting on either side of his head and her knees on either side of his hips. His cock had tented his boxers into a wet peak. The thin layer of cotton wouldn't save him from eruption.

Caspar cupped her cheeks and pulled her down for another kiss, groaning into her mouth as her nipples brushed his chest. His hands swept down the sides of her body, into the dip of her waist and up over the curve of her hips. He slipped his fingers under the stretchy lace and followed the line of the panties over the taut mounds of her backside to the hot valley between her legs. Ally shook against him while he stroked her through the lace. She groaned into his mouth as he pulled back to spread his hands over the cheeks of her backside. *God, I love her butt*.

Ally lifted her head for air, her eyes heavy with desire and her mouth kiss-swollen. Caspar licked around her nipple. When she shuddered, he slid his hands to her waist to pull her down so he could just lie there and feast on her. Her dark pink nipples were beautifully delicate, swollen like new buds in spring. Caspar circled one with his tongue, wetting it before drawing back to tease with short puffs of air. He smiled when tiny goose bumps rose around the tight nub. Caspar flicked the same nipple, pulled at it gently with his teeth, let his tongue enjoy the different textures, and all the time Ally trembled and gasped above him, her knees shaking against his waist.

Caspar moved from one breast to the other, either licking or grazing her flesh with his teeth while his cock got ready to throw a tantrum.

"God, you have to stop," Ally said with a groan.

"Only just started," Caspar muttered, and sucked hard at a neglected nipple.

"I can't wait any longer. You're too good at this. Please, Caspar. I want to come with you inside me."

He froze. I'm an idiot. How could he have forgotten to bring his wallet upstairs?

"What's the matter?"

"Before I lose the capacity to think, I need to get something from downstairs."

He had one condom in his wallet. Much to his relief, almost every woman he'd recently fucked had provided her own. The damn things were expensive. Though not, as he always reminded himself, as expensive as a child.

Ally lowered herself onto his chest, and Caspar groaned at the pressure on his cock. What he needed to do was get up—in a minute—stumble downstairs and have a quick wank while he pretended to play "find the condom". He'd hardly impress if he came the moment he pushed inside her.

"Do you always use protection?" she asked.

"Always," he said in a firm voice.

"Have you ever done it without?"

"Never."

"Me neither." Ally stared straight at him. "But I like to be doubly sure so I take the Pill."

Was she telling him something here? Other than the obvious.

"Don't go downstairs," Ally whispered.

Oh fuck. Yes, she is.

She kissed his chin. "I want to feel you inside me. I want nothing between us. I want *you*."

"Oh God."

"What was that? Oh good?"

The tiny part of his brain that retained a teaspoon of common sense was silenced by a deluge of excitement from the remainder. Ally stood on the bed and, in one elegant movement, peeled her panties over her hips and stepped out of them. A strangled groan burst from Caspar's mouth, echoed by a spurt of pre-cum from his cock.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered.

Her pubic hair had been trimmed very short to the shape of a teardrop, pointing to her navel. Caspar struggled out of his boxers with less than his usual elegance, getting them trapped around an ankle until he finally kicked them off the bed.

"So are you," Ally said.

"You're more beautiful."

Ally laughed. "No you are."

"No you are." Caspar reached up and pulled her down to lie alongside him, running his hand over the arch of her hip. "Christ, Ally. Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yep, you really are more beaut—"

He shut her up with a kiss.

Caspar slid his hand between her legs and sighed at the wet warmth of her. His fingers explored the soft folds of her flesh, sliding back and forth until Ally dragged her mouth from his.

"If you touch my clit, I'll come. I want to come with you inside me."

Caspar was in imminent danger of coming all over her stomach. He sent a silent threat to his balls, threatening to wrap them in tight leather if they let him down. They tingled in response. *Shit, seems they like the sound of that.* The telltale sensation that warned he neared his limit rippled down his spine, and Caspar contracted the muscles in his lower belly until the feeling drifted away. When he opened his eyes, Ally was staring at him as though she — *Oh fuck.* What was it about her? How was it she could make him care so much?

He gently rolled her onto her back and settled between her legs. When she reached for his cock, Caspar grabbed her wrist. He yanked her arm up, brought her other to join it and held them on the pillow with one hand.

"Knife edge here, Ally. No touching."

His mouth went dry as he looked at her, her thighs spread open for him, pink folds glistening. Caspar positioned his cock at the entrance to her body and stared into her eyes as he pushed. He only meant to slide in a little way, but once he'd felt the clasp of her muscles, he kept going until his hips were locked to hers.

"Oh fuck, fuck," Caspar whispered.

He held himself motionless as he savored the tightness. He could feel his cock throbbing, roaring like an engine readying to race but Caspar gritted his teeth and kept still. Wrapped in her hot, wet embrace he recognized sex with a condom had just been wrecked for him.

Ally shifted her legs and wrapped them around his thighs.

"You okay?" he managed to ask, though the answer was irrelevant. Too late to turn back.

"Tell me when you've finished."

Caspar let out a sound that hovered between a laugh and a growl. His first thrust was long and hard and made her groan. His second was harder and deeper, and Ally groaned longer and louder. Caspar didn't hold back, he drove into her. He wasn't careful or cautious because he couldn't help himself. He was caught in the grip of something uncontrollable as orgasm built inside him. It enveloped every organ, creeping through his limbs, surrounding him, drowning him in such deep pleasure it felt as though his entire body were going to shatter.

His hips jerked faster and faster, and Ally bucked into each down thrust. *One more.* He didn't want to stop, didn't want to lose the exquisite clasp around his cock. *One more.* Caspar refused to let himself come first. She clenched harder around him, her breath quickening. The hot, slick friction of his rigid cock driving into her soft, tight folds turned him on in a way he'd never felt so intensely before. Ally cried out, arched her body up to his, and he felt the ripples of her pussy contracting along his length.

Yesssssssssss. Caspar continued thrusting as her body shook against his, until his balls ignited and he exploded with the force of a star going nova. She tightened around him again, the contractions milking his shaft, and he shuddered with every wrenching pulse of cum.

The feeling of satiated pleasure trickled through him as if he lay in warm water. *Christ, what a fuck!* Caspar released his hold on her wrists, belatedly realizing he was holding her too tight. He shifted to her side and she wrapped herself around him, still holding him inside her.

"Caspar."

The soft whisper of his name against his lips made his cock jerk and jolted his brain into action. He flicked his tongue inside her mouth, teased her tongue and then deepened the kiss. His belly was on fire and he felt lightheaded with desire. Caspar was the master of smooth, gentle seduction, yet he'd fucked her as if the world were going to end at any moment. But he'd wanted to please her, do what Ally wanted and not be gentle, which happened to be just perfect with him. Next time he'd go slow.

Maybe.

He smiled against her lips.

She had her arms wrapped around him, fingers stroking his back, twisting hair at the nape of his neck. They were still melded together, his cock firmly lodged inside her. A fierce tide of arousal raced through him at the prospect of doing this again. With no condom. *Fuck, he was an idiot*. He didn't trust anyone, and what had he just done?

Caspar could still barely believe he'd let it happen, though the consequences were somewhat worse for Ally if she'd lied. Why would she lie? Yet he *did* need protection, just not the sort that came in a foil packet. How was he supposed to protect his heart against her? Caspar took women to bed and then never saw them again. That way he could be sure what they'd done never developed into anything else. He had no responsibility for their future happiness. He didn't want to care about Ally. He wouldn't. He couldn't.

How could he be hardening again? *Oh God.* Caspar wrenched his mouth away from hers and gulped air into struggling lungs.

"What happened to your tights?" Ally mumbled in his ear.

"My tights?"

"Superman." She clenched her pussy around him.

Caspar chuckled. "Your fault."

Strong fingers gripped his backside and pulled him even closer.

"Can I get my breath back?" he asked.

"No."

She plunged her tongue into his mouth, clutched his backside, and Caspar groaned. When he felt her finger slide down the crease of his bottom, he clenched his fists but not

his butt. As the finger pressed deeper, his blood thickened in his veins. What was she doing? Well, he knew what she was doing, but did she?

Caspar lifted his mouth from hers and rested his head on the pillow. Ally faced him. Her hand pressed lower, passing his anus, tickling the sensitive strip of flesh behind his balls until his breath hitched, and then she touched the place where their bodies joined. That was okay, he could cope with that. A finger rubbed the base of his cock and he sucked in a breath.

Then she pulled back to tease around the pucker of his anus, and Caspar wasn't sure he could cope at all.

"Am I freaking you out?" she whispered.

"Yeah."

"In a good way or bad?"

This is Ally, not someone trying to hurt me. "Good."

Ally's finger pressed and circled as Caspar pushed back against it.

"I am allowed to do this to you?" he asked.

"Only in August."

He laughed and then gasped as her finger slipped inside and kept going.

"Oh God," he mumbled.

"I can feel you inside me," she said, her eyes opening wide. "Now where's - Ah."

Caspar hissed as she curled her finger on his prostate and rubbed it gently.

"Nice?" she whispered.

"Ughahh." That made sense.

Caspar gently rocked his hips, pushing his cock into Ally and pulling back onto her finger.

"Want two fingers?" she asked.

"Yes." One word was as much as he could manage.

His eyes closed as he lost himself in the dual sensations. Ally's fingers thrust harder and he matched the movement with his cock.

How can I come again?

His balls tightened. His asshole quivered. Ally twisted her fingers and the rope that held him broke, sending him plummeting to oblivion. But no crash upon jagged rocks awaited, instead a soft carpet of feathery bliss cushioned his fall.

Ally's breathing had almost returned to normal when Caspar scooped her into his arms and carried her out of the room.

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"Where - ?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Shower," he said.

That wasn't a bad idea. She was hot and sweaty, her thighs dripping with Caspar's cum and her cream.

"We have five minutes fifty-three seconds before the water goes cold," he said as he stood her under the wide showerhead. "This is the plan. I soap you all over and you rub your body against mine. Okay? The countdown starts from the moment I turn the knob."

"Go," Ally said, and then screamed as a blast of cold water hit her on the head and missed Caspar completely.

"I forgot to mention the first fifteen seconds are cold too." He grinned.

She closed her eyes as Caspar stood behind her and ran soapy palms up her thighs and over her belly. He cupped her breasts and rubbed her nipples with his thumbs before sweeping down her back to her butt and between her legs. His hands and fingers were everywhere, and Ally's arousal, ticking on a slow simmer, crept back to a rolling boil.

She twisted round to press her breasts against his chest, somehow managing to find enough room to slide down to crouch at his feet to soap his cock and balls. He was still semi-hard. Ally was amazed. One caress with her fist and he went even harder. She shimmied up his body, rubbing her breasts against his cock, and Caspar's fingers tightened in her hair. But he pulled her up not pushed her down.

"Sixty-three seconds," he spluttered through the deluge.

Ally wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. His fingers tightened on her waist and his cock jerked against her belly. He let her take control of the kiss and Ally went exploring, tracing the ridges of his teeth, the smooth arch of his palate, the soft area under his tongue. She nibbled his lip and dragged her tongue along the crease of his mouth as she rocked into his erection.

The shower went off as the first drop of cold water landed on her cheek.

Ally chuckled. "Been caught out by five minutes fifty-four?"

"Once."

She shifted a lock of wet hair from his eyes and he blinked. Ally ran her finger along a white scar disappearing into his hair at his temple. "Where did you get this?"

"Prison. One of the luckier things that happened to me."

Oh God. "How come?"

Caspar pulled her out of the shower and wrapped her in a blue towel. "A guy wanted to give me a tattoo. I wasn't as keen and I slipped and hit my head. I was carted off to the infirmary, and when I came out, he'd been transferred."

He wiped her arms with the towel and didn't look at her. Ally knew Caspar was lying and suspected he knew that she knew. It wasn't hard to imagine what prison must have been like.

"Do you ever talk about it?" she whispered.

"I try not to. Four years of my life was enough to waste."

But how could he put it aside? What had happened to him was like an invidious poison seeping through the rest of his life. Ally wanted to find the antidote, make people see the good man beneath. Would he give her the chance?

Maybe she wouldn't be with him long enough to right any wrongs.

"Be gentle when you've had enough of me," she blurted, and then bit her lip. Not a good idea to show herself as needy.

Caspar dried her with infinite care, landing kisses after the pass of the towel. He knelt in front of her, looped the towel around her butt and pulled her closer.

"I could never have enough of you," he whispered, and pressed his face into her stomach.

Ally knew he lied to her again. She stroked his head and thought she'd kill anyone else who tried to hurt him.

# **Chapter Thirteen**

Caspar lay with his head on the same pillow as Ally and stared into her eyes. He'd lost count of the number of times they'd made lo—they'd *fucked*. Every time he'd just about recovered, he wanted to do it again. They'd hardly slept, but when they had, it had been wrapped in each other's arms, their bodies seamlessly entwined as if they'd been made to fit together. Caspar could tell himself as many times as he liked that he didn't want to care about her, but he did. She was cute and funny and kind to him. Somehow her kindness was the hardest thing to bear.

The fierce burn in his gut was her fault.

The pain in his heart—her fault.

The ache in his muscles – her fault.

And he cherished them all because it felt as if she was bringing him back to life.

He smiled and Ally smiled back, her curving mouth splitting her face in a broad grin. She wrapped a hand around his hardening cock and the smile changed to a pout. "Again?"

"I can't help it," Caspar said.

"I want to see it when it's not hard."

"You think that's likely when you're lying naked in my arms?" She didn't have to be naked. Even thinking about her sent his blood rushing south.

The alarm on her phone cheeped and they both groaned.

"We don't need to go," Caspar said.

Ally yanked the duvet off his body. "Oh yes we do. I'll shower first. I'll time myself so I don't use all the hot water."

If he showered with her, they'd definitely be late. Caspar sat up. *Oh shit.* He should've switched the heater on again, but he was so used to rationing himself he'd forgotten. He tensed. The shower started and Ally shrieked. Caspar looked at his cock. Maybe a cold shower wasn't a bad idea.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he came downstairs in loose-fitting pants, a t-shirt and fleece, Ally pushed a slice of buttered toast smeared with marmalade into his hand. Caspar hadn't eaten breakfast in months.

"Coffee on the table. Drink fast."

Caspar chewed his toast as he looked at her in her pretty pink camouflage pants and blue sweater. She had the smaller of his two fleeces tied around her waist and her purse hanging from her shoulder. She looked as if she were off to the shops.

"Do you need the purse?" he asked.

She sighed and put it on the table.

Caspar picked up his rucksack. "Stick the sandwiches in here. There's a half-empty plastic bottle in the fridge we can fill with water."

He drank most of his coffee and threw the rest down the sink, grabbed the last slice of toast and hauled the rucksack onto his back.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Always."

Caspar laughed as he locked the door. Ally's white tennis shoes weren't ideal footwear, but she'd insisted that was all she had. So long as it didn't rain, she should be okay. She slid her hand into his as they walked up the hill, and Caspar squeezed her fingers. He doubted taking part in today's activities would lead to his inclusion in the mountain rescue team, but he didn't want to let Ally down.

As they neared the foot of Tyburn Crag, he saw people standing by a Land Rover drinking coffee.

"Do you know them?" Ally whispered.

"Most of them." There were a few faces he didn't recognize, a few backs that he did.

Caspar steeled himself and let go of Ally's hand as they joined them.

"Morning," Ally said brightly, and repeated it as she looked from one person to another.

The greeting was returned, but no one made eye contact with Caspar when he added his voice to Ally's. *Fuck them*.

"Equipment check," Tom called. "Caspar?"

Ally went with him as he walked to the back of the vehicle.

"Hi Ally," Tom said. "You've not forgotten I need your help?"

Caspar tried not to bristle and failed.

"Any chance of coming to the pub tonight?" Tom asked.

"That's fine," Ally said.

And Caspar would be going too.

"Whistle," Tom said.

Ally pursed her lips and whistled Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

Caspar and Tom gaped at her.

"What?" she asked.

Caspar put his hand in a pocket of the rucksack and took out a whistle.

She snorted. "I thought you were checking to see if I could whistle in case I got into trouble."

Tom laughed, and Caspar wanted to smash his teeth down his throat.

Instead he buried his fist in the rucksack and took out the compass, torch, spare batteries, a small first-aid kit, a hat, the sandwiches and water and his climbing shoes.

"Okay?" Caspar asked.

He knew damn well that Tom wanted to find fault before they'd even started.

"No helmet?" Tom asked.

"Do you wear one?"

Not the last time Caspar had seen Tom climbing.

"You don't have any energy bars," Tom said. "Essential—"

"My fault. I ate all the chocolate," Ally said. "I really needed the energy last night." She snuggled closer to Caspar. He felt a thrill of pleasure at the way she defended him.

"Pick a couple up from the box," Tom said in a gruff voice. "And grab a pager."

Ally whooped and stuffed in two Mars bars as Caspar repacked the rucksack.

"Gather round, everyone," Neil called, and the chattering stopped. "Good morning. Looks like we've got a nice day for it, weather forecast says fine to start, wind and rain later. We'll be done by the time the cold front arrives. This exercise is split into sections. The first is a climb up Tyburn Crag to warm up then an orienteering challenge that should bring you back within a reasonable distance of our poor casualty who'll be having his accident at precisely one thirty. Be gentle with him because he'll just have eaten his lunch."

A chorus of chuckles followed.

"You'll all be required to demonstrate some aspect of mountain rescue service support. The details are on a sheet together with your maps and orienteering instructions. Tom's handing those out now. If you don't have your own ropes, collect them from the vehicle. I'll bring them down from the top of the crag."

Caspar took the package Tom offered and didn't miss the smirk. *Shit.* What did *that* mean? But then he wouldn't do anything to make life difficult for Ally, would he? Unless Tom wanted to make Caspar look a fool. *Oh fuck it*.

"Just to remind you all that this is not a race," Neil said. "The aim of today is not to tear across the moorland like lunatics. On your marks, get set, go."

As everyone dashed off, Ally tugged on Caspar's sleeve and gave him a wide-eyed look. "Climbing?"

"Tyburn Crag isn't hard. Go and stand on the left hand side of the crag while I get the ropes."

Caspar turned to find himself facing Tom.

"No need for Ally to climb. Does she want to stay with me?" Tom asked.

Over his dead body. "No." Caspar grabbed a set of ropes and harnesses, and set off after her.

"Caspar?" Neil beckoned him. "Do you want to leave Ally with me while you do the climb?"

Fuck it. Did no one trust him? "She'll be fine."

Neil sighed. "I wouldn't be too sure of that. I heard you tell her to go left. She's on the far right pitch."

Caspar spun round and groaned.

Ally's heart was doing its best to escape from the prison of her ribs and run back down the hill. Her stomach had already bottomed out. She looked up at the solid wall of rock towering miles into a cloudy sky, like that column on *Lord of the Rings*, and groaned. Caspar sat on a boulder at her side and changed his shoes.

"Ally, which is your right hand?"

Her arms jerked up one after the other like a marionette. "Oops. Wrong side?" She groaned.

Caspar stood. "Don't look so worried. You'll be fine. What I'm going to do is climb up partway and belay the rope—er, make it secure. I'll call 'Climb when you're ready' and you shout 'Climbing'. When I call 'Okay', then you start to climb. If you need more rope, shout 'Slack', less rope, shout 'Take in'."

Ally could feel her knees shaking already. "I'm not very strong."

Caspar pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. "Climbing is ninety percent balance and technique. You need to use your arms to explore and guide but your legs do the work. I think your legs are plenty strong enough." He put his mouth to her ear. "Not sure I don't have bruises."

She snickered.

"All you need to do is watch where I put my feet and hands on these first few moves and copy me. It's simple." He smiled at her.

In Ally's experience, if someone said something was simple, it wasn't.

Caspar ran his finger down her forehead over her nose and lips to her chin. "I won't let you fall."

He tucked her fleece into the rucksack and helped her into her harness before he put on his own. Ally clasped her hands together so he wouldn't see them shaking.

"You don't have to do this, Ally," he whispered as he attached her to the rope.

"I'm fine."

"You don't seem very happy."

"I'm just peeved you're not wearing shorts," she mumbled. "I'd have had something to look at."

Caspar smiled. "Feed me the rope as I climb. Remember, I won't let you fall."

That's what Finn had said, but he had. Okay, she hadn't fallen all the way to splatter on the ground, but that sensation of tumbling away from safety when her hold on the rock had failed had almost made her wet herself. *Please don't let that happen today. Either the falling or the other bit.* 

Ally watched Caspar effortlessly clamber up the rock face, finding hand and foot holds in splinter-thin cracks, on matchstick narrow ridges, on bloody nothing. But he looked so cool, his long, lean body stretched out like that, his lovely bum flexing under those worn pants. Ally sighed.

"Hey, kinky girl in the harness."

Ally's gaze shot to Caspar as rope slithered up the crag face.

He looked down at her. "I'm safe. Are you ready?"

No. "Yes."

"Climb when you're ready," he called.

"Climbing," Ally shouted.

"Okay."

The first few yards weren't too bad, in fact Ally impressed herself until she lost track of where Caspar had put his hands and feet.

"You're doing great," he called. "Hand hold to your left." Ally reached out. "No, other left."

Damn.

But inch by inch she made her way up, pressing herself into the rock while her heart hammered in her ears. When Caspar's foot came into view, Ally wanted to cry.

"Bit farther, Ally. Onto this ledge. You're doing brilliantly."

Ally scrambled up beside him and whimpered. Caspar landed a quick kiss on her lips. His eyes were shining, his entire face animated, and Ally realized how much he enjoyed this. She wouldn't spoil it.

"That was so great," she said, and looked down. "Look how far I've— Ooh." Ally turned her eyes back to the rock, fear galloping up and down her spine. "That was easy. How much harder is Everest? Not much, I bet." *Oh God, I need to pee.* She didn't dare move, even to cross her legs.

"One more stage and we're at the top."

I need to pee now. Now. NOW!

"Go on then," Ally said.

"You don't need a rest?"

"Nope. Fine."

"Okay, now listen. After the next pitch, I'm not going to be able to see you for a few yards so you have to follow my instructions. Once I shout 'Safe', you can take the rope out of the belay and call 'Off belay'. Then I'll take in the slack. When it pulls on your

harness, shout 'That's me'. That's so I know the rope hasn't been snagged by some gremlin. Okay?"

Ally gave him a smile a chimpanzee would be proud of and he laughed.

Caspar began to climb again. Ally's heart pounded all over her body. She risked a glance to either side and saw the others making their way up from lower down. Wow, Caspar was fast. *So am I*.

"Safe," Caspar shouted.

Ally unclipped the rope from the anchor. "Off belay," she called.

Once again the rope slithered up the rock face. When she felt the tug on her harness, she yelled, "That's me."

"Climb when you're ready," he called.

"Climbing."

"Okay."

Ally stared at the rock. Good news and bad. The good news was she no longer wanted to pee. The bad was that she hadn't watched which way Caspar had gone. Yes up, but how? She started to climb and felt Caspar take in the slack. He said he wouldn't let her fall and she trusted him.

"Hand hold on your right... Other right," Caspar shouted.

I don't like it. I don't like it.

Ally's fingers hurt, her legs ached and her heart pounded. She stretched to reach the next hold and froze. *Oh God, what's wrong with my legs?* They shook so hard Ally thought she was going to fall.

"Are you okay?" Caspar called.

Ally opened her mouth and only a whimper slipped out.

"She's got sewing machine legs," Neil shouted from a mile below her.

Is that what they called it when legs shook with such violence? Ally couldn't move.

"Listen, Ally," Caspar said. "You're shaking because you have all your body weight on the ball of your foot with the heel lifted. You've fatigued your calf muscles. Relax and lower your heel and it will stop. You're trying too hard, sweetheart, that's all."

The magic word to melt her bones, muscles, everything. The first endearment apart from star girl. The shaking stopped and she began to climb again.

"Good girl," Neil said. "Well done, Caspar."

The moment Ally realized her performance reflected on Caspar, her resolve hardened. She whizzed up the last few holds, crawled onto the flat rock at the top of the crag and kept crawling past Caspar to make sure she was away from the edge.

When her hand touched something that wasn't hard, Ally lifted her head and freaked. *Oh my God, a snake.* "Shit, shit." She threw herself sideways and toppled over the edge of a flat rock. The rope tightened and she sprawled facedown, bum in the air over a wide dip in the crag but only in danger of looking a fool.

It was Tom who hauled her back to the top. He put his arm around her as Ally shook. Caspar rushed over and she buried her face in his chest.

"What the hell's the matter?" Caspar tipped up her face.

"Snake," Ally gasped.

Several people had gathered and they looked around.

"This?" Tom held up a brown snake and Ally tried to dig her way into Caspar's chest.

The need to pee had come back with a vengeance.

"Ally, it's plastic," Caspar whispered.

She stiffened. The outbreak of chuckles annoyed her but she put a smile on her face. "Not that snake, the one behind you," she said.

Tom spun around and everyone laughed harder.

"Are you okay?" Caspar whispered.

"Yes."

"Let me get you out of the harness."

Ally trembled while Caspar unfastened her and tidied the rope.

"Put the ropes in a heap. I'll take them down," Neil called. "See you all later."

"Some kids must have left it," Tom said, bringing the snake over.

Ally tried not to back away, plastic or not, it looked real enough to bite.

"Come on, Tom," Mike said. "Let's get going."

"Don't get lost," Tom said to Caspar, and turned away.

"I'm sorry," Ally whispered. "I really—"

Caspar pulled her into his arms. "It's okay. I don't like snakes either. I have a thing about them and Tom knows it. I think it was meant to scare me, not you."

"He left it deliberately?"

"It's possible."

Ally glared at Tom's retreating back. *Bastard*.

Caspar sat to change his shoes.

"Right. We're going to win this. Where's the map?" Ally pulled it out of the rucksack.

"We need the instructions and the compass."

Caspar pushed his climbing shoes into the rucksack and stood. He took the map and the sheet of paper from Ally and glanced at it. "Okay. Put everything back for the moment, I know how to get to the first checkpoint."

They started to walk.

"I've never been orienteering before," Ally said.

"This isn't real orienteering. If it were, we'd all be going the same way on a staggered start and we'd be running."

"Do you want to run?"

Caspar looked at her. "Do you?"

"I want to win," she whispered. "Actually, I want to beat Tom."

"That's not going to happen."

Ally's shoulders slumped. Was she that much of a hindrance?

"Hey, not because of you." Caspar tweaked her cheek. "Tom's likely to have given us the longest, most difficult route. The prick."

"Well, let's show him then." Ally started to run.

A hundred yards later, with Caspar on her heels, she slowed to a walk. "Maybe not," she panted.

"You need to learn to pace yourself," Caspar said. "Jog, don't sprint."

"So says Mr. One-Speed, flat out."

Caspar snickered. "Oh yeah, Ms. Fast and Furious."

They grinned at each other and a surge of lust sent tremors racing down Ally's spine.

"I need that Mars bar." She fumbled in the pack on Caspar's back. "You want yours?"

"We've only been going for a few minutes."

"So?"

"They're supposed to be in case of emergency."

"This *is* an emergency." She needed Caspar naked, but the Mars bar would have to do.

"So what happens when we're desperate for something to eat?"

Ally looked him up and down. "Which bit of you do you want me to eat first?"

Caspar laughed and ripped the paper off his bar.

Ally licked her lips after the first mouthful. "Mmmm. Chocolate is one of my vices. I never buy more than a bar at a time because my willpower is a pathetic, sniveling, little dweeb. I was once given a bag of Cream Eggs. Twelve of them. I told myself to ration them. I hid them all over my bedsit, and by the end of the day I'd eaten them all. I didn't eat anything else, but even so... I am such a pig."

Caspar laughed. "Want half my Mars bar, porkie?"

"Don't tempt me. Right, I can run again now. You set the pace. Don't turn around, I'll be directly behind you."

"Why shouldn't I turn around?"

"I need to water this patch of dry grass in case of fire."

Ally watched his back as he moved away, laughing. Caspar smiled a lot of the time now. It was as though Ally had cracked his shell and little by little he was coming to life. She couldn't think when something had made her feel happier.

Bladder emptied, she ran to catch up with him. "That's better. Halfway up that crag I was desperate."

"You did really well to climb that. I'm proud of you." He brushed her cheek with his fingers.

Ally swallowed hard. "Thank you. Maybe you ought to think about teaching. You were really kind and patient."

"Only because it was you. Anyone else I'd have yelled at."

"Finn yelled at me all the time. He told mum and dad that if I kept following him, he'd dig a hole and bury me."

"When I was home for the holidays, Jemima followed me everywhere. It was like having a puppy. She didn't understand if I got cross with her. She just gave me this wide-eyed look of hurt and I felt terrible."

"I did that to Finn but he took no notice. Did your friends mind Jemima hanging around?"

"I didn't let them. Jem was happy to sit and watch, so long as she was near me."

Caspar talked more about his sister as they ran, with Ally asking questions to prod him on. His love for Jemima shone through everything he said, and Ally supposed that made him feel even guiltier that she'd gone missing under his watch. What had he been doing when he'd left her for those few moments in the bar? The fact that he hadn't explained suggested it was something bad. A quick fuck in the bathroom was the obvious conclusion. Would he tell her the truth?

"First checkpoint," Caspar said, and pointed to a small, orange flag.

While Ally slumped to the ground and got her breath back, Caspar stuffed the flag into his rucksack, gave her the water and read the next set of instructions. She looked up at him. *God, he is so gorgeous*. He frowned when he concentrated, his lips a little way apart. Such kissable lips.

Ally drank and handed him the bottle. The muscles between her legs clenched as she watched him tip back his head and swallow the water. Oh God, she had it bad if something as simple as taking a drink turned her on.

She pushed herself up. "Where now?" All Ally could see was moorland dotted with sheep and the odd rocky crag. "Tom wouldn't send us into a bog, would he?"

"He'd better fucking not." Caspar stuffed the bottle back inside the rucksack and took out the compass. "Want me to show you how to use -"

"Nope, let's keep going," Ally said.

Caspar held the compass against the map and turned. "Okay, this way. We're heading for those rocks."

They set off at a jog, and Ally's mind wandered to the previous night. Hand job, blowjob, him on top, her on top, doggie style, legs up, legs down and the kissing. *Oh God, the kissing*.

By the time they reached the crag, Ally had worked herself into such a state of arousal she could barely breathe. The rub of her panties against her wet folds was driving her mad. When Caspar took off his rucksack and bent to pick up the second orange flag, Ally jumped on his back.

He laughed and grabbed her legs. "If you think I'm going to carry you, think again."

"Is there nothing I could do to persuade you?" She swirled her tongue around his ear.

Caspar groaned. "Possibly."

Ally slid from his back, stood in front of him and rubbed his cock through his pants.

"Probably," he said, his eyes darkening.

She squeezed.

"Definitely," he amended.

### **Chapter Fourteen**

Caspar's eyes fluttered shut as Ally played with his cock through his pants. He ought to stop her.

"Fuck me," she whispered, and he let out a choked laugh.

He took hold of her naughty-but-nice hand and pulled her closer to the rocks. "Seems my willpower is as pathetic as yours."

Caspar pressed her back against a flat surface and slipped his hands into the front of her pants. *Damp*. A shiver of excitement raced down his spine.

"I wish we were in London, standing in some dark cul-de-sac," Ally whispered.

Caspar landed whisper kisses around her jaw. "Why?"

"So someone might see us."

His breath caught. He flipped open the button on her pants and pulled down the zip. "You like the idea of being watched?"

"I like the idea of shocking someone."

"I think you've freaked out the sheep."

Ally sniggered. Caspar stepped back and unfastened his pants. He eased out his cock and drew his fist up his length, pulling his foreskin back over the crown.

"Oh God, I love watching you do that," she whispered. "Turn round and see if the sheep feel the same."

"I don't think so." Caspar pinched the skin over the head of his cock with his thumb and forefinger and worked the top couple of inches, rubbing and twisting, while his other hand squeezed around his base and pressed down on his balls. Shivers raced up and down his spine.

"Take your pants off," he growled. "Tie that fleece around your waist."

Ally stared into his eyes as she toed off her shoes then yanked down her pants and panties together. The fleece in place to protect her backside, she leaned against the rock.

"Spread your legs," Caspar said. When she'd done as he'd asked, he swallowed hard. *Oh God*. The fact that she'd responded to his command ratcheted up the pressure in his balls. "Now hold yourself open for me."

She made a little noise in her throat—reluctance? excitement?—and then pulled her folds apart. Caspar's breathing quickened and he tightened his grip at the root of his cock. He could see her clit poking out of its hood, and he dropped to his knees and licked it.

Ally gasped and shuddered against him. The taste of her, the smell of her made Caspar's head swim. He explored her with his tongue, relearning the dips and hills of

her sex, licking the length of her, sucking her clit into his mouth. Ally's hands were on his shoulders, fingers digging through his fleece as she panted and groaned.

Caspar worked the sensitive knot of tissue, rhythmically, pressing against it with the tip of his tongue, and he felt her tense.

"Cas...par," she wailed.

He pulled back. He didn't want her to come too soon. Ally opened her eyes and looked down at him, her face a mix of need and desire. "Please."

Caspar dragged his hand through her cream and brought it to his lips. When he sucked each finger in turn, Ally whimpered.

"You taste delicious," he said, and buried his face between her legs.

With renewed pressure on her clit, Caspar felt her on the rise again. He pressed the little nub between his tongue and teeth, and she jerked. Caspar let his cock go and grabbed her hips to hold her steady.

"Oh fuck," Ally moaned.

Her thighs tightened around his ears as she started to quiver. She came on his tongue, her cream flowing like nectar, and Caspar drank and drank.

His balls tingling, Caspar stood and took her in a single thrust, burying his cock deep inside her. He pressed her back against the rock as Ally wrapped her legs around him. Too desperate to wait, he pounded into her, his hands tight on her hips to hold her still while he moved. He drove harder, faster, deeper while the noise of them fucking sounded loud in his ears. Ally's breathy cries, his grunts, the wet sound of his cock sinking into her pussy, it all wound him tighter.

"Yes...yes...yes," Ally gasped the words as he rammed into her.

The ache in his balls was intense enough to hurt. Jolts of current raced along his nerves. Her hands caught his face and held him, and Caspar breathed her name over and over, "Ally, Ally,"

She lifted her hips somehow, the angle of penetration changed, and his cock jumped. He'd been deep, now he was deeper, and every bang of his root against her pussy pulled another thread out of the fraying mental rope that held him.

Out in the middle of the moors, cold air on his backside, for all he knew an audience of hikers standing feet away, and Caspar didn't give a fuck. His breathing quickened as orgasm built, raising him higher and higher so he knew the fall would be sweeter. He felt Ally come again, her pussy clenching around him and she quivered but still thrust against him.

The rope that held him snapped.

"Fuck, fuck," Caspar gasped.

He sprayed his cum inside her as he collapsed against her, his mouth seeking hers, his tongue kissing hers as his hips twitched and his balls emptied.

"You...are...fucking...fantastic," he muttered into her neck.

When he could breathe again, Caspar eased her legs down and pulled out of her. He pulled up his pants and fastened himself up.

Ally groaned as she bent to get her clothes. "Now I need a Mars bar. You should have made me save one."

When they were decent again, Caspar tugged her back to the rucksack. One hand inside and he groaned. *Shit*. He pulled out the soggy sheet of instructions and equally soggy map. When Caspar tipped up the backpack, water dripped out. *Fuck*. He should have put the papers in a plastic bag.

"Oh no. Didn't I screw the top on properly?" Ally asked.

"There's a crack in the bottle. Want to drink the rest before it trickles out?"

She took a swig and handed it back. Caspar finished it.

"The ink's smudged on the paper and the map's falling apart." Caspar sighed. "I can't read the instructions. We'll have to go back."

"Could we contact Neil and ask him where to go?"

"Do you know his number?"

Ally shook her head. "What about the pager?"

"One way. It's just to tell us where to go when Neil has his accident."

"So we've fucked up. Shit." Ally stamped her foot.

"It doesn't matter, Ally." No one would be surprised when he failed. It was what the world expected.

"Yes, it does. I wanted..." She huffed. "Come on then. We might as well go back."

Caspar took out the compass and pointed. "This way."

Ally's shoulders and head stayed down as they walked. Was winning so important to her? Caspar was competitive, but four years in an Albanian penal institution had taught him what was really important in life, and sometimes it was safer to lose.

"Would you come and have dinner with my parents on Wednesday?" he blurted.

She gave a shocked glance. "You want me to meet your mum and dad?"

"That's the general idea."

She smiled at him. "That would be lovely."

No, it wouldn't. Caspar wondered why he'd invited her. To deflect attention from his shortcomings? To please his mother? To prove to his father he wasn't a complete waste of space? To show them Ally was special?

"I wish..." Ally's voice trailed away.

"What?"

"That you could have met my mum and dad. I wish they'd been mine from birth, but I feel lucky I had them as long as I did."

"Ever tempted to trace your birth mother?"

Ally scowled. "No. She was the one who broke off contact. She could have found me if she'd wanted."

"She might be able to tell you the name of your birth father."

"I don't care."

"He might though."

She shot him a quick glance as though the thought hadn't occurred to her before. "Maybe. For all I know he's some fabulously wealthy guy who's been desperate to trace me. Or some layabout who wants to sponge off me." She frowned. "What's that noise?"

Caspar pulled the pager out of his pocket. "That's weird. I thought Neil said the exercise would start after one thirty."

"Where is he?"

Caspar took out the map and checked the coordinates. "Not that far. About a mile. On the only dry part of the map." He gave a wry grin.

Ally's face lit up. "Hey, it won't matter about us not collecting the other flags will it? This is what we have to respond to. Let's run."

Caspar began to jog. "Why would Neil cut short the day?"

"Well, if he planned to use a helicopter rescue, maybe they're the ones who've caused him to reschedule. A call out somewhere else?"

"Or Tom is sending us miles in the wrong direction." Except they were heading back toward Wyndale.

Caspar kept adjusting their course according to the terrain and the bearing, and they ran on.

"That's Neil's red jacket." Ally pointed to the foot of a small crag, a few hundred yards to the right. "Ooh we're first. That has to impress him. Keen and fast *and* you know left from right." She grinned.

She's doing this for me. In a moment of clarity, Caspar realized how much Ally wanted to make the others accept him and his heart swelled with...something he didn't want to give a name. He wasn't used to people being on his side. He'd spent so long feeling isolated he'd forgotten the pleasure of having a friend. More than a friend.

Except maybe it was a guy thing, but getting back first was *not* going to endear him to the rest of the team.

"Hi Neil," Ally yelled, and waved her arms.

Caspar rolled his eyes. "He won't respond. He's pretending to be injured."

They sprinted the last few hundred yards. Neil lay on his stomach, his head to one side, eyes closed, pager clutched in his hand at the edge of a steep ravine.

"Don't touch him," Caspar said, panting heavily. "We have to assess his condition." "Okay."

"Can you hear me?" Caspar asked. "Open your eyes."

"Help."

The frail voice came from somewhere below them. Caspar leaned over and groaned. "Shit." Neil's wife, Mary, lay on a rock slab, blood all over her face. Caspar hadn't expected there to be two casualties to deal with. Still he supposed it was a fair test in prioritizing. *Christ, that blood looks real*.

"Hang on, Mary," Caspar called.

"Oh God, Neil's really white," Ally muttered. His eyelids fluttered and she squeezed his hand. "And cold. Caspar, I think—"

"Where does it hurt?" Caspar asked.

"Chest," Neil whispered.

Ally let out a quiet whimper. "Caspar, don't you think —?"

"Did you fall?" Caspar asked.

"No. Pain. Arm. Chest. Can't breathe. Real. Not pretending."

And Caspar finally accepted what Ally had been trying to tell him. This wasn't an exercise. *Shit. Heart attack.* Adrenaline surged. "Ally, get the first-aid box out of my rucksack."

He'd been expecting a fake situation and had stupidly assumed that's what this was. Praying for no spinal injury, Caspar shifted Neil onto his back and loosened his clothing at the neck and waist. Then he yanked his own fleece off and laid it flat under Neil's head. "Are you allergic to aspirin?"

"No," Neil gasped.

"Ally, is there any water left in that bottle?"

"Tiny bit." She handed it to him.

"It's enough. Neil, mate, you're going to be fine. I'll crush an aspirin and put it in your mouth." Caspar glanced up at Ally. "Use my phone. If there's a signal, call 9-9-9. Get our location off my pager." Caspar smeared the aspirin and water mix on his finger and then put it in Neil's mouth. "This is going to help. Just stay calm."

Ally groaned and said, "No signal."

Fuck. Caspar was desperate for Neil to wink and tell him this was all an act.

"Mary?" Neil muttered.

"She's okay. I'll go and look at her in a minute."

Caspar stood and pulled Ally to one side.

"You have to go for help, Ally. The mobile reception is crap up here but there are pockets where you can get a signal. Tyburn Crag is due north. That direction. Take the compass. If you don't get a signal on the way, you'll definitely get one there. Tell them it's a suspected heart attack and the other casualty has undiagnosed climbing injuries."

"Wouldn't you be faster?" she whispered.

"I'm more use here."

She nodded and ran.

Please let her be okay.

Caspar turned back to Neil. Sweat had beaded on his forehead and he was panting. "Stay with me, Neil."

Caspar had taken a course in CPR but he'd never done it for real. Should he have run instead of Ally? He'd have been quicker, but if Neil went into full-blown cardiac arrest, would she have known what to do?

"Mary, are you okay? What are your injuries?" he called.

"Banged my head. Hurt my ankle. Neil was coming to get me and then he cried out. What's happened?"

"Try not to worry. Keep still. Ally's gone to get help."

Neil's breathing became even more labored. Caspar held his wrist, his fingers on an erratic pulse.

"Neil, hang in there. Help's on the way." Almost.

When Neil's lips went blue, Caspar knew they were in trouble. He could see Ally in the distance, still running. Neil's left fist clenched, his body tensed, jerked and he stopped breathing. Caspar didn't hesitate. He placed the heel of his hand in the center of Neil's chest, put his other hand on top and interlocked his fingers. With his arms straight and fingers turned up, he pressed down and then released and began to count.

"Caspar, what's wrong with Neil?" Mary shouted.

"Doing CPR."

Mary cried out. "No, no. Don't let him die. Thirty compressions. Two breaths."

"I know. Sssh."

After thirty compressions, he stopped, tipped Neil's head back, pinched his nose and blew into his mouth until his chest rose. Caspar lifted his head, waited for the chest to fall and repeated the action. Then went back to the chest compressions.

Christ, I have this right, don't I? Caspar began talking to Neil as he pressed on his chest.

"I am going to be so pissed off if this was a way to get me to kiss you." Five. "You could have just asked. I'd have said no." Ten. "You're not allowed to die, Neil. I've been blamed for enough, don't you think?" Twenty. "Christ, if you cop it, they'll lynch me." Twenty-five. "Breathe, for fuck's sake, you bastard." Thirty.

Back to breathing into Neil's mouth. Back to the compressions.

Caspar kept going, kept talking, didn't stop.

He had no idea how long passed before he saw feet next to Neil's head.

"What the fuck's going on?" Tom snapped. "It's dangerous to do CPR on someone who doesn't need it."

Caspar lifted his mouth from Neil's and pressed on his chest. "He's had a heart attack." *Five.* "Ally's gone to call 9-9-9. Wouldn't hurt to send someone else." *Ten.* "Mary's down there."

Tom and Mike looked over the edge. "Oh Christ. Don't worry, Mary. We'll have you up in a jiffy."

"Help me get rigged up. Hurry," Mike said.

"Make sure you check her for spinal injuries." Tom took rope out of his rucksack, and out of the corner of his eye, Caspar watched them prepare to lower Mike to the shelf where Mary lay.

When the *whop-whop* sound of a helicopter grew louder and louder, Caspar groaned with relief.

He kept going until the paramedics crouched beside him.

"Good work. We have him now," one said.

"I gave him an aspirin," Caspar said.

He moved away and sat on a rock. It seemed only seconds before they had Neil and Mary in the helicopter and it was taking off. Caspar's hair whipped over his face in the downdraught and he watched the craft wheel away into the sky before he slumped on his back.

His fleece landed on his head. Caspar pulled it off and looked up.

"Put it on before you get chilled," Tom said.

"How was he?"

Tom's jaw twitched. "They shocked him. His heart's beating on its own."

They both knew that didn't mean Neil would survive.

"Well done, Caspar," Mike said. "We couldn't figure out what Neil was doing when the message came."

"What's happened?" asked Bill as he came up beside them. "We saw the helicopter."

While Tom explained, Caspar gathered his things and slung the rucksack over his shoulder. He looked in the direction he'd sent Ally and hoped to hell she was all right and hadn't found some big hole to fall down.

Caspar fidgeted while Tom messed around, organizing everyone. All Caspar wanted to do was set off after Ally.

"You get that, Caspar?" Tom asked.

"Sorry."

"Bill and Viv will stay here until the last pair arrives. The rest of us will go back."

"Fine." Caspar set off at a jog.

His anxiety grew by the second. He hadn't shown her how to use the compass. He'd given it to her and told her to head north, but this was a woman who got right and left muddled up. Caspar's heart pounded. Ally was probably fine, but he couldn't stop himself going through every worst-case scenario.

She'd fallen into an old lead mine and broken her leg. She'd slipped on the rocks and tripped over a snake. This time real. She'd found the only patch of quicksand in the Peak District and was up to her neck in it. An alien spacecraft had abducted her.

*This* was why he didn't get involved. Life was much simpler if he only had himself to look after.

Shit, shit, shit. Let her be okay.

When Caspar saw a familiar-looking figure in the distance walking toward him, he gave an audible sigh of relief and began to run faster. He had no idea why. She was okay and he didn't need to worry anymore, but he wanted to hold her.

When Ally threw herself into his arms, Caspar clutched her tight and pressed his face into her hair.

"How is he?" Ally asked.

"Hanging on. Being airlifted to the hospital. You okay?"

"I've never run so far in my life. I need chocolate."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack sat in his car outside the burned-out shell of his business and wondered how he'd managed to ruin his life so effectively. He'd tried to think of everything in order to distance himself from what he needed to do. He'd done it before when he'd set fire to this place, though he was beginning to think that'd been a mistake. Now he needed to drive up to Derbyshire but cover his tracks. And he couldn't make it look as if that was his intent in case things went tits up.

He sank his head into his hands. Who was he trying to kid? Everything had already gone wrong. Greed had been his downfall. Not just on his part. A spendthrift wife, kids who didn't know the meaning of money, plus his own expensive taste in cars and a tendency to crash them had turned a red bank account deep crimson. He'd flipped it black again by borrowing from people he should have crossed the street to avoid.

That money had to be repaid, but declining demand in key markets meant low prices for metals, and Jack's plans to settle the loan floundered. The people he owed made it painfully clear that wasn't acceptable. They wanted their money and they wanted it now. Jack's last resort had been to burn his business down.

That crime paled into insignificance compared to the way he'd absorbed the loan into his business. He'd raised invoices on nonexistent companies to hide the influx of cash, invoices Ally had seen and emailed him about. Jack guessed he'd been pulled into a money laundering scheme, but he'd been too desperate to placate his bank manager to face the truth. He sank deeper.

Setting fire to his business hadn't just been about the insurance money, it had been about gaining time to cover his tracks so no one figured he'd done anything illegal. But those seven emails likely sitting in Ally's sent box could bring everything crashing around his ears. The *right* circles would close up, with him on the outside. Invitations to

prestigious events would dry up. His wife would divorce him and strip him bare, assuming he hadn't had his balls ripped off. Jack shuddered.

If Ally let him use her computer, if he found the emails, he could delete them and be back home by teatime. He could have used a rental car to drive to Derbyshire, but if one CCTV or speed camera caught the license plate it could be traced back to him. Forget the license plate, a camera could easily pick up his face at a service station, street corner, fucking anywhere. If he caught a train and paid cash, there were still cameras. He'd be remembered on a bus journey. Even more so if he hitched.

The insurance company wanted a list of all his employees' contact numbers. He told them he'd managed to find all but four numbers and was working on those. He'd have saved himself a lot of time and effort if he'd have kept at least those details out of the flames. Ironically, one number that he had, he didn't want to supply. Ally's.

In the end, Jack decided selective openness was the least risky action. He wouldn't tell his wife where he was going, but he'd drive up to Derbyshire in his own car and think up some excuse on the way. Not that he fancied Ally because that clearly wasn't going to work, though to be honest, if he hadn't been so pissed about the emails, he might have.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark tapped his fingers on the wheel as he sat in stationary traffic. It had taken him an hour to get to the outskirts of London only to hit another jam. He was peeved Ally hadn't called to thank him for the flowers. Maybe he should have brought them up with him. He hoped the motorway wasn't busy or he wouldn't get there before the fucking pubs shut. He'd thought about letting her know he was on his way but decided arriving unannounced was preferable. Much harder for her to tell him to fuck off. Actually he was looking forward to a weekend in the country, log fires and pints of beer and long sessions of make-up sex. Belinda thought he was at his mum's. All bases covered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma sighed when the vehicle came to a halt yet again. The traffic was terrible. Geoff didn't seem to mind, but she hated this stop-start every few hundred yards.

"We're never going to get there," she said.

Delia pushed a plastic glass of champagne into her hand. "Chill out, Em."

"Don't you think it would have been a good idea to warn Ally you were all coming?" Geoff asked.

Emma chewed her lip. "I want it to be a surprise." Actually, she wanted to see the expression on Ally's face when she saw Geoff, and the expression on Geoff's. Pleasure? Shock?

"You ought to call her," Sal said. "The whole point of this is involving her. What if she has something else planned?"

"Yep," Kerry said. "You need to check it's okay for Geoff to sleep at her place."

No, it isn't fucking okay.

"He could sleep in her bed," said Delia.

Emma almost swallowed her tongue. Geoff had the nerve to laugh.

"Well, Ally will be with us, won't she?" Delia said.

Sal nodded. "She gets a room as part of the package."

Emma caught Geoff's eye in the rearview mirror and for a split second saw a coldness in his face, someone underneath the affable easy-going guy she knew—a Geoff she wasn't so sure of.

"I'll call Ally," Emma said.

# **Chapter Fifteen**

Ally clutched Caspar's hand as they made their way down from the moorland and onto the road back to the village. The adrenaline had dissipated to leave her exhausted but full of pride for Caspar.

"When did you start giving Neil CPR?" she asked.

"Not long after you'd gone."

"All that time? Have you ever done it before?"

"Only on a model."

"The kind with long legs, big breasts and beautiful eyes?"

He smiled. "Yes, but plastic."

"Bit tricky bringing those back to life." Ally sighed. "Wow, what a day. Do you think Neil and his wife will be all right?"

"Mary will be. I don't know about Neil."

She squeezed his fingers. "You're my hero anyway."

Ally would never have wished a heart attack on anyone, but she really hoped that people appreciated what Caspar had done.

"Cup of tea?" Caspar asked as he pushed open the door to the Gatehouse.

"Great."

He tossed the rucksack onto the kitchen table and knocked Ally's purse to the floor. The contents flew out and Caspar's medal skated across the tiles. Ally's heart dropped into her stomach. When the medal came to a halt against the skirting board the silence was deafening. She couldn't look at him.

Oh Christ.

Caspar bent and picked up the cross. "What the hell was this doing in your purse?"

Ally flinched at the anger in his voice. "I followed you. I persuaded the guy to let me have it back. I didn't—"

"You know how much it's worth?" he snapped.

She raised her head. "Yes, I-"

"And you thought you'd sell it and pocket the money?"

*What?* "No, I—"

"I can't believe you'd do this to me."

Ally could feel everything spiraling away from her. "Caspar, I—"

"Get out."

"But-"

"Now." He glared at her, his eyes black with fury.

Ally grabbed her purse and left, closing the door quietly behind her. Halfway to the road, she realized she still wore Caspar's fleece. She took it back and dropped it on the doorstep. Ally wasn't sure what to feel about his reaction. She was in the wrong for having followed him, for retrieving the medal and most of all for not telling him before now.

Why didn't I tell him? I'm an idiot.

She hadn't told him because she hadn't known whether he'd be angry or pleased. Even the idea of posting it anonymously through his letter box was a crap one because he'd have rung the guy in the shop who'd then describe her and Caspar would know she'd done it.

Have I just fucked everything up?

She'd felt numb with shock when the medal had fallen on the floor, and the feeling hadn't passed. Everything had been so brilliant and then so crap. But why hadn't he given her chance to explain? He should have. She stifled a sob.

Only, what the hell would she have said? "I saw you wipe a tear from your eye and figured you didn't really want to sell it?" She'd had no right to interfere. But it wasn't as if she'd stolen the damn thing. A spark of anger flared. Okay, so Caspar would have to go back to Buxton with the medal and he'd lost a couple of days before he had his money but he'd still got the thing back.

Except Ally had a feeling she'd lost a lot more than that.

By the time she was back in the garage, the lump in her throat made breathing difficult. When her phone rang, Ally yanked it from her pocket and pressed the button before she thought to look who it was.

"Hi Ally. You'll never guess where we are," Emma yelled.

Ally could hear muffled laughs and squeals in the background. "Who's we?"

"Me, Kerry, Sal, Bryony, Jen, Delia and Geoff's driving."

The lump in Ally's throat grew larger, the ache in her heart more painful.

"Hey, Ally," Kerry said. "We miss you."

"I miss you too." *Oh God, why did I ever leave London?* 

"You didn't even say goodbye." Jen must have snatched the phone.

"It was spur of the moment. I just needed to run." Out of the frying pan and into bed with trouble.

"You haven't guessed where we are." Emma had the phone again. "Don't spill that champagne, Kerry. So where do you think?"

On their way to somewhere fun without her. That was fine. Ally wasn't exactly in the party mood.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"On our way to your brother's place." Emma whooped.

Fucking hell.

Ally heard the others join in with the cheers. "Aren't we the best friends in the entire world?" Emma asked.

Ally looked around the garage. *Oh fuck.* "Absolutely." *Did that sound sincere?* 

"We've booked in for two days at Morton's Adventure Center," Emma said. "Sal organized it. We're taking a day off work. There's a bed for you with us but can Geoff sleep at your place?"

Ally cringed. Geoff couldn't sleep in a garage. Her gaze alighted on a green bag hanging from a hook opposite. "A little snag with that. Finn's house has been rented out so I'm sleeping in a tent."

A pause before Emma said, "Geoff says that's fine. We'll meet at the adventure place. See you later."

Ally put her phone back in her pocket and sighed. Maybe this was exactly what she needed. A complete distraction from Caspar. What she also needed was for Finn's tent to be one of those that shook out of the bag, and with a twist and twirl, it self-erected. Ally lifted the bag from the hook and staggered under the weight. What the hell was it? A circus tent?

She dragged it out of the garage and looked around. A small patch of lawn to the far right—um, left—looked tempting, but Ally figured she needed to find somewhere out of sight. She hauled the bag up a bank toward the trees that separated the development from Caspar's place and Wyndale Hall.

"No point trying to hide the body now that I've seen you," said a male voice.

Ally spun round, her heart pounding. Sean MacAlister stood watching in amusement.

"Damn," Ally said. "Now I'll have to kill you too. Wait 'til I get my breath back."

He climbed up the bank to her side. "What are you doing?"

"Erecting a tent."

"I'm great at erections. Want a hand?"

"Where's it been?"

"Ha, ha,"

Ally knew she ought to say no, but the only time she'd put up a tent was when she was in her teens. Finn had rolled on the floor laughing when it collapsed on top of her the moment she crawled inside.

"You're not needed on set to brood over the gorgeous governess or silence your mad wife?"

"I did my brooding this morning. Jane keeps forgetting her lines. So I'm free the rest of the day."

"Ever put a tent up before?" Ally asked.

"No, but it can't be that difficult."

Ally restrained her snigger. "Okay then, thanks."

Sean rubbed his hands together and grinned.

After they tipped out the contents of the bag and seen the number of poles and lines, he stopped smiling.

"It looks complicated," he said. "Are there any instructions?"

Ally gaped at him.

"What?" He returned the gape.

"Real men don't need instructions."

"Hey, I'm an actor. I make my money doing what I'm told. I live for instructions."

"There aren't any."

"Shit."

They burst out laughing. This was the distraction Ally needed. The name Sean meant *God's Gracious Gift*. Maybe it was a sign.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the medal had come to rest on the floor, Caspar hadn't quite been able to believe his eyes. Rigid with fury, he'd clamped his teeth into the inside of his cheek and tasted blood. He'd made Ally leave before he said something he'd regret, and then stomped into the woods and kicked the crap out of every branch and twig he came across.

Now I'm calm.

Caspar made his way toward Stone Cottage.

Now I can talk without yelling.

The sound of laughter rang out—the distinctive sound of Ally's laughter.

Now I'm bloody furious.

Caspar followed the sound then stood and watched. What the fuck was she doing putting up a tent with Sean MacAlister and then getting inside with him? She was supposed to be upset, not cavorting with a movie star she'd told him she didn't fancy.

Bristling with disappointment, Caspar turned and made his way back to the Gatehouse. When his phone vibrated in his pocket, he dragged it out, hoping it was Ally. Number unknown.

"Yes?" he asked, trying not to snap.

"Caspar? It's Mary."

Caspar stopped walking. "How's Neil?" Please don't tell me he's dead, that I broke a rib when I was doing the chest compressions and severed some artery.

"Awake, complaining and asking for a cup of tea." She let out a muffled sob.

Caspar swallowed his groan of relief. "What about you?"

"I'm fine. Concussion and a broken ankle."

"That doesn't sound fine."

"I am because Neil's still alive and that's because of you. I lay there listening to you talking to him. You started CPR the moment his breathing stopped and saved his life. I can't thank you enough. Neil says he owes you one. He's not out of the woods yet but...thank you."

"I'm glad I could help. I'll visit if he'd like."

"I'm sure he would."

Wow, that's progress. "Okay, 'bye." Caspar put the phone back in his pocket and smiled.

He knew exactly what he wanted to do now. Clear his head. Do some thinking about Ally, the medal and Sean MacAlister. *Climb*.

\* \* \* \* \*

The tent finally erected, with only three pieces of pole left over, Ally slumped on her back and looked up at the line of the roof. Sean lay beside her.

"I can't believe you're intending to sleep in here," he said. "I have a two-bedroom cottage shouting distance away with no one in the other bed. Why don't you stay with me?"

"I think your rent might be too high."

"I won't— Ah." He turned on one side and leaned up on his elbow. "You're cute. There's something about you. I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before." He stared at her with his hazel eyes, stroked her cheek with his finger and inched closer.

Ally flinched.

He continued undeterred. "It's as if I have a string somewhere under my left ribs fastened to a similar string in the corresponding quarter of you."

Ally sighed. "Is this where I'm supposed to swoon and fall into your arms?"

He froze. "Damn. Don't tell me I've lost it."

"Lina's not the only one fluffing her lines." She cleared her throat. "I sometimes have a queer feeling with regard to you — especially when you are near me, as now: it is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame."

He gaped at her. "How the hell do you know that?"

"I spent a year studying Jane Eyre at school."  $\,$ 

Sean laughed and slid his hand over hers. "I really want to take you to bed. We could have some fun for a couple of weeks. No one needs to know."

Ally moved her hand from under his.

"No promises. No obligation. Pure unadulterated pleasure. And my autograph." He grinned. "What do you say?"

Ally laughed. "No." He might be good-looking but he wasn't the man she wanted.

He frowned. "At least let me try to change your mind."

He lunged and Ally scrambled out of the tent, giggling, to find herself facing Lina. *Oh damn*.

"I could kill you, you bitch." She slapped Ally so hard across the face her teeth rattled.

Ally gasped and raised her hand to her cheek. This was turning into a very shitty day. Misunderstood by Caspar, misread by Sean and misjudged by Lina.

Sean emerged from behind Ally. "Baby, baby, what's the matter?"

Ally somehow knew she wasn't "baby".

Tears poured down Lina's cheeks and Sean tugged her into his arms. Lina glared at Ally over his shoulder. If looks could kill, Ally suspected she'd shortly be lining up to collect wings—or horns and a tail. As it was, she merely felt bemused by the role-playing on both sides. Ally went back to the garage and collected the sleeping bag, battery-powered lantern and a few other things to make Geoff comfortable.

When she got back to the tent, the pair had gone. *Good*.

Ally zipped up the tent and sighed with relief that her friends were arriving that night and — *Arrghh, I am so slow.* Tom had asked her meet with him to give him advice on a booking for a hen party that included her. Ally allowed herself a little smile. She could make sure she didn't have to climb any crags for a start.

Back in the garage, she unpacked one of her cases and repacked it with clothes she'd need for two nights. Maybe Tom wouldn't mind if she checked in earlier than the others. It served Caspar right if he came looking and couldn't find her. Once he'd calmed down, he'd see how crazy he'd been.

Rather than trail all the way through the village to find Tom wasn't there, Ally switched on her laptop and huffed with relief when she could still log on to Finn's wireless network. The garage was becoming a home away from home. A few moments later, she had Tom's number. Ally packed her laptop in the case and called him.

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"Tom Morton," he said.
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"Hi, it's Ally."

"Oh hi."

"How are Neil and his wife?"

"Doing okay. I spoke to Mary a little while ago. Neil's conscious and stable."

Ally sighed. "That's good. You know you wanted to meet me later?"

He sighed. "You're cancelling?"

"Well no, but guess what? I'm one of the hen party you have arriving tonight."

Tom laughed. "You're kidding?"

"It's my friend Kerry who's getting married. I'm staying with them. I could bring my stuff over and we could talk now if you're not busy."

"I'll fetch you."

"No need. I could do with the walk. See you in a bit."

Ally didn't want Tom to see that she was sleeping in the garage. She locked up and wheeled her case to the road. She hadn't gone more than twenty yards before a car pulled up ahead of her.

"Had enough of Wyndale already?" Rose asked through the open window.

"Not quite. I'm staying at the adventure center for two nights. Hen party."

"Oh, Tom's branching out. Want a lift?"

Ally nodded. "Please."

Rose got out and opened the back door. "Trunk's full of supplies. Put your case on the backseat."

Ally had hardly settled beside her before the questions started.

"So what happened on the moor? I heard Neil's in the hospital."

"Neil's wife fell in a ravine and Neil had a heart attack. Caspar saved his life. Neil's heart stopped and Caspar did CPR until the air ambulance arrived. Neil must be very glad now that I persuaded him to let Caspar train today."

Rose threw her a glance. "Trying to rehabilitate him? Hey, what happened to your face? Someone slapped you?"

Ally's hand slipped to her cheek. "Dumb rock." Otherwise known as Lina. "And yes, why not rehabilitate him? This village has been judge, jury and executioner without knowing all the facts." No wonder Caspar was so quick to think the worst of her, though that didn't stop it from hurting.

"Maybe you're right. But some of it's his own fault. Because he refused to talk about it, the story's been put together piecemeal from umpteen sources."

"Maybe he wasn't allowed to talk about it," Ally said. "You know what I think? Caspar was a spy."

The car swerved as Rose laughed.

"I'm serious," Ally said. "Think about it. He worked for the Foreign Office. He's been to Cambridge."

"And looks like James Bond?"

"Absolutely. I think when he left his sister in that bar it was because he was—"

"Spying?" Rose chuckled.

"Yes. Meeting a contact. Maybe he saw someone he had to keep an eye on. One thing I know, Caspar loved his sister. No way would he have left her without good reason."

"You've got it bad," Rose said.

"Caspar's the one who's got it bad. Everyone treats him like dirt and he doesn't deserve it."

Rose pulled into the parking lot at the adventure center. "Maybe that will change now. We all love Neil."

"I want everyone to love Caspar." And I want him to love me. Maybe after he'd calmed down about the medal, they'd be okay again.

Ally dragged her suitcase into the reception. Tom stood behind the desk. He gave her a broad smile and then raised his eyebrows at the large case.

"Two days not two weeks," he said.

"The inflatable raft didn't fit in my other bag."

Tom laughed. "Let me carry it for you."

Ally followed him up the stairs.

"All the bedrooms are on this floor. The communal rooms are downstairs. I live on the third floor."

"Penthouse suite?"

Tom smiled. "Spectacular views anyway. If I'm lucky, you'll see them. Here you are." He turned the key, opened the door of room seven and slipped the key into the lock on the other side. "Basic accommodation. Nothing like Stone Cottage."

But much better than the garage. "Thanks, Tom. I'll unpack and come down so we can talk, shall I? Fifteen minutes?"

"That's fine. Tea or wine?"

"A glass of wine would be lovely. Thanks."

"I'll be in the lounge. Left of reception."

The shower was bliss. Ally ached after racing around most of the day. Pity the warm water didn't ease the ache in her heart. No chasing Caspar. He had to come to her. Ally froze with a soapy hand over her heart. He would come, wouldn't he? He'd realize he'd overreacted? He wouldn't *really* think she was stealing the bloody medal? *Oh fuck*.

\* \* \* \* \*

She found the lounge without making a wrong turn. Tom sat on a large, red couch facing a coffee table strewn with brochures and folders. Ally joined him and he handed her a glass of red wine.

"Cheers," Ally said, and clinked her glass against his. "So what sort of activities can you offer? Shopping with naked men, visit to a chocolate factory with naked men, makeup session with naked men?"

He rolled his eyes. "I can arrange climbing, caving, angling, riding, cycling, walking, abseiling, rock scrambling, paragliding, mine exploration, weaseling—"

"What the hell do you do with a weasel? Don't they have sharp teeth?"

Tom chuckled. "Doesn't involve animals. You have to weasel your way through tunnels and tight spaces. It's like caving but mostly aboveground."

"Sounds a bit like the London underground. Oh God, I have no idea what they'd like to do. How much can you fit in? Sure there are no naked men?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter. Maybe three activities. The weather forecast's good for tomorrow, so you can choose anything. Sal's already arranged something for you all on Monday morning, I have no idea what, and they leave after lunch, so it's just tomorrow I need to sort. I have to ring the guys who specialize in each activity and book them so I need to know now."

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"I get to choose?"

"Yep."

Ally took a gulp of wine. "Paragliding, weaseling and cycling."

"Sure?"

"No."

Tom laughed. "Well, that was painless."
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"For you maybe. They'll probably kill me when they find out what I've picked."

Tom made a few phone calls, fixed the timing of the activities and then leaned back on the couch and looked at her. "You and Caspar did well today."

"All I did was run around like a headless chicken, looking for a spot with phone reception. Caspar did the tricky stuff."

Tom swirled the wine in his glass. "Yeah, he's tricky all right."

"Have you known him a long time?"

"We were at school together for a while. My father was in the armed forces. When I was seven, I went to the same boarding school as Caspar. I stayed until I was eleven."

"Were you friends?"

"Yeah, we were, but my dad died in a car accident and my mother came back here, so I went to the local school after that."

"I'm sorry about your father."

He shrugged but Ally could see pain in his eyes. "Your parents still alive?"

"Depends which you mean. The ones who treated me like a daughter, loved me and cared about me for seven years? No, they died. I don't know where my birth mother is and she never revealed the name of my birth father. I have no idea whether they're alive or dead, and frankly, I don't give a damn. Hard to care when they don't. Though Caspar said—"

Ally closed her mouth.

"Caspar said what?"

"Maybe my birth father doesn't even know about me. Though I'm probably better off not knowing he's some brain-addled drug addict living rough under a bridge."

"He might be the opposite."

Ally shook her head. "Nope. I'm not that lucky, and even if he were a happily married man with four lovely kids, it's hardly fair if I turn up and wreck his world." She swallowed a gulp of wine.

"What about you and Caspar? Is there no hope for me? Shall I just shoot myself now?" Tom flashed her a resigned smile.

"He's not speaking to me at the moment because I did something stupid."

Tom straightened. "However stupid you were, I'd speak to you."

"You're sweet, Tom—"

"Please don't say 'but', please don't call me 'sweet'."

"You're not sweet to Caspar. I don't like the fact that he has no friends here. Four years in an Albanian jail and he's treated like a pariah. I can't believe how everyone is against him." Ally put down the glass of wine before she spilled it. Caspar might hate her now, but she still burned with the desire to defend him. "I suppose you're like everyone else. You think it's his fault his sister was abducted."

"He left her on her own in a bar. She had the mentality of a ten-year-old. She shouldn't have even been in a place like that. He went off with some woman into the bathroom. He tell you that? He couldn't turn down a quick fuck when it was offered and he's not changed."

Indignation surged up Ally's throat. "So, what would you have done if you'd seen a woman in danger? Someone who'd been feeding you with information to pass back to the British government." Shit, was that going too far?

Tom stared at her. "Is that what he told you?"

"No. He wouldn't tell me he was a spy, would he? Just like he couldn't tell anyone else."

"What about the women and the drugs?"

"Caspar doesn't have an addictive personality. God, if he did, the way this village has treated him over the last year would have turned him to drugs or alcohol. He was set up. The one who set him up is dead. The one who might know the truth, the woman's father, is in a position of power in our government. No way will *he* speak out. Caspar is trapped here. He has no money, no job and no friends."

Shit. Ally knew she'd said too much.

"You're not going to make me like him, Ally."

"Took a woman you fancied, did he?"

She saw from Tom's face she was right.

"Looks like he's taken two now," Tom said.

## Barbara Elsborg

Ally sighed. "And I'm just one in a line, I know. I'm as self-destructive as Caspar when it comes to lust."

They looked up as gravel crunched outside and a vehicle pulled up.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Ally's friends rushed in, squealed when they saw her and enveloped her in a huge group hug. Ally smiled a greeting to Geoff, who moved back and forth, bringing in their bags.

"Are you really okay?" Sal asked after they'd bombarded her with questions.

Ally nodded. "I'm fine."

"You actually think it was a deliberate push?" Delia asked.

Yes. "Probably not." Ally didn't want to dampen the mood.

"You know you could have made a fortune," Jen said. "The *Metro* was desperate to identify you."

"What's she done?" Tom asked.

Ally spoke quickly. "Tom, this is Sal, Ms. Super-organized. The blonde is Jen, Ms. Super-sporty. On her right is Delia, Ms. Takes-two-hours-to-do-her-hair, and next to her is Kerry—the lucky bride-to-be." She pointed across the room. That's Bryony, the lawyer-so-watch-your-step, and behind her is Emma, Ms. Excitable. The pack horse is Geoff, Emma's boyfriend."

"Pleased to meet you all." Tom shook their hands. "If you want to grab your bags, I'll show you your rooms."

"I might as well help." Geoff picked up a couple of suitcases.

While she was on her own, Ally browsed through the brochures Tom had left out. She jumped when Geoff hugged her from behind.

He rubbed her head with his knuckles. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Emma said you told her someone pushed you under the train."

"You know what it's like on the tube at rush hour. Mayhem, bedlam and anarchy. How was the journey?"

"Mayhem, bedlam and anarchy. I have no idea why I volunteered to drive six hyperactive, overexcited females with attention deficit disorder *and* champagne on a hen party. I must have been mad."

"Or a saint."

Geoff laughed. "So where's my tent and is there a pub next door?"

"Almost. Go to the other end of the village, past the pub, keep going up the hill and you come to new development on the right—no left-hand side. Five houses. On the far

right, I think, there's a bank leading up to a wood. Tent's at the top of the bank. I've put a sleeping bag inside and a light."

"Bathroom?"

"There's one down the hall," Tom said from behind them.

"Geoff's going to be sleeping in a tent. He was asking where he could floss."

"You can use the facilities here."

"Thanks," Geoff said.

"You're wanted upstairs," Tom said to Ally. "They're plotting something. I've been commanded to speak to the chef. They reckon they're starving."

"They need something to mop up the alcohol before they begin drinking again," Geoff said. "I'll be off. See you later."

"'Bye, Geoff."

The moment Ally turned, Tom was in her face. "Why does the *Metro* want to identify you?"

No point lying. There were six voices upstairs ready to contradict her.

"I fell in front of an underground train."

Tom gaped at her. "It missed you?"

"Sadly no. Ripped off my right leg, left hand and I bled to death on the tracks."

"Christ, Ally. You fell or were you pushed?"

"The platform was crowded. Everyone was pushing." True, but Ally still felt those hands in the middle of her back. "I'd better go up and see what horrors are in store for tonight."

"Take these with you. It's the itinerary for tomorrow."

"Er...maybe it'd better be a surprise. What time do we need to be down here ready to go?"

"Eight."

"That's enough bad news for one night."

Ally made her way upstairs. She wasn't entirely sure why she hadn't told the truth about being pushed. Partly because she wanted to forget it had happened and partly because she thought they wouldn't believe her. Caspar did and that was all that mattered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar stood at the foot of The Screaming Buttress, graded very severe. The gritstone pinnacle took on an ethereal glow in the late afternoon sun, though Caspar was the only one there to witness its glory. Late in the day to begin this particular climb, but he wanted to fill his mind with nothing but the challenge of the rock. The descent

was by abseil from a metal chain, so provided he climbed fast, he'd be down before sunset.

Total concentration was essential because if Caspar missed the last tricky move, he'd be lucky if he lived to hear the helicopter needed to take him to hospital. And since there was no one around to watch him fall, he'd probably die of hypothermia if the fall didn't kill him. Maybe it'd be a good thing if the fall *did* kill him.

The climb was a mixture of good holds and the requirement to jam his hands into slender cracks. He headed left and started up the slab, sliding his fingers over the rock face to the first ledge. Caspar settled into the rhythm of the climb and for a few minutes made steady progress. His feet didn't slip, but his mind did.

Had Ally intended to sell the medal? But she wasn't stupid. His grandfather's name was inscribed on it. No way would she have gotten away with it. So, had she taken it because she felt sorry for him? He'd been upset when he came out of the shop. Had she assumed he didn't want to sell it but had been desperate for the money?

Caspar's foot skidded off a ridge of rock and he slithered a few feet before he jammed his hand into a crack. His heart lurched. So much for total concentration.

He tried to put himself in Ally's position and think what he'd have done if he'd seen her selling some piece of jewelry that had belonged to her mother.

Ah, damn it. He'd have done the same. Then he'd have dithered over how to give it back to her. *Fuck*. Why couldn't he have listened, let her explain? Instead he'd turned into an iceberg and pushed her straight into the arms of Sean MacAlister.

Which led to the root of Caspar's fury.

What were they doing in a tent? What right did Ally have to laugh after the way they'd parted?

Another careless step and Caspar lost his footing. He hung from one hand pressed into the rock and scrambled with his toes until he managed to secure his feet. His heart pounded. He was an idiot for attempting this climb with his mind in a mess.

Concentrate.

Ally didn't fancy Sean MacAlister. She'd told him that. She was allowed to laugh with other people, for fuck's sake. *Christ, I'm an idiot*. He wished he hadn't started the climb, but it was much easier and safer to go up than back down. And Caspar didn't want to die. He had for a while after Jemima died, but he'd foolishly thought once he was free of prison, he could rebuild his life.

As month after month brought more and more rejection, Caspar found his only respite in sex. Very few women said no. He'd didn't bother with those who didn't look willing. He'd already tired of the emotionless fucking before Ally arrived. She'd made him see he could have a different life. He needed to go back and tell her that.

Caspar looked up at the last few feet, the hardest part of the climb where he'd be at his most vulnerable. The holds were difficult and he needed to swing out to get his foot on the ledge on his right.

Once he'd pulled himself to safety, Caspar released a shaky laugh. He stood and looked east to dark skies then west to a falling sun, watching as it slid in and out of the clouds. The lights of Wyndale twinkled a mile or so away. He could see his parents' house, his place and the roof of Stone Cottage. He'd find another rose and he'd go and apologize.

Oh, and give Ally the two hundred pounds he'd hidden on the top of the dresser. Then he'd ask her about Sean MacAlister.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally stared at the seven bags on the bed in Sal's room.

"Kerry gets first pick," Sal said.

Kerry grabbed the bag in the middle, peeked inside and grinned. "Nurse and stethoscope. Steve is going to really love me in this."

Emma took the next bag and tipped out the contents. "Cave woman. Oh, and I get a huge club." She laughed.

Sal was Catwoman with a whip. Jen, a devil with a plastic pitchfork, and Bryony pulled out a police uniform and pink furry handcuffs. Delia was a cheerleader with pompoms and Ally was a schoolgirl with a ruler. She needed to lose that before she was asked to measure something below a guy's waist.

"You do realize we're going to freeze to death," Ally said.

"All in a good cause. The costumes stay on at all times unless we're doing the adventure activities," Sal said. "After we've eaten, we're off to the pub and we'll each have a challenge to do."

"Oh God," came the collective groan.

Ally thought about the handful of guys who'd been in the pub the night she arrived and smiled. "We have to be ready to leave here at eight in the morning," she said.

A chorus of louder groans followed that announcement.

"What are we doing?" Sal asked.

"Surprise." Ally pretended to zip her lip.

Sal looked at her watch. "Right, go and get changed and we'll meet downstairs in thirty minutes."

Ally walked along the corridor to her room. She tipped the contents of the bag onto the bed and winced. She really *would* freeze. Thigh high, white holdups, a very short, zip-fronted, low-cut black dress with a school badge on the top left...right...left, a Velcro collar with a little blue-and-pink-striped tie attached and a straw boater. A tart's school uniform. Ally sniggered. She changed her underwear to red lace and put on a pair of black high heels. By the time the thirty minutes were up, Ally was dressed, made up and ready to party physically if not mentally.

She wouldn't let thoughts of Caspar spoil tonight. Sal had gone to a lot of trouble to organize this, and Ally refused to let her friends down. When she'd paid the money to Sal, Ally had assumed everything would happen in London, so it was more than kind of them to come up to Wyndale.

When she walked downstairs carrying her coat and the ruler, she emerged into an empty reception. Tom pushed open a door opposite and his jaw dropped.

"Oh my God. I've wasted seven years trying to persuade corporate wankers to play nice and my skilled hands could have been on scantily clad females who I don't want to play nice."

Ally laughed. As the others joined her, Tom's eyes opened wider and wider. Emma tapped him on the head with her club and Delia fluttered her pompoms up and down his chest.

"Good God," he blurted.

"Coming to the pub later?" Sal asked.

Tom grinned. "Not sure anything could stop me."

\* \* \* \* \*

After they'd eaten, they retrieved their coats and staggered arm in arm in threes and twos through the village. Ally lost her hat with the first gust of wind and it disappeared into someone's garden. She was behind on alcohol intake, but two glasses of wine with the meal had mellowed her mood. One thing she mustn't do was think about Caspar.

I wonder where he is?

Shit

Before they went into The Wyndale Arms, Sal handed them each an envelope with their challenge. Ally wondered if some poor schmuck was going to be the victim of all of them. But when they walked in, the pub was heaving, barely recognizable from the quiet place Ally had expected. Loads of men and women in their twenties and thirties—but where had they all come from?

Ally looked for Caspar, wondering what she'd do, what she'd say, but he didn't appear to be there. The arrival of seven females turned a number of heads. The removal of their coats to reveal their scanty costumes turned the rest and brought a chorus of whistles.

"Two bottles of champagne on me for this evening's entertainment," a guy shouted, and Kerry and Emma whooped with glee.

Ally wondered what they'd say when they discovered Sean MacAlister had bought the alcohol. Ally realized most of these people were connected with the filming. When Sean carried over two bottles of bubbly and another man brought the glasses, Kerry looked as though she was about to faint. "Oh. My. God," Kerry said. "I can't believe you guys did this. How did you do it? A Sean MacAlister lookalike? He's just like him."

"That's because he *is* Sean MacAlister, you nitwit," Ally said.

Sean roared with laughter.

"You're joking." Kerry looked on the verge of tears.

"It's really me," Sean said, and proved it with his mega-watt grin.

"I'm going to faint," Kerry said. "This is going to be the best night of my life."

Emma hit her over the head with her club. "Until your wedding day."

Sean poured the champagne in glasses held by a tall, dark-haired guy. "This is Vince. He's playing St. John Rivers."

"Hi," Vince said, openly eyeing up Delia.

"They're filming *Jane Eyre*," Ally said when she saw the blank looks on the faces of her friends.

"Quick, do your challenge," Bryony told Kerry.

Kerry opened her envelope. "I don't care what it says. I have to do it with Sean."

Ally chuckled at the look of terror on his face.

"Oh God," Kerry groaned, and looked straight at him. "Do you have a condom?"

Sean raised his eyebrows. "Does this challenge require me to put it on?"

"No." Kerry pouted.

He took out his wallet and Kerry lifted the foil packet from his fingers. "I don't want to tear this. Sean MacAlister touched it." But she ripped it open and began to blow up the condom.

Everyone shouted encouragement and the latex grew larger and larger. Kerry pulled back to take a breath and the condom flew out of her hand and whizzed across the room to land in someone's pint.

"I'll buy you another," Sean shouted against the wail of annoyance. He sidled away from Emma over to Ally and put his mouth to her ear. "What have *you* got to do?"

"Me next," said Emma. She pulled the card from the envelope. "Kiss someone old, someone new, someone borrowed and someone blue." She licked her lips and said, "I'll save the best 'til last."

The chants and cheers grew louder as Emma kissed a guy in his sixties and slapped his hand off her bum when he tried to pull her closer.

"Old," she yelled. She moved to a middle-aged man who sat with a sour-faced woman and perched on his knee to kiss him. "Borrowed," Emma shouted.

A guy in a blue sweater got a kiss and then she turned to Sean. Ally felt him quiver.

"Save me," he whispered.

"You've no chance and no choice," Ally said.

Emma launched herself at Sean, pressed her lips to his and wrapped her arms around him. When she pulled away, her eyes were glazed. "Oh God, I kissed Sean MacAlister. Did you take a photo, Sal?"

"Yep."

"Damn, now I don't have an excuse to do it again," Emma said.

"I'm going to be part of all these challenges, aren't I?" Sean muttered in Ally's ear. "The other men will hate me."

He was right about the first, but everyone found it hysterical that Sean had to do everything. When Ally opened her envelope, she groaned.

"Okay, what now?" Sean sighed.

"I'm not asking you." She tucked the card away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark followed his sultry-voiced sat nav all the way to Wyndale. He hoped Ally appreciated how far he'd driven. He'd sacrificed his Sunday morning football and turned down an invite from Belinda. Even worse because he wasn't at his mother's, he'd have to sacrifice another weekend and actually go. Mark had done a lot of thinking during the drive. Asking Ally to marry him was a great idea. He'd hinted in the note with the flowers, so he'd have some idea of what she thought before he actually asked her. Just in case.

But in Mark's view, it was a win-win situation. She'd be thrilled. Frank would be happy and move Mark up a peg or two on his "guys I like" board. Mark's mother would be ecstatic. Mark would have someone to cook for him and iron his shirts, and Ally wouldn't need to look for a job. And if he was careful, he could still have Belinda. He hadn't yet tired of her breasts.

He turned into the drive and spotted Stone Cottage on the end. Hopefully Ally would cook him something. He'd bought a bottle of champagne so they could celebrate. Mark spotted the flowers on the doorstep as he approached and read the card before he knocked on the door. He wasn't surprised to see they were from Frank, but he wondered why they were outside. He hoped his had arrived.

When a gorgeous woman in a dressing gown opened the door, words failed Mark.

"Ally," he forced out.

"Doesn't live here." The door closed in his face.

Mark's mouth fell open. He banged on the door again.

"What?" the woman snapped.

"She must live here. These flowers—"

"Are outside because she's moved out. No, I don't know where."

The door closed again. The face rang a bell. An actress?

Mark kicked his way back to his car. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He couldn't drive all the way back to London tonight. He needed to find a place to stay. He drove back into the village, passed the pub and wondered if they let out rooms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack now knew how long it took to get from the south to the north of England before they'd built motorways. Fucking hours. He'd avoided the fast route because he knew they'd have cameras, and while he still vacillated between openly or covertly going to see Ally, he knew if he could achieve the latter, he'd prefer it, if only to keep his wife silent.

He'd completely nixed the idea of telling Ally he was attracted to her. It hadn't worked the first time, why would it work now? She'd understand that his life was a mess and the kiss had been an aberration. Jack had decided to be partially honest, tell her he wanted to start the business up again and needed to get as much information from her as she could remember or perhaps held on her laptop.

That way he'd know the worst or the best. He'd knock on her door tonight, ask his questions and then drive home. Mission accomplished. Only not if she asked anything awkward. If she knew what he'd done, what was he supposed to do then? Maybe only the complete truth would work.

The sat nav took him to the little cul-de-sac and he spotted Stone Cottage at the end of the row of houses. Not too hard to track her brother's address. Jack strode to the front door. A huge bouquet sat by the mat and he bent to look at the card. He'd never heard Ally mention a Frank. She'd been going out with a guy called Mark, though Jack thought that was over. Why were the flowers outside?

He knocked.

A beauty in a slinky red dress opened the door. An actress. He struggled for her name. Lina Moon.

"Yes?" she snapped.

"I was looking for Ally."

"She doesn't live here."

When she tried to shut the door, Jack thrust out his hand to stop it closing. "She did. Where is she?"

"I have no idea."

Jack moved his hand and the door slammed. What the fuck was he supposed to do now?

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar had rehearsed what he wanted to say to Ally. He'd apologize for telling her to go without letting her explain about the medal. Then she'd tell him she was sorry

and she'd explain what she was doing in a tent with Sean MacAlister. Even if she didn't, the moment he saw her, he'd know whether or not he'd blown it.

When he walked up to the door of Stone Cottage, holding his single rose, stolen from his father's garden, he saw yet another bunch of flowers sitting on the doorstep. White roses and lilies. Not the same bouquet. Caspar bent to read the card. Very happy to hear you survived your encounter with the train. Hope these flowers go some way toward cheering you up. With best wishes, Frank.

Who the fuck was Frank? Caspar banged on the door.

Lina opened it, yelled, "What the hell is it now?" and then smiled. "Sorry. Hi Caspar." Her gaze dropped to the rose in his hand and she beamed. "For me?"

Caspar yanked it away. "Where's Ally?"

Lina glared. "Christ, again? She moved out. The BBC rented all these cottages for us. She wasn't supposed to be here. Those flowers came for her, but I don't know where she's gone."

Caspar thought he could guess. A tent.

"Will you take me down to the pub?" Lina asked. "I'm not staying in while the world and his dog call for Ally. I don't want to walk there on my own."

"Okay."

"Come in. I'll just be a minute."

"I'll wait out here." Caspar wandered across the drive and climbed the bank to the tent. "Ally?"

When there was no answer, he checked inside. Empty sleeping bag. Caspar zipped the tent up and went to wait for Lina. Maybe Ally was at the pub.

Lina emerged in a pure-white coat with a turned-up collar. She locked the door and grabbed Caspar's arm. "I am so tired. The director made us go over one scene thirty-three times. Bloody Sean kept laughing and got sent back so I had to do the scenes with the kid instead. Talk about precocious. So what have you been up to?"

"Nothing much."

"Your parents invited me for dinner." She squeezed his arm. "Your father's so sweet. He really made me laugh."

She must have the wrong man, Caspar thought.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Ally tightened her grip on the envelope that detailed her hen party challenge.

"Tell me what it says," Sean said in her ear, and Ally inched away from him.

"Let me do mine while Ally's getting her courage up," said Delia.

Sean's gaze burned into Ally's back as the attention shifted to Delia.

"Ask the sexiest guy in the room his three top tips for seducing a woman." Delia looked around the group of preening men and twirled her pompoms.

Ally felt Sean move from behind her, but it was Vince who Delia captured with her gaze.

"I'm not the sexiest guy in the room?" Sean whispered to Ally, and then turned to Vince. "Share your words of wisdom and then prove them, buddy."

Vince's eyes narrowed before he turned back to Delia and smiled.

"First, you listen to the woman and don't bore her senseless with crap about yourself or sport. Make her feel she's the most important person in the world to you." Vince kept staring at a wide-eyed Delia. "Second, you make sure she sees the man you are—confident, interesting and sexy. Third, you give her the best kiss she's ever had in her life."

When Vince pulled Delia into his arms and kissed her, the bar erupted in a cacophony of hoots and whistles.

"What's your challenge?" Sean had an edge of desperation in his voice.

Ally chuckled. Strange how a hen party had turned into a game of macho oneupmanship. She made her way to the bar and begged a pen. With almost everyone in the room now staring at her, she faced Sean and said, "Drop your pants."

The smile fell off his face. "What?"

"Only your pants, not your boxers." Ally groaned. "Oh God, please tell me you're wearing boxers."

"What are you going to do?" Sean's unease was clear on his face.

"I have to write on your backside and then you have to write on mine." She mumbled the second part.

He grinned. "I can write on yours?"

His pants fell to his ankles and he stood there in black silk boxers. The noise from women cheering and men jeering grew louder. Sean turned round. Ally gingerly lifted one leg of the boxers to expose his butt. *Oh God, a very nice butt.* She wrote on it with the black marker pen and let the material fall. Before her legs raced her out of the pub, Ally handed Sean the pen and bent over.

He flipped up the edge of the black dress and groaned. "You little devil."

When his fingers brushed the lace, Ally pretended to growl. "Write, don't touch."

Sean laughed. "I'm not going to write Don't Touch."

Ally shivered as she felt the pen move on her skin. The deliberate brush of his fingers made her flinch.

"What's she written on me?" Sean tried to look over his shoulder.

Vince chuckled. "Kick here."

The bar erupted in laughter.

Ally lifted her dress. "What does mine say?"

"Kiss me," Sean said.

Ally tsked and looked round to lock eyes with Caspar. Oh fuck.

Lina clung tighter to Caspar's arm. "Bastard," she whispered.

She'd taken the word right out of Caspar's mouth.

The sight of Ally's long legs encased in white holdups had sent his cock into an instant state of alert while the sight of her writing on Sean's backside had filled him with mind-numbing fury. When Sean wrote on Ally's butt, Caspar steamed with pentup rage. He wanted to grab her and run, but there were so many people in the pub, he could hardly breathe let alone move.

"Caspar, what are you drinking?" someone called.

"Hey, mate. Good job," said the guy next to him, and slapped Caspar on the shoulder.

"Tho did a rit gud turn f'Neil," said an old man at his elbow.

Caspar just about managed to translate the thick accent, and as more and more people milled around him, depriving him of the view of Ally, he gave in and let them drag him back into the fold. He felt a little like the lost sheep, happy to be back but wondering what was to come. Were they going to eat him? And there was still the issue of Ally.

Lina clung to him in bewilderment. "What have you done?"

"He saved a good man's life," said John Morton, Tom's father, who hadn't spoken to Caspar since he'd come back to Wyndale. "Well done."

Caspar felt as though he'd landed on another planet. He accepted the pint of beer thrust into his hand and sighed with relief when someone bought a drink for Lina. That saved him a few quid.

"Looks like all the film crew is in here, plus a hen party," Lina said.

Caspar finally managed to join a few dots. That was why Ally was dressed as a schoolgirl.

"Look at him and those women," Lina snapped. "He's such a tart. Thinks he's God's gift. Selfish bastard."

Ally wasn't with Sean now. The actor had a curvaceous cavewoman draped on one arm and a stern-looking nurse brandishing a ruler on the other. *A ruler?* Sean had almost everyone's attention and clearly loved it. A Hollywood actor in front of an admiring crowd, he milked every moment while Lina turned into a snarling witch at Caspar's side.

"Bastard, bastard," she muttered.

He wondered what upset her more, that Sean had grabbed the role as shining star of the night with his clutch of admiring hens or that the actor wasn't paying her any attention.

"Kiss me," Lina whispered.

Caspar sighed. Lina was beautiful, sexy and she wanted him, even though it was to make a point. But Caspar didn't want her.

"Kiss me," she hissed.

How different she was to Ally. Lina selfish, Ally generous. Lina expected while Ally hoped. Lina false and Ally true. He'd been an idiot.

"One kiss," she muttered.

Lina's wheedling voice, edgy with desperation, had no effect. Caspar wouldn't be used. "No," he said.

He wanted Ally.

"Fuck you." Two words barked in his face and Lina forced her way through the throng to where Catwoman arm-wrestled a bald guy.

Lina kissed the guy on the head and ran her tongue down to his ear. He gasped. Catwoman took advantage of his distraction, slammed his wrist to the table and purred in delight. Lina high-fived her and she was in with the crowd. Simple as that. Caspar had to admire her technique.

He finished his pint and another appeared in front of him. Maybe he should take up CPR for a living and get paid in booze. He could see Ally out the corner of his eye, talking to the nurse, her mouth against her ear. Caspar wished it was his ear. He looked down at his pint. Typical that he'd regained some standing in the village and lost Ally. Given the choice, he'd have taken Ally any day. He slumped onto the newly vacated chair at his side and lifted his glass.

Oh God. He'd spent all these months wanting to fit in and now that he had a chance to he didn't care. How crazy was that? Neil might still die. What would they do then?

A brush of hair against his cheek, the scent of flowers teasing his nose and his cock hit the underside of the table.

"I've been bad. Want to spank me?" Ally whispered.

Caspar spat his beer back into his glass.

"Eww, I was going to ask for a sip of that," she said, and stared at him without blinking.

"What sort of bad?" Caspar asked.

"Didn't do my homework. Was cheeky to a teacher. Kissed a boy behind the bike sheds."

"What was his name?" Caspar asked.

"Began with a C." She tapped her chin. "Can't remember. Charlie? Conrad? Oh yeah, Clive."

He laughed. Ally pushed the table back, straddled his lap and sat facing him. His cock tried to high-five her navel.

"Oh God," he mumbled. "We're going to have to sit here all night."

"I wondered if you'd be happy to see me. I can feel one part of you is." She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned into him. "Sorry about the medal. I saw how upset you were when you came out and I talked the guy into letting me have it. I told him I was your sister. That was before I knew about Jemima."

"Sorry for snapping. You're right. I didn't want to sell it. I planned to call him and tell him I'd changed my mind, and I never got round to it. Someone distracted me."

"So we're good?" Ally asked.

"I am, but I hear you've been bad."

I've just seen Sean MacAlister write on your butt.

She smiled. "I've had permission to leave from the bride-to-be, but I have to be back at the adventure center by seven thirty to get ready for our day of nail-biting terror."

Caspar slipped his hands over her backside and squeezed. "Doing what?"

"Paragliding then cycling followed by weaseling."

He raised his eyebrows. "Ever done any of those before?"

"I can ride a bike and I know how to have fun with long, slinky creatures." She slipped her hand between them and spread her palm over his cock.

Caspar stood up and positioned her in front of him. "We have to leave now."

"I need my coat."

Caspar fastened his coat then caught hold of her hand and let her pull him through the mass of people. More slapped him on the back and told him "Well done" as he passed. He was beginning to think being hated was easier to deal with.

When they stepped out into the night, Caspar pulled Ally into his arms and kissed her. He'd been thinking slow and gentle, but as usual, desperate and urgent took over. His hands didn't know where to touch her first, sweeping over her butt, up her back, onto her neck, into her hair as he pressed his lips harder against hers and rocked his cock into the soft swell of her stomach.

Their tongues collided and his heart pounded. The sweet taste of her was almost too much to bear. Caspar pulled back for air but couldn't leave her alone. He landed

kisses all over her face, his chest heaving. Ally clung to him, kissing with as much madness as him.

"At least a foot long," someone said behind them, and they sprang apart.

"Give or take an inch," said another voice.

"Well, it was the biggest one we caught today."

Two men came into view around the corner. "Caspar! Heard about what you did for Neil. Good man."

"Aye, thee did reet gud," said the other man.

They nodded at Ally and went into the pub.

"Fish," Ally said, and sniggered.

Caspar took her hand and tugged her up the road. "The headmaster wants you in his study."

"I've heard he's got a big stick."

"You heard right."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack reeled when he walked into the pub. In a little village like this, he'd expected a quiet place full of horse brasses and Toby jugs with a couple of wrinkled old men playing dominoes in the corner. What he found was a woman dressed as a nurse, standing on a table, roaring "I will survive" into a plastic stethoscope, a cheerleader hitting guys on the head with her pompoms and a cavewoman with her arms around—Sean MacAlister? He fought his way to the bar and ordered a pint.

"Anywhere with rooms to let?" Jack shouted at the barmaid.

"Not 'round here. This lot are filming at Wyndale Hall. All the local places are full." *Shit.* 

Jack found a place to wedge his backside and sipped his pint. He studied the faces, wondering if Ally was in here. His beer sloshed in his glass as his arm was jostled.

"Sorry," said a harassed-looking guy. "Christ, what is this? Mad hour?" He caught the eye of the barmaid. "Pint of lager, please."

Then just as Jack had done, the guy scanned the crowd and slumped back, clearly disappointed.

He paid for the pint and said to the barmaid, "Any rooms available?"

When she walked off without hearing him, Jack answered. "No. I asked her already. Nothing in the locality. This is a film crew and they've sucked up all the accommodation."

"Oh fuck, I've driven all the way from London. I thought I could stay with—" He straightened up. "Christ, that's Emma. What's— And Kerry. Hey," he shouted. "Where's Ally?"

Jack grabbed his shoulder and spoke before thinking. "You know Ally?" "Yes, do you?" The guy gave him a quizzical look.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Who's Frank?" Caspar asked as he tugged Ally up the hill.

She wrinkled her brow. She had no clue where Caspar was coming from. "The only Frank I know is my ex's boss. Why?"

"He sent you flowers. I saw them on Finn's doorstep."

"Wow, that's nice of him."

He squeezed her hand. "Why didn't you tell me Lina had moved in and you'd moved out?"

"I didn't want you to feel obliged to offer me somewhere to stay."

Caspar sighed. "You'd rather sleep in a tent than with me?"

"I'd much rather sleep with you."

"That's a pity," Caspar said.

Ally shot him a glance. "Why?"

"You're not going to be doing much sleeping. You might as well dismantle the tent tomorrow, despite all your hard work erecting it with Sean MacAlister."

No mistaking the venom in the last two words. "Caspar, are you jealous?" A flush of pleasure washed over her.

"I've hidden my green tinge with makeup."

She chuckled. "I told you I'm not interested in him."

"What were you doing in the tent?"

"Admiring our handiwork. The tent has to stay. It's for Geoff, Emma's boyfriend. He drove her and the others up from London. He's destined for sainthood. He puts up with such abuse. Emma has a lot in common with a bulldozer. She just pushes until she gets what she wants. She won't let Geoff stay near the hen party and the film crew has snaffled all the local rooms."

"Would you like to move in with me?" Caspar blurted.

"You don't have to—"

"Ally, I'm asking you to move in with me." He stopped walking and turned to face her.

Oh God. For a moment, Ally couldn't speak. Her throat closed up and her heart pounded. "Thank you," she croaked.

Caspar smiled. "You're welcome."

He unlocked his door and tugged her inside. Caspar kicked the door shut and pulled Ally close to rain kisses all over her face and neck. Excitement surged through her in an overwhelming torrent, flooding every cell as their lips met and melded, and their bodies fused at various points along their length. Caspar tugged her forward and they moved an inch at a time in the darkness, neither willing to relinquish their hold on the other. Caspar's hands were all over her, trying to get her out of her coat while struggling to dispatch his own.

"Christ, Ally," he groaned.

Her coat hit the floor and Caspar's fell on top of it.

"You're not going to expel me, are you, Mr. Sanderson?" she whispered, wondering if Caspar would play.

He tensed and then straightened before he moved away from her. "I'm thinking about it."

"I'll do anything you like if you let me stay these last few weeks at school. I'll be good, I promise."

When she tried to move closer, he held her back. "Behave yourself, Alexandria."

"I can't, sir. I only have to look at you and I'm all wet. Want to feel how wet?"

Caspar released a long groan. Ally stepped a little closer and twirled her tie in her fingers.

"No one ever comes here. We won't be seen," she said. "No one will know."

"You're a very bad girl."

"I can't help it. When I see things I want, I take them."

Ally ran her knee up the outside of his leg, tugged on the collar of his shirt with both hands and pressed herself against him.

"You need to learn some self-control." Caspar's hands settled on her hips and he pushed her away. "I've heard about the games you play behind the bike sheds, using school ties."

"They're silly boys. I don't like boys. I like men." She stroked his cock through his pants. "Big men."

Caspar grabbed her wrist and lifted her hand away. "Oh, you really are asking for it."

Ally shrieked as he grabbed her. Caspar carried her through to his lounge and sat on the couch, flipping her so she lay over his knee.

He bent his mouth to her ear. "Bad girls need punishing."

Ally wriggled and felt the bulge of his cock press against her hip. Caspar slid a hand underneath the hem of her dress and lifted it over her bottom.

He growled. "Who's been writing on your backside, Alexandria?"

"Some dickhead."

Ally trembled when she felt Caspar's fingers trail around the edge of the lace, tracing the limits of the material.

"How many smacks do you think you deserve?" he asked.

Ally raised her head and he pressed on her neck to keep her down. She couldn't believe how much this turned her on.

"I'm waiting," Caspar said.

"One?"

Caspar snorted.

A flutter of panic tinged with nervous excitement stole into her belly. Caspar brought the flat of his hand down hard on her backside and she gasped. "Ow!" The first strike had come with no warning.

"You want me to stop, say Paris." He smacked her again.

Why had she thought this was a good idea? It...hurt. Sort of. Another smack and Ally squirmed on his lap. Another and another and slight discomfort drifted to guilty pleasure. Ally's skin tingled as the heat building in her buttocks spread through her body.

"Bad, bad girl," Caspar whispered, and landed a flurry of blows to cover her backside, striking the right, left and beneath each butt cheek until Ally gasped under the fierce delight of it.

"All pink and glowing," Caspar said. "Beautiful. Almost the first thing I noticed about you was your lovely backside."

Her body grew hotter, her sex wetter. Each time Caspar's fingers made contact, it was as though he'd stroked her pussy. To Ally's amazement, she felt herself moving toward release. Between blows, her fists unclenched and she melted into Caspar's lap.

"Oh Christ," he muttered, and when Ally heard the choke in his voice, she knew he was as turned-on as her.

Cream trickled down her thighs, her panties were soaked. If he touched between her legs, she'd come.

"Enough," Caspar said. He lifted her to her feet then slumped back on the couch and flipped open the button of his pants. "It's me who's in agony here."

"Let me stop you hurting, sir."

Ally stood in front of him and slowly unzipped her dress from the top down while she swayed and circled her hips. She smiled at the glazed look in Caspar's eyes and turned her back before she let the dress fall. When she bent from the waist to pick it up, she heard the strangled howl of a male in rut. Ally turned, carefully folded the dress and laid it on the floor.

"You're not wearing regulation underwear, Alexandria," Caspar said. "White cotton at all times."

"Sorry, sir," Ally said. "What shall I do?"

"Take those disgusting things off at once."

She unclipped her bra, pulled it off and dropped it on the dress. Caspar exhaled noisily. Ally cupped her breasts and ran her fingers over her nipples and down to her

hips. She stared into Caspar's eyes as she peeled the lace down her thighs and stepped out of the panties.

Caspar cleared his throat. "The white holdups can stay. They meet regulations. The shoes don't. Those heels are too high. Bend over and take them off. Face away from me."

Ally bit her lip so she didn't laugh. She turned so her back was to Caspar and bent to remove her shoes. Ally could hear his heavy breathing punctuated by faint groans. When she stood and turned to face him, he'd unzipped his pants. The bulge of his cock had tented his boxers. He beckoned her closer until he could reach the tie around her neck and then used it to pull her to stand between his legs. He rubbed his chin on her belly.

"There's been an unsettling development," Caspar whispered. "Something's come up that requires urgent attention."

Ally stroked his head, letting his silky hair slip through her fingers. "That sounds serious, sir. Is it something I can help you with?"

"Possibly. I seem to be turning to stone. I don't know if you have the skill to reverse that."

She pushed him back and unfastened the buttons of his shirt. "I ought to make sure the problem hasn't spread. Isn't *rigor mortis* infectious?"

Caspar laughed. "You haven't been paying attention in biology."

He stood to let her remove his shirt, and Ally peeled it from his arms. His broad shoulders tapered down into a narrow waist. Dark-copper nipples topped his firm pecs, and below lay the sculptured surface of a honed stomach with the line of dark hair trailing into his pants. Shirt discarded, Ally eased Caspar's pants and boxers over his slim hips. He kicked off his shoes, stepped out of his chinos and finally stood before her in the dim light, all long limbs and fluid grace, a sweet smile on his sexy lips.

The top of her thighs were wet with her cream. Ally's mouth watered and her heart pounded. The muscles of her sex pulsed. Not one part of her remained unaffected by the sight of him. Caspar was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, and she wanted him so much it scared her. All her insecurities flooded back, and Ally had to fight hard not to let them spoil this. *Don't waste this moment because you think it might not last*.

Ally put her finger in his mouth, wet it and then trailed it from Caspar's slightly rough chin, down the column of his throat, over the hard bone of his sternum and into the warm valley between his pecs. Down and down, inch by inch Ally's finger explored the contours of his chiseled abs and finally crept into the trail of hair that led to the dark thatch at the base of his cock.

Caspar's thickly veined shaft rose strong and proud out of a nest of black curls. His balls hung full and heavy below. Ally ran her thumbs down the sides of his hips and up the valley of his groin, the delicate skin hot and smooth under her touch. She gently twisted his pubic hair in her fingers and watched as pre-cum gathered at his cock head.

"Not sure that's working, Alexandria. I'm going harder."

"Trust me," she whispered. "I'm an expert."

Ally pulled Caspar to sit on the couch and dropped to kneel between his legs. She ran the pad of her finger over the satiny crest of Caspar's cock and smeared the glistening moisture around the exposed bulb.

"Which class did you learn this in?" He sucked in a breath and speared his fingers through her hair.

"Physics."

Ally spread the pre-cum in a circular swirl to coat more of the head then lifted her finger to her lips and sucked. The taste of Caspar flooded her mouth, tart and sweet at the same time, a mix of musk and man and raw sex. The flavor exploded on her tongue and shot straight to every erogenous zone.

"You lick me and I'm gone," Caspar whispered.

"Einstein's third law," Ally said. "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

He laughed and cupped her breasts with his hands.

"See?" Ally said. "I touch you and you touch me."

"I had something more explosive in mind."

She laid her palms on his thighs and with the flat of her tongue licked a slow, wet path the length of his cock and down the center of his balls. Caspar's breathing grew ragged, and when Ally took his sac into her mouth, a deep moan slipped from his lips. The wrinkled skin of his balls tightened as she gently sucked. Ally could feel Caspar's thighs trembling beneath her fingers and she let him out of her mouth with a soft pop.

"You're not allowed to come until I say," she whispered.

Caspar groaned. "Say what?"

"Not sure I'll be in a position to speak. Okay. I'll set a time. Fifteen minutes."

Caspar gasped. "Paris."

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Hold off coming for fifteen minutes? Ally was mad, bad and gorgeous. Caspar's balls were on the boil, his cock already hard enough to drill holes and a pressure headache built between his eyes. Fifteen minutes? Impossible. He looked down at her sweet face, thinking that was almost enough to make him come, and then he opened his mouth and said, "Go for it."

What? What? How had that slipped out?

"Got any oil?" she asked.

"Bathroom cabinet."

"Don't move."

Caspar tried to laugh, but the sound changed in his throat and came out as a high-pitched grunt. He watched her butt until she disappeared and then swallowed hard. *Think unsexy thoughts*. He could do it, it wasn't beyond him. Memories of prison usually worked. The crowded dorm that smelled of semen, sweat and farts. The snoring, the crying, the sound of spit-slick hands working — *Oh fuck*.

Ally bounced back into the room and knelt in front of him. She squirted baby oil onto her palms and then slid her fingers around the base of his cock, squeezing hard as she pressed down on his balls almost to the point of pain. Caspar's eyelids fluttered as he struggled to keep watching. He moaned and wrapped his fingers around the edge of the couch.

While she maintained the pressure on his balls with her fist, Ally worked his cock with her other hand. She slid a tiny way up his length before she squeezed again and released, slowly making her way up until her finger and thumb pressed against the sensitive head and pre-cum slid onto her fingers.

"Ugghrggh." Caspar wasn't sure what he was trying to say, but he doubted coherent speech was possible because intelligent thought had come and gone in a single squeeze.

She did the same thing once more, starting from the base, maintaining the pressure on his balls, her grip firm around his root as her other hand milked him of pre-cum. Little shifts up his cock to squeeze and release, and Caspar's breathing began to sound as though he were running up a hill. The ache in his gut intensified. But the pleasure, oh fuck, the sheer sensory delight, the bliss of being played with by soft, firm hands fogged his head to all but the feel of her palms and fingers, the caress of her warm breath and the casual brush of her pebbled nipples on his thighs.

This time, when Ally reached the head of his cock, she moved her hand away and they stared at the trail of pre-cum sliding from the winking eye of his slit, watched the silky pearl grow and grow before its weight sent it slipping down the side of his cock. The tickle was torture. Caspar trembled with anticipation, wondering if she'd let it slide all the way to her hand or -Ah, God. Her tongue flicked out to lap it up and a clenching shiver of joy surged through his groin. Ally used her tongue to drag the pre-cum back the way it had come and rubbed it into his crest with her mouth, pushing the tip of her tongue into the tiny opening at the head until Caspar couldn't breathe.

She began again, squeeze and release, squeeze and release while his balls quivered in outraged delirium. *Oh God, I'm going to come.* Caspar clamped down with everything he had, and when Ally wrapped her lips around his cock head and sucked, he clamped down with everything he didn't know he had as well.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he gasped over and over. "That must be fifteen minutes."

She lifted her head. "Two minutes. Thirteen to go."

"Nooooo," Caspar wailed.

Ally pulled down harder on his balls and the need to spurt eased away.

Angel.

She suckled the head of his cock and the need came roaring back.

Devil.

Tiny, wet sucks at his blood-filled crest with her hot mouth and Caspar feared he'd end up drooling. He was already crazed with lust.

"Try to relax," Ally said.

"Oh that's hysterical. There's not one bit of me that's not primed, ready to explode. Even my hair is tense."

When she removed her hands, Caspar wanted to cry, and he wasn't sure whether it was in relief or frustration. A moment to gulp air before her fingers pressed into the top and sides of his aching sac and began to massage the hidden root of his cock.

"Fuuuuck." Caspar's body flooded with intense sensations of pleasure tinged with the knowledge that her touch sent him rushing into danger. Amazingly, the need to erupt lessened a little under the massage and he let himself swim in the hidden depths of Ally's skilful hands.

The pad of a finger pressed the magic spot at the back of his balls and a whimper escaped his cemented lips. Tension slipped away and Caspar melted into the couch. He suspected he'd have to be levered out of it with a crowbar. Keeping his eyes open was a struggle, but he didn't want to stop looking at Ally. Oh God, I'll be good for nothing after this. But he didn't want her to stop.

Just as he thought he could cope with no more than another minute, she played a different game. She wrapped her mouth around his cock and began to suck in earnest while she twisted and pumped, and Caspar knew this time there was no way to hold back. She swallowed against him, using every part of her mouth to tease him. She pressed his cock head into her cheek, twirled her tongue into the groove under his crest, took more of his length into her mouth than he'd have thought possible, did it fast, did

it slow, did it rough, did it smooth, and everything took him a step higher on a crumbling cliff face. His handholds tenuous, his feet unsteady, his body trembling while the sounds she made, the look in her eyes, the feel of her hair in his fingers dragged him up and up. Caspar recognized how little control he had, that she wasn't his so much as he was hers.

He was covered in sweat, his breathing labored. Orgasm gathered like a distant thunderstorm, building in power. It began to race toward him, and every second of that race was such perfect bliss that Caspar could barely stand it. The flash of release made his back arch and his toes curl as his feet lifted from the floor. His fingers still buried in Ally's hair, he couldn't let go of her head as his cock swelled and jerked in her mouth, spilling all his pent-up energy between her lips.

"Ally, Ally, Ally," he gasped.

Shit, I'm going to drown her. But she didn't let him pull away. Cum dribbled from her mouth, but Ally kept him there until the spurts faded to nothing.

Caspar pulled free of her lips and wrapped his knees around her body, tugging her head to his chest. It took a moment or two to get his breathing under control, to check he was still alive. She crawled up and sprawled across him on the couch. Caspar could feel her heart fluttering as she panted against him.

She tipped her head to look into his eyes. "Oh dear. Fourteen minutes, fifty-five seconds. Damn, we're going to have to do it again."

He groaned. "I can't believe any guy has ever let you leave his bed, let alone his life."

"I've never done that before."

Caspar gaped at her. "Never?"

"Not quite like that. I like to experiment," Ally said.

He curved his lips in a smile. "So do I. Shall we see how many times I can make you come in fifteen minutes?"

"Have to catch me first."

Ally wriggled out of his arms and fled. When she pulled open the back door, Caspar reached from behind her and slammed it shut with a laugh before she could get outside.

"We are *not* dancing naked in the woods," he said.

"Spoilsport."

Ally dipped under his arm and made for the stairs. She threw herself at the bed and rolled onto her back. Caspar dived onto her. His cock was still semi-hard, and Ally squirmed down until the wet head nuzzled against her folds. Caspar's hips pressed onto hers and pushed her into the mattress. Ally looped her hands around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

His lips nibbled from side to side, teasing as she tried to keep him still.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, and nipped her lip. "You take my breath away."

His words bathed Ally in sunshine. Caspar's tongue speared her mouth in sync with his cock pressing against her, and Ally felt as though his tongue were fucking her between her legs. Already on the edge of coming, she began to slide. Her pussy fluttered and she moaned into Caspar's mouth as a warning twinge cramped her muscles. She knew this would be fast and hard. He ground himself more firmly against her, and Ally's head snapped back as she came. Waves of heat pulsed through her body to leave her trembling in their wake. As if she'd been wiped out on a surfboard, Ally felt herself pummeled by the waves as they dragged her to the shore and left her trembling on the sand.

"One," Caspar whispered, and slid down the bed.

He buried his tongue inside her, and even as one orgasm died away, another flickered to life in her core. Caspar pushed her legs farther apart and reached to play with her breasts while he licked and sucked and nuzzled her dips and folds. *Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.* Ally pushed up on her elbows to look at the dark head buried between her thighs and then dropped back to the pillow. What he was doing now, guys ought to be made to learn once they reached the age of consent. And he hadn't even touched her clit— *Oh damn.* One brush against that tiny bud and her hips bucked. Caspar didn't let her go. He kept moving his mouth over her, drawing out her climax until Ally mewed like a kitten.

"Two," he said.

She groaned as he flipped her over. He slung an arm under her belly to pull her to her knees.

"Don't I get a rest?" she asked.

"Did you give me a rest, Ms. Squeeze-and-Release?"

Caspar leaned over her back, his cock between her legs, rocking his hips so his shaft rubbed along her folds. When he licked his way down her spine, Ally clenched her fists on the sides of the pillow and panted into it. Caspar trailed his tongue down the crease of her bottom, and Ally let out a gurgled groan and fought to crawl up the bed. He didn't let her.

Ally lifted her head and gasped, "Caspar!"

"Sshh."

"Have you ever been fucked here?" he asked.

He spread her cheeks with his fingers and licked across her anus.

"No."

"Like to try?"

"Maybe, but I think I'd like to practice for a year or two with something smaller than your cock. One of those little candles off a birthday cake sounds about right."

He laughed and spun around so he lay on his back with her belly over his face. Caspar swirled his tongue around her navel, and her skin jumped as if something alive inside her had just woken. He continued to tease her, and Ally groaned and grunted and gasped with every flutter of her flesh.

Caspar spread his hands over her bottom and held her tight as he slid down the bed and tugged her onto his mouth.

"Oh God, not again," Ally said with a half laugh.

He took her swollen clit into his mouth and sucked gently, rocking her into him.

"I can't, I can't," she wailed, but even as she said it, Ally knew it was a lie.

Caspar had to work harder, longer, but her body knew what it liked. Shivers of delight flickered up her spine and her breathing slipped back into ragged gasping. His finger joined his tongue, and her muscles tightened around the intrusion. Ally swallowed against the climax building in her belly, but the deep thrusts of his finger made resistance impossible.

Tight, hot pleasure ripped through her and she came in shower of blazing-white sparks, every part of her trembling as she fell apart.

Caspar scooted from underneath and crawled up to pull her into his arms.

"Three," he whispered in her ear.

"If you're not inside me for number four, I won't show you my party trick." She opened her eyes and found him staring straight at her.

"Okay," he said, his eyes dancing.

"Can I take these holdups off now?" Ally asked. "They're 'round my ankles anyway."

Caspar slid down to pull them off. He rejoined her and put his head on the pillow next to hers.

Ally chewed her lip. "We have to be quiet in case the headmaster hears us."

She hoped he'd go with the change in role.

Caspar slid his fingers through hers and squeezed her hand. "It was a great idea to hide out under the stage. These gym mats are comfy."

"I've been so desperate for you all day," she said. "When you sat in front of me in biology, I wanted to crawl under the desk and unzip you then suck your cock with everyone around and no one knowing."

"I must have guessed what you were imagining because my dick was hard as stone. I kept thinking about how we'd arranged to meet here after school and how we were finally going to see each other naked. I had to carry my books in front of my pants to get to the bathroom then jack off in case one of my friends noticed I was sporting a woody. I jacked off again after the next lesson. I came so hard I thought I'd damaged something. After that, I made myself wait...until now."

Ally's heart did cartwheels. She'd never played these sorts of games before, but she really liked it, and Caspar had slid right into them. She ran her tongue over his lips and tasted his desire.

"Can I touch you?" she whispered.

"I'd like that."

She wrapped her fingers around Caspar's cock and gave the velvety head a tentative squeeze. "Is that okay?"

Caspar's fingers settled over hers. "Rub it up and down like this. Harder. I won't break."

He groaned as Ally tightened her hold.

"Can I touch you?" he asked.

"Yes. You'll still respect me tomorrow though, won't you?"

Caspar snorted and then slipped back into role. "'Course I will. I lo-like doing this."

Ally gulped. Had he nearly said the L word, even in play?

His finger slipped between her legs and he exhaled heavily. "You're so wet. Can I rub myself against you, just a bit, please?"

"Okay."

Ally rolled onto her back and Caspar lay over her, his cock head nudging her folds.

"That feels so good," he whispered.

She put her hands on his buttocks and his muscles rippled as he rocked against her, his cock brushing her clit.

Caspar kissed her, his tongue surging alongside hers as his cock slid along her sex. Ally widened her legs and hooked her heels over his calves, wrapping her hands around his back to pull him as close as she could. His skin prickled and dampened under her fingers. Caspar had his arms under her shoulders and their hips rode against each other, her nipples aroused to the point of pain by the rub of his chest.

"Ally," he gasped. "I want to push inside you. I know we said we'd wait but I don't want to. Can I, please?"

"Yes." Ally thought that if she'd really been a teenager under a stage with Caspar naked on top of her, "yes" would have been the only word that came from her mouth. Thank God she hadn't been tempted by anyone at her school.

"I'll go slow," Caspar whispered.

He kissed her, pulled back to hold her head in one hand as he positioned his cock over the entrance to her body. The blunt, smooth crest probed and then pressed, and Ally released a long sigh as Caspar slid inside her.

He stared at her with such intent, Ally lost herself in his gaze. She watched him as he pushed deep into her, so thick and strong, and he kept going and going until their bodies were joined. "Did I hurt you?" he whispered.

"No."

Caspar groaned. "Oh God, you're so wet and tight."

"And you're so big and hard." She put as much dramatic awe into her voice as she could.

He laughed and Ally felt his cock jerk. Then his face changed and he swallowed hard. "I never dreamt it could be like this," he said, and Ally understood then that they weren't playing, and it was as if something caught fire inside her.

"Me neither," she whispered.

He began to thrust, deep, slamming strokes that Ally arched into. She lifted her head so she could see his cock drive into her, the shaft gleaming with her cream as he pulled back. The muscles flexed in his belly as he fought to stay in control, but Ally could see the wildness in his eyes.

"Caspar, Caspar," she gasped his name, and his hips shifted into another gear, shunted into a different angle, and there was almost a frenzy in the pace of his thrusts.

Ally clung to him as they flew together, bodies molten, minds fused, hearts entwined.

Oh shit, I love him.

Oh shit, I love her.

As Caspar came down from the high, he pushed back the thought. How could this be love? He hadn't even known her a week.

Lust?

Then why couldn't he stand to be apart from her? Why did he feel "right" when he was with her? Why did he want to protect her to the death?

Love?

If it was love, should he fight it or embrace it? Did he want to do either?

Caspar cuddled her tighter. He was afraid of letting her down, getting it wrong, destroying her dreams. If he fucked up, how could he live with himself? He'd already made one fatal mistake and lost his sister. What was there to stop him messing up again? Better to let this run its course. Ally was different. That's why he felt like this and the feeling would pass.

He'd make it pass.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning, Ally left Caspar sleeping and crept out of his bedroom, clutching her holdups. She gathered the rest of her clothes and dressed in the hall. Quietly closing the door behind her, Ally fastened her coat as she made her way to the main road. With a bit of luck, she'd be able to sneak up to her room in the adventure center, shower and be ready for breakfast with the others without anyone realizing she'd spent the night elsewhere. She walked as quickly as high heels allowed.

It hadn't occurred to Ally that the place might be locked until she tried the door and it didn't open. When she spotted Tom behind the glass, she rattled the handle.

"And what time do you call this?" he asked as he opened up.

He might be smiling but Ally thought she caught a glimpse of disappointment in his eyes.

"When did the others get back?"

"One o'clock. Good thing I didn't have anyone else staying here. I didn't know women had such loud voices."

"Anyone up yet?"

"Nope. You might want to wake them. We leave in thirty minutes and they need to eat something."

"Have you heard how Neil is?"

"He's comfortable."

"Good."

And not just for Neil. *Please don't die*. Caspar was still the hero, and Ally wanted him to stay that way. She hurried up the stairs and down the corridor, unfastening her coat as she went. Ally opened her door, switched on the light and laughed when she saw the orange snake on the bed. No way would she be fooled twice. She covered it with her coat so she didn't have to look at it and then froze.

What had moved? Just her coat settling? Ally rolled her eyes. How could there possibly be a real snake on her bed? She stripped, dropped the school girl costume onto a chair and went into the bathroom. As she stood under the torrent, she thought about Caspar's timed shower and smiled. They hadn't talked about tonight, but Ally didn't intend to sleep here when strong arms waited for her the other side of the village.

Ally dressed in the old clothes she'd bought, gray chinos, a pink t-shirt and her blue sweater. She bent to tie the laces on her tennis shoes and let out a strangled gulp. Heading toward her across the carpet was a mottled orange snake. Not plastic. Real.

Fuck. Ally screamed. And kept screaming.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Tom burst into her room. "What the -?"

He took one look at the snake, slapped his hand over Ally's mouth and kicked the door shut.

Noooooo, we're still in here with it.

Ally struggled, but Tom wrapped his other arm around her and kept her still.

"Ally, it's okay. It won't hurt you. Calm down." He took his hand from her mouth.

The snake slithered under a chair and coiled up. The sudden bang on the door had Ally lurching back against Tom in case the creature tried to make a break for it.

"Please don't say anything," he whispered.

Why? In case they panicked the snake? Because he didn't want people to get the wrong idea about him being in her room?

He opened the door a crack.

"Ally, are you-? Oh Tom. Is everything okay?" Emma asked. "We heard a scream."

"Spider," Tom said.

What?

Ally tried to pull the door wider. Tom stopped her. Emma gave her a puzzled look. "Didn't think you were frightened of spiders?"

"It was in my shoe," Ally blurted.

"Breakfast is ready. We'll be down in a minute." Tom pushed the door closed with him and her and the snake together in the room.

No, no, no.

He still had one arm around her. Worrying about what Emma and shortly everyone else would think about him being in her room ranked low compared to worry about the murderous three-foot reptile under the chair. How had it gotten in her room? Tom's pet and it had escaped?

"What the hell is that thing doing in your room?" Tom whispered.

Oh damn. No simple explanation then.

"Sure it's not poisonous?" Ally asked. "It's not one of those types that can leap across the room and sink their fangs into you or unhinge its jaws and swallow someone whole?"

"It's a corn snake. Not poisonous and more frightened of you than you are of it." "Impossible."

They stared at the snake who stared back at them.

"Please don't say anything about this," Tom asked. "It's a nasty joke and it could wreck my business. If people think they're going to find snakes in their rooms, they won't stay here."

"I don't think this was aimed at you," Ally said. "Someone wanted to scare me, though it makes a change from wanting to kill me."

She lifted Tom's arm away from her waist and moved toward the door, not taking her eyes off the tangerine menace. Ally didn't like the look in its eyes.

"Kill you?" Tom pressed his hand against the door.

"The train I fell in front of – well, I was pushed."

Tom gaped at her.

"I was also knocked off my bike by a car, nearly crowned by a flowerpot and given a shove at the top of the tallest escalator in Europe."

"Why?"

"I have no idea."

Tom scratched his head. "But this snake won't hurt you."

Ally huffed. "I have a morbid fear of snakes. I don't think Caspar is keen on them either. Was it you who left the plastic one at the top of Tyburn Crag?"

The snake moved an inch and Ally put Tom between her and it.

"Good God, of course not. I can't believe all this. Someone trying to kill you? That's ridiculous." Tom sighed. "Look, go down to breakfast. I'll ring someone to come and take care of this and I'll talk to you later."

Ally was disappointed Tom didn't believe her but not surprised. She knew how crazy it sounded. By the time she reached the dining room, everyone sat eating. They looked up and grinned.

"You jammy devil," Emma said. "He is rather gorgeous."

"No wonder you wanted to slip away early last night," Kerry said.

Ally groaned. She hadn't told Kerry she was leaving with Caspar. "Tom was just getting rid of a spider."

"Since when did *you* need rescuing from spiders?" Delia gave her a knowing wink.

*Oh shit.* Ally helped herself to a plate of food and joined them. *Change the subject.* "So all ready for the naked parachuting?"

Six horrified faces turned to look at her.

"Oops." Ally put her hand over her mouth and smiled.

"Morning," called a voice.

Geoff stood by the door.

"Morning, sweetie." Emma jumped up and ran over to give him a kiss.

"Have a good time last night?" he asked.

"Brilliant," Kerry said.

"Did you?" Emma asked.

"Me and Tom sank a few jars here and watched the football." Geoff walked up to the table. "You look a bit pale, Ally."

She plastered a smile on her face. "I forgot my legs aren't hollow."

Tom came up behind Geoff. "Hi, mate. You want something to eat? They've paid for it, you might as well help yourself to what's left."

"Thanks." Geoff filled a plate and sat between Emma and Ally.

"Hey, Ally," Sal said. "You'll never guess who came into the pub last night after you'd gone."

"Not me," Geoff grumbled. "If I'd have known there was only one bloody pub in this village, I'd have thought twice about driving you lot. Still, good of Tom to keep me company."

"Who was it?" Ally asked between mouthfuls of egg and toast.

"Mark."

The toast stuck in Ally's throat and scratched as it lurched down. Mark was here? *Oh God.* What the hell did he want? Ally gulped. He knew how much she loved snakes. Could it have been him trying to scare the crap out of her?

"You and he are finished, aren't you?" asked Bryony.

"Yes."

Bryony lowered her voice. "You're really not interested in getting back with him?" "No," Ally said.

Her voice wasn't the only thing Bryony lowered. She wouldn't meet Ally's gaze. Ally's mind set off on a speculative voyage. Maybe Bryony had got off with Mark in The Wyndale Arms. If he'd spent the night with her—there wouldn't be anywhere else to stay with the film crew around—he might still be in the building, waiting to leave after they'd gone. Had Mark put the snake in her room? Had he pushed her in front of the train? Done the other things?

Hardly a way to win her back, and that message with the flowers sounded like he might even have planned to ask her to marry him. *Moron*. She opened her mouth to warn Bryony and then closed it again. They all knew Mark had cheated. If Ally went on and on about it, it'd sound as if she couldn't let it go. She could. She had.

"Everyone ready?" Tom called from the door. "Car park. Five minutes."

When Ally stepped outside the adventure center, shock froze her in her tracks. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you and I can't get you to listen. I thought it was easier to come and see you."

Jack ran his fingers through his hair. He looked terrible, dark circles under his eyes, his face pale, his clothes rumpled.

"I had to sleep in the car," he said, taking in her gaze. "Can we talk?"

The others came out of the door behind her, laughing and joking.

"Not now. We're going out for the day," Ally said. What the hell was happening? Mark and now Jack?

"When you get back then?"

"Fine."

Ally climbed into Tom's minibus. It wasn't fine. Jack's behavior was freaking her out. Maybe *he* was the one who'd put the snake in her room. Who else was going to turn up in Wyndale? Ally's birth mother? That bitch of a foster mother who put her in the dog kennel? Her long-lost father?

She wanted Caspar. She wanted to sit down with him and talk through stuff and try to come up with a reason why all this was happening. Caspar was the only one who believed her.

Ally looked back through the window as Tom drove away. Jack stood staring after her. What reason could he have to want her dead?

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar stretched out his arm and sighed when all he found was a cold, empty space. He'd not heard Ally leave and he wished she'd woken him. But if she had, maybe she wouldn't have left. He grinned and checked his watch. If he hurried, he'd be in time for the bus that took him along the valley bottom where the paragliders landed.

On the way to the bus stop, three people stopped him to congratulate him on saving Neil. The last one, Mike's mother, made a weird comment about him having been trained for that sort of thing in his job and then winked at him. Caspar had no idea what she meant.

By the time he got off the bus in the heart of the valley, he could see one red-and-white canopy high in the sky. Caspar headed down the lane toward the field where they'd land, and then sat on a drystone wall to watch.

One by one, the paragliders launched off the hillside, rising on the air currents and circling in the big blue sky like giant psychedelic eagles. Caspar's heart pounded as he wondered which canopy Ally lay suspended beneath. He'd never tried paragliding—something about deliberately throwing himself off a mountain that went against his climber's sensibilities.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out, not taking his gaze from the sky. Caspar almost dropped it when he saw who was calling.

"Hello," he muttered into the phone.

"We'd like you come for lunch today," said his father. "If you're free."

We? "Any particular reason?" Caspar asked.

"Martha's cooking your favorite. Roast beef and Yorkshire pudding."

Caspar's mouth watered. Damn, he was like Pavlov's dog with Martha's food. Caspar knew he hadn't received an answer to his question but his stomach overruled his brain.

"One o'clock?" Caspar asked.

"See you then." His father ended the call.

Caspar wondered what he'd done now and then remembered Neil. Had the local grapevine stretched that far? 'Course it had. Chinese whispers probably had Caspar doing open-heart surgery with a fork and spoon. But a meal was a meal and it would make his mother happy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally and her friends stayed uncharacteristically quiet as they put on suits, helmets and gloves. She worried she'd pressed them into something they didn't want to do. Tom offered them the chance to back out, saying Wes, one of his employees, would drive them to the landing site. No one had.

Sven, the guy who operated the paragliding company, asked each of them how much they weighed and allocated them to an instructor. Ally was surprised to find herself with Tom.

"Fully trained," he said. "Only had one slip through my fingers so far."

"What?" Ally gulped.

He laughed. "Don't worry. You'll be fine."

"Doomed then," she said.

Around them, at the top of the hill, pairs huddled as the instructors went through the safety procedures.

"The important thing to remember is to do exactly what I say, when I say it," Tom said. "It's easy. Lean right, lean left."

Ally sighed. "Definitely doomed."

He gave her a sad smile. "I hope Caspar knows how lucky he is."

She felt her face grow hot and turned away.

Tom laid out the fabric on the hillside, and Ally thought how flimsy it looked and how thin the lines were and how high she would be, and paragliding suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea. What if someone had gotten at the kite thing and rigged it to fall apart in midair—? Oh shut up, idiot. The snake had done what it was intended to do—made her paranoid.

Ally watched and listened to the shrieks of her friends as they launched into the sky and then it was her turn to be fastened to Tom and afterward to the giant kite. The arc

of blue and red material rose and inflated behind them. The wind caught it, and when they turned, Ally staggered as she tried to keep her feet.

"Okay?" Tom shouted in her ear.

No. "Yes." If she survived, she'd cut out her tongue.

"Run."

Ally closed her eyes and ran as fast as she could—not fast at all—off the mountain.

There was a sudden lurch, nothing under her bicycling feet, and when she opened her eyes, they were twenty feet up and rising. Her scream froze in her throat.

"Get on the seat," Tom yelled, and Ally wriggled until her backside was planted on the platform.

"Now breathe," he told her, and she laughed.

No engine, no carbon footprint, no noise—well, just the bleep of the altimeter as they went up and the hum as they came down. Ally knew this was the closest she'd get to being a bird. The sky was cloudless, the view endless, the euphoria almost heart-stopping. They turned in lazy circles, Ally trying to lean whichever way Tom directed, and she marveled at how far she could see, how high they were, how exhilarated she felt.

"Okay?" Tom asked.

"Brilliant," Ally said. She meant it.

He talked to her, explaining how to fly, the slight pressure needed to change direction, and although Ally listened, she doubted she'd ever do this on her own. Not a cheap hobby. She whooped as Tom found a thermal and they soared up. Then she had a slight panic that they wouldn't stop and would keep going and going until they reached the International Space Station. Below, Ally could see the rainbow arcs of her friends drifting like alien butterflies across the patchwork landscape and she hoped they were enjoying this as much as she was.

When their circles began to take them nearer the ground, Tom dipped the ends of the wings and made a controlled descent.

"Out of the seat now," he said.

Ally took a deep breath and wriggled forward so she hung in the harness. She bent her knees, kept her legs together and got ready to run. They slowed almost to a stop and then her feet were on the ground and the kite fell down behind them. With an expert flick and twist, Tom tamed the bird and the air fell from the fabric with a gentle hiss.

They'd landed quite near the minibus, but everyone else stood a few hundred yards away. Ally freed herself from the harness and took off her helmet and gloves.

"Thanks so much," Ally said. "That was great."

Tom nodded. "Look behind you."

She turned to see Caspar walking toward her.

"Hello, star girl," he said. "Enjoy that?"

"It was fantastic." Ally threw herself into his arms and hugged him. "I'm still alive."

Caspar grinned. "I thought I'd come and make sure you didn't need CPR."

Ally rolled her eyes as she peeled off the gray suit.

"Did you muddle up right and left?" Caspar asked.

She nodded.

"I pointed out the R and L on the gloves," Tom said as he folded up the kite. "It didn't make a difference."

Ally grinned. "So he tapped my shoulder on the side I was to lean."

"And she still went the wrong way," Tom said. "You'd think by the law of averages, she'd get it right half the time, but no."

"Sorry," Ally said.

"It made it interesting." Tom smiled.

Caspar took hold of Ally's hand and squeezed it. "Well, this is just a fleeting visit. I've got to go. There's only one bus every hour and I've been summoned to lunch with my parents. Come 'round to my place tonight?"

Ally nodded and he kissed her cheek and walked away. When she turned, Tom headed toward the van with the equipment and she followed.

"Would you give Caspar a job?" she asked.

"I don't have any vacancies."

"If you did?"

"He wouldn't work for me."

"If he would?" Ally pressed.

Tom grunted. "I'd think about it."

Progress! Ally was sure that wouldn't have been Tom's answer yesterday morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Caspar walked into Wyndale Hall, he heard the distinctive sound of feminine laughter coming from the drawing room. Not his mother. He pushed open the door and saw Lina talking to his father. *Oh fuck*. Caspar glanced at his mother. She looked pink-cheeked and happy.

"Caspar," his father said. "You didn't tell us you tried out for the rowing team. Lina said you were almost chosen for the first eight."

Bit of an exaggeration. Caspar had been in his college squad, but at six-three, he was too small for the Goldie crew.

Lina floated across the room in a green swirly dress and kissed him on the cheek. "The problem with Caspar," she said, "is that he hides his light under a bushel." She

tucked her arm under his and pressed herself against him. "He was so brave yesterday."

Brave? No he wasn't.

His mother smiled and – shit – was that a smile on his father's face or wind?

Caspar extricated his arm and stepped away from Lina.

Lina went straight to his father and took his arm. "I've been telling your parents what a wonderful home they have. The director is thrilled to bits to be filming here."

"You're not working today?" Caspar asked.

"No, so we could have fun this afternoon."

"You could show Lina the Blue John Cavern," his mother said.

"Borrow the car," said his father.

Oh Christ.

"Dinner's served," Martha called from the door.

Caspar was being set up here and he wasn't happy.

"Your mother and father don't remember you mentioning me," Lina said in a waspish tone as they walked into the dining room.

What a surprise. There's this girl I've met at college who fucks a different guy every week.

"I said – what young man wants to tell his parents about his girlfriends? It's such a shame we lost contact. I-"

Caspar bit back his smile when Lina broke off and blushed. Not that she'd tried to keep in touch when they'd left Cambridge, but four years in an Albanian jail had severed all links to friends or otherwise.

They sat at the dining table. His father took the seat at the head with his mother on the left and Casper and Lina on the right.

"We understand you can't talk about...things that happened," Lina said in a soft voice, and patted Caspar's hand until he moved it.

"Bad time all 'round," said his father.

Caspar stared at him. That was it? No "It damn well served him right"? No "You let us all down"? No "Pull yourself together"?

The food arrived and Caspar sighed. Martha had done the parsnips just as he liked them, roasted to perfection with dark-brown crispy edges. The sight of peas, carrots and perfectly cooked beef told Caspar that the fatted calf had been slaughtered for the prodigal's return. They'd even found him a wife.

Caspar didn't need to hear his parents say it, their unspoken words echoed in his head. *Perfect for you...good family...high cheekbones...impeccable manners...elegant bearing*. His father hadn't spent years breeding livestock without learning something.

Lina's toes slid under the bottom of Caspar's trousers and the peas fell off his fork and splattered gravy on the white tablecloth. When his mother didn't *tut*, Caspar was

really worried. He moved his leg, but Lina crossed hers and slid her foot into his lap beneath the cover of the cloth.

Before his cock did something stupid and said yes instead of no, Caspar lifted her foot off and pushed his chair well back from the table.

"Have you thought about going into acting?" Lina asked.

Caspar waited for the back legs of a donkey comment but it didn't come.

"He starred in a number of school plays," said his mother.

His father stayed quiet. Was he ill?

"Good beef," said his father.

A parallel dimension, Caspar decided. It was the only explanation.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Not much farther," Tom said as he cycled next to Ally.

"You've said the exact same thing for the last fifty miles."

Tom laughed. "We've cycled five."

Ally was at the head of the line. Unlike the others, she was used to getting around London by bike. Well, she had been until the accident. Wes held up the rear to poke stragglers with a cattle prod, but Ally and Tom were a few hundred yards in front of Bryony, the next rider.

"I hope the next bit's downhill," Ally mumbled.

"Lunch at the pub coming up on the left...other left," Tom said when Ally looked the wrong way. "Then it's downhill all the way to the weaseling."

Every time she heard the word, Ally sniggered.

"I should have put sleeping for the last choice," she said. "They're going to kill me."

"Talking of killing you, what makes you so sure those incidents were deliberate rather than accidents?"

"I felt someone push me in front of the train."

"Were the police involved?"

"They said it was an accident," Ally said. "If I'd had some tangible proof, they might have taken me seriously, but no one saw anything. I'm pretty sure they have me down as a neurotic attention seeker."

Tom didn't say anything and Ally could tell he didn't believe her. "What did you do with the snake?"

"Gave it to the chef. He has a recipe..."

Her front wheel wobbled and she almost fell off. "Not funny."

"Called the local vet. He's a pal of mine. He texted to say he'd gotten it. Nothing else in your room, by the way. I asked him to check. He liked your underwear but I told him you were taken. Not by me, unfortunately."

Ally rolled her eyes, but it was quite nice to be flirted with. She turned into the pub car park and dismounted. Once she'd leaned her bike up against the wall, she bent and stretched her back.

Tom put his bike against a metal rack. "I can't imagine you pissing anyone off enough for them to want to hurt you. What point did that snake serve?"

"It scared me."

"So someone wants to frighten you, not kill you. I'd look to one of your friends. Sounds the sort of thing a jealous woman might do."

"Maybe."

Tom looked over his shoulder. "Here come the peloton."

Bryony jumped off her bike and put it against the rack.

"Drink, drink," Sal gasped, and leaned her bike next to Tom's.

"Oh my God, I've never had so much exercise in my life," Bryony said.

Ally smiled. "Nor so much fresh air."

Emma cycled in last with Wes behind her. "My aching butt," she wailed.

"It's lovely," Wes said, and Emma let out a choked groan.

"Don't worry. It's downhill after lunch," Tom said.

"You two going to be cycling together again?" Delia winked at Ally.

"I bet they're looking forward to the weaseling." Sal giggled.

"When are you going to tell us what the hell that is?" Kerry asked.

"You have to wait and see," Tom said.

Emma shrieked when she walked into the pub. Ally spotted Geoff walking away from the window.

"What are you doing here?" Emma snapped.

"Having a drink," Geoff said.

He sat down next to Jack and Mark. Ally blinked hard but they didn't disappear. This was freaking her out. They were like Marley's three ghosts except she wanted none of them in her future.

Mark leapt to his feet, rushed toward Ally and halted partway there. Ally guessed he'd spotted Bryony behind her.

"We didn't know you'd come here to eat," Geoff said. "Want us to leave?"

"'Course not," said Kerry.

Sal tapped her foot. "You can finish your beer first."

Jack slid out of his seat and came over to Ally. "Can I talk to you now?" He stared at her anxiously.

And ruin a perfectly good lunch? She sighed. "Okay." At least it avoided a confrontation with Mark, who'd been waylaid by Bryony.

Jack bought Ally a drink, Tom provided the pre-ordered meal and they sat in the corner away from the others.

"I'm sorry I rattled you in that restaurant," Jack said. "I was out of order. Moment of insanity." He gulped. "Not that you're not lovely — Ah, shit."

Ally squirmed.

Jack took a deep breath. "I'm going to start the business up again and I wondered if you had any emails or information on your computer that could help."

Ally didn't believe him. Even if it were true, he could have asked over the phone.

"No, I don't," she said.

"Nothing?"

She shook her head.

"Would you let me look at your emails?" he asked.

"No."

A look of pain flooded his face. "Fine. Okay. I've tried hiding, I've tried lies and now I'm going to try the truth. The thing is, Ally, I'm in trouble. I owed the bank, they called in the debt I borrowed from elsewhere to pay them off. The 'elsewhere' I picked wasn't a good choice."

"Ah." She'd guessed he was in trouble.

Jack edged closer. "They persuaded me to get involved in something illegal. I washed their money through our accounts."

*Oh shit.* Ally thought about the invoices raised on companies she'd never heard of. The emails she'd sent to him that weren't answered.

"Even that wasn't enough. So...I set fire to the business to claim on the insurance."

Ally's fork clattered to the table. "Oh God, Jack, you idiot."

"No one knows. Only you."

"Why did you tell me?" Ally whispered. "I don't want to know. Now I do. Why did you have to tell me?"

"Because of those emails you sent me about Radicon and Emetix. If the police see those on your computer, I'll end up in prison."

"You should be in bloody prison. Oh God." Ally pushed her plate away. "Is that what all this is about? You're worried about some bloody emails?"

"Delete them from your sent box."

"And when I'm asked if I think you set fire to the business, what am I supposed to say?" She kept her voice low.

Jack's face hardened. "I'll deny everything. I'm appealing to you. Think of my wife and kids."

"You should have thought of them before you said yes to those people." She lowered her voice. "Money laundering? Are you crazy?"

 $^{\prime\prime}$ I got caught up. I made a mistake. Everything will be all right if you don't say anything. Please, Ally."

"I don't want Bella and the kids to get hurt, but I won't lie if I'm asked," Ally said.

"Everything okay here?" Tom asked as he walked over to their table.

"Just telling Ally some company secrets," Jack said with a laugh. "'Course, now that I've told her, I'll have to kill her."

## **Chapter Twenty**

Caspar emerged from lunch feeling as though he'd been manipulated at the hands of three masters. His mother's tremulous hope, his father's almost jovial civility and Lina's blatant flirting had combined to lower his resistance until he found himself agreeing to take Lina to the local limestone cavern, the Blue John Mine.

What was one short drive if it kept his father smiling and made his mother proud for a while? He'd soon be rid of Lina and everyone would be happy. His father handed over the keys to his silver convertible with something resembling a smile, and for the first time in five years, Caspar sat behind the wheel of a car.

He grinned and pressed the button to retract the roof.

"Don't put the roof down," Lina said. "It'll mess up my hair."

Caspar pressed the other button. He wished it were Ally beside him. He doubted she'd have complained about the wind in her hair. The afternoon was perfect for rattling over the hills with the top down. He felt bad about taking Lina out and maybe he should tell Ally about this outing that wasn't a date before she found out from someone else. Yep, he would.

Caspar pulled out of the village and began the climb to Dawes Peak.

"So spill the beans," Lina said.

"What beans?"

"When did they approach you? At Cambridge? How did they choose you?"

Caspar swallowed to try to bring moisture into his mouth.

Lina's hand crept onto his thigh. "My very own James Bond." *Oh fuck.* 

\* \* \* \* \*

"No racing down the hill," Tom said as they piled out of the pub. "Take it steady."

Ally fastened her helmet and wheeled her bike to the road. Despite the slog uphill, everyone apart from Emma seemed to be enjoying themselves. Ally knew Sal and Bryony were sporty, but she wasn't sure Kerry had this in mind for her hen party. Ally suspected naked men and getting drunk were more Kerry's sort of thing, though a day in London had been arranged to do something outrageous with the rest of the money they'd stumped up three months ago.

The first inkling Ally had of anything being wrong with her bike was when she came round the bend. She squeezed the brakes and nothing happened. Assuming she'd

not used enough pressure, she tried again. The bike gathered speed. Ally survived the curve, but her heart had leapt into her mouth, probably preparatory to escaping.

"Slow down," Tom yelled behind her.

Ally yanked on the brake levers as though some miracle would make them work. It didn't. She eyed the road ahead and groaned. A long, winding downhill slope.

"Ally!" Tom shouted.

"Can't stop." Her voice was whipped away by the wind.

Should she put her feet to the tarmac? Ally took them off the pedals but didn't dare let them touch the road. She was going too fast. Feet back on the pedals, she concentrated on negotiating the next bend. Only there were hundreds of the damn things coming up and the bike rolled faster and faster.

Oh God, had Jack nipped out of the pub and cut her brakes? Was he behind all the other incidents? She whizzed past a cyclist slogging up the hill and heard him yell, "Too fast!"

I'm going to get hurt. I'm a dead woman. Oh shit. Tears streamed from Ally's eyes as the wind blasted into her face. She blinked them away, unable to ease her grip on the handlebars and useless brakes. Her gaze flashed back and forth between the road ahead and what lay in the distance. No way would she get to the bottom without falling. Maybe her best chance was steering onto a bank at the side of the road. Falling on grass had to be better than slithering on tarmac, except there was no soft, grassy hill to slow her down. A boulder-strewn karst landscape lay on either side.

*Oh Christ.* She'd have to concentrate on making it to the bottom where she could slow on the flat.

After she almost fell off at the next bend, Ally began to shake, fear beginning to swamp her. Unless there was a pile of feathers or a large pond conveniently situated to cushion her fall, there was no way she'd walk from this unscathed. At least there weren't any cars around.

Oh fuck.

A silver sports car was on its way up the hill. So far Ally had been able to use the whole road to take the turns but if she met this car on a section where she was forced to stay left...right. "No, no, no," Ally groaned.

She kept squeezing the brakes as the car approached. Jack was such a bastard. What the hell was he thinking? The car passed in a blur and Ally whimpered. She leaned so far over on the next bend she thought she'd topple, but as she followed the line of the road, the bike returned to the upright position.

Ahead, like an oasis in a desert, loomed a bracken-covered upslope. In front of it, the road curved in a tight horseshoe bend. No way would she make that. The other side of the road dropped away. *Do it, do it.* As the point grew nearer that she'd have to make the decision to steer off the tarmac onto the gravel and then onto grass and hopefully into the bracken, Ally stopped breathing.

I don't want to do it.

But she kept going when the road turned. The bike started to shake on the loose stones and Ally fought to keep it level. She hit the grass, missed one rock, ploughed into the bracken for several yards, slowing all the time, then hit another rock and felt the back wheel lift. Once she lost her grip on the handlebars, it was as though everything happened in slow motion and Ally flew into the air.

Wow. Now I really am like a bird.

She hit the ground. Hard.

No I'm not.

Tom gasped when he saw Ally veer off the road. He'd raced after her down the hill, but she'd pulled steadily away from him. He had to reduce his speed or he'd have been in the same sort of mess. Not hard to guess that her brakes had failed, but front *and* back? If anything happened to her, he was going to be in so much trouble.

She flew into the air, and his heart jumped into his mouth. Tom skidded to a halt on the gravel. He threw his bike down and raced across to where Ally lay on her back in a bed of crushed bracken. When he saw her blink, Tom groaned in relief.

"Don't move. Don't even try to move. I'm phoning for an ambulance." He yanked his mobile from his pocket.

"Wait," Ally said. "I'm okay... I think. Any missing limbs?"

Tom clutched his phone but hesitated. "Christ, Ally. What the hell happened?"

"No bloody brakes."

A barrage of thoughts bombarded Tom's head, not least of which was the worry Ally might sue him. The bikes were serviced regularly. She'd ridden the same bike for an hour before lunch with no problem. *Both brakes?* His gaze flickered toward where the bike lay.

"Can you move your toes?" Tom asked.

"Yes, and my fingers and my tongue."

"Does anything hurt?"

Ally wriggled. "Not enough to make me yelp." She levered herself into a sitting position. "Yelp."

"Steady."

"I think the bracken saved me. I flew straight into it. Oh God, I nearly -" She bit her lip.

Tom knelt by her side and gave her a tentative hug. "It's okay. Bloody hell, I thought you were racing after I'd told you not to. Then I figured there had to be something wrong when you didn't wave to Caspar."

He felt Ally stiffen. "Caspar?"

"He was in the convertible." *Shut up.* "With some woman." *You bastard.* "She looked familiar." *You complete bastard.* 

"Oh." Ally stood and Tom kept hold of her arm in case she collapsed. Easy for her to think she was okay when she wasn't.

"You all right, Ally?" Sal called.

"Fine."

"Fine?" Tom whispered. "You sure? Which is your right hand?" He smiled when she lifted her left.

"See? Body responds to brain. I'm just a bit shaken."

Tom watched her totter over to Sal, who gave her a hug. Then he went to the bike. One look and his lunch threatened to reappear. The brake cables had been cut. *Christ Almighty*. He sighed. Had she done this herself, a way of getting attention? He picked up the bike and carried it to the roadside. Everyone else had come to a halt and was fussing over Ally. If it was attention she wanted, she had plenty of it now. Tom caught Wes' eye and they moved to one side.

"What happened?" Wes asked.

Tom pointed to the cut cables.

Wes whistled his exhale. "Shhhiiit. You'll have to call the police."

"What if she did it herself?"

"Are you serious?"

Tom looked back at her. She was laughing now and waving her arms in the air as if describing her flight, but there was a gray tinge to her face, a look of wariness in her eyes. Maybe she'd underestimated what would happen. Maybe she'd been telling the truth about someone trying to kill her. Tom shook his head. That was crazy.

"I don't know what the fuck happened," Tom said.

"How are we going to get her the rest of the way down?" Wes asked.

"If you can carry her bike, I'll take her. I'll talk to her about the police. If she did it herself, she won't want them involved. I don't think we should say anything to the others. I don't want to freak them out. The brakes were fine earlier."

Ally shuffled over, brushing greenery off her sweater. "Shall I start walking?"

"Nope," Tom said. "I'll give you a lift." Once Wes had mounted, Tom handed him Ally's bike and called, "Okay, ladies. Off you go. Follow Wes down this time. Ally's route was a little too scenic."

"How can two of us fit on that?" Ally asked.

"You sit sideways on the luggage rack at the back and hold on to me."

Ally gave him a resigned look and perched her backside on the narrow rectangle. She wrapped her arms around Tom's waist and his cock perked up. *Not bloody now*.

She tightened her grip as he set off, but Tom took it very steady.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yep."

She rested her helmet against the middle of his back and he could feel her shaking. Didn't mean she wasn't responsible.

"Did someone do something to the brakes?" she asked.

"They were cut."

She clutched him tighter. Pretending?

"I thought Jack was joking when he made that quip about company secrets," she said.

Tom swallowed hard. "You think he's behind this and all those incidents you told me about?"

"Yes."

"Then you have to tell the police."

"I know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar wasn't surprised when Lina declined to go into the cavern once she discovered there were steep steps down and no elevator. When he looked at her shoes, Caspar saw her point.

"Let's go to Buxton and you can buy me a cream tea," she said.

"Don't have my wallet."

"I'll buy then."

Caspar pulled onto the Buxton road. He still had time to drive there and be back before Ally had finished for the day. Had she been in that line of cyclists they'd passed? Hard to tell when they were wearing helmets. No way she'd be that daredevil idiot in the lead.

Lina checked her watch. Again.

"Do you have somewhere you need to be?" he asked.

"No, nowhere at all." She gave him a sunny smile that smacked of a lie.

Caspar turned onto the main road, thinking how much better a time he'd be having with Ally. Once her friends had gone back tonight, she'd be all his again.

Another check of her watch and Lina turned to him. "Whereabouts are you in the line of succession?"

Caspar tightened his grip on the wheel. "I have no idea."

"Really?"

"Why would I be interested? The chances of me becoming king are nil." *Thank Christ*.

"Your wife would be called Lady Sanderson, wouldn't she?"

Caspar glanced across at her. "Don't bother, Lina."

She pouted. "A girl can dream. Lady Lina. Sounds like a song."

"Sounds like a diet food." He sniggered and she glared.

"Oh look, park there."

"I can't. Double yellow lines."

"No one will mind. I'll pay the fine if they catch you."

"No." Caspar kept driving until he spotted a car pulling out of a gap.

"Good, we're nearer here anyway," Lina said.

Nearer where?

When Caspar came 'round to open the door for her, she was messing with her phone. *Texting?* She pushed it into her purse and stepped onto the pavement with a bright smile. Caspar didn't object when she looped her arm through his, but he was glad Ally couldn't see them.

"This place looks okay," Caspar said when they came to a small tea room.

"No, let's keep going."

At the end of the street Lina stopped and looked around with a puzzled expression. Caspar sighed. He wanted to dump her and drive back to Wyndale.

"Over there." Lina dragged him across the road.

Caspar looked through the window of Eat Here. "There are no tables."

Lina grabbed his arm and tugged him inside. "Then we'll wait."

Caspar felt relieved she didn't order him to throw someone out. Not that he would. Moments after they walked in, a table became free and the waitress cleared it as Caspar sat down. Lina had gone to the bathroom. When she came back, he noticed she'd combed her hair and touched up her makeup. He still wasn't interested.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked. "Hey, aren't you Lina Moon?"

Lina smiled. "Yes."

"Oh God, you're filming around here, aren't you? I read about it. Is Sean MacAlister coming in too?"

Lina's smile slipped and Caspar bit his lip to stop his chuckle escaping.

"We'd like tea for two and a selection of your cakes...please," Lina said.

"Can I have your autograph?"

"Of course."

When the girl had left, clutching the signed order pad, Lina leaned forward. "Sorry about that. It's such a pain being recognized everywhere I go."

*Liar.* Caspar watched as the word spread around the café and Lina slid into role. She gestured more, laughed louder. Even her conversation was staged. Caspar listened in amusement as she name-dropped stars like glittering confetti. He wondered who in the café apart from the waitress actually recognized her. But then, maybe he was doing

her an injustice. She could be more famous than he thought. He'd been out of the country for so long and once he'd returned, he'd not watched TV or gone to the cinema.

When the three-tiered cake stand arrived, laden with calories, Caspar wondered if Lina intended to eat any of them. Since she was paying, he'd ask for a box and take them back to share with Ally.

"So," Lina said. "You never did tell me, was it while you were at Cambridge that MI6 approached you."

Caspar didn't answer but sighed mentally. After her comment in the car, he'd hoped she'd drop it.

"You can tell me that surely," she whispered.

He filled his mouth with coconut cake and chewed.

"I presume it was. They went after Jonno too but he said no. Why did they let you go to prison?" she asked.

Caspar remained silent. It was better to say nothing and respond to nothing.

"Are you still working for them?" She leaned in closer. "Do you have a gun?"

The door of the café opened and two guys strolled in, one lifted a camera and started snapping pictures of Lina. *Shit, and of me.* Caspar turned his face away.

Lina shuffled nearer to Caspar. "Oh no," she whispered.

Except he thought she meant "Oh yes."

"This way, Lina. With a piece of cake?" the man called.

Lina gave a good-natured smile Caspar suspected she'd practiced in the mirror. She probably had a face to fit every occasion.

"Hey, guys, don't interrupt people's meals." She tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"Pay and let's leave," Caspar said.

Lina took twenty pounds from her purse and dropped it on the table. "'Bye, everyone."

She grabbed Caspar's arm as he stalked off, the photographer bustling to get out of the way.

"Who's your friend?" the other guy shouted.

"None of your business," Lina said.

That was a pleasant surprise. Caspar had expected her to –

"Oh well," she called over her shoulder. "You'll find out anyway. Lord Sanderson. Caspar's a viscount. His father's the Earl of Lynham."

Shit, shit, shit.

The pair pursued them all the way to the car, Lina clinging to him like a limpet. Caspar's fury mounted. He was tempted to drive back alone and leave her here. Serve the bitch right.

He slammed the door and started the engine while she waved and blew kisses to the photographer through the window.

"What the fuck was that about?" he snapped once they were moving.

"What?"

"I'm not an imbecile. You deliberately staged that. Why?"

"Because I like you."

Her hand crept onto his groin and rubbed. Caspar knocked it away. Even his cock was disgusted.

"If you care about me, you wouldn't have done it," he said.

"I don't know why you're mad at me. It's your little schoolgirl who's been telling everyone you were a spy."

A ball of lead settled in Caspar's stomach. "What are you talking about?"

Lina gave a heavy sigh. "One of the makeup crew came back from the village this morning and said someone had told her you used to be a spy and that your girlfriend had been bragging about it."

Shit. Was that true? Why would Ally say that? What the hell was she thinking?

"Do you even know what happened over there?" Caspar asked as he overtook a lorry. *Too fast, slow down*.

"Your sister died. You got caught in some scandal and went to prison."

"Right."

"I don't care. Well, I care about your sister obviously, but I don't mind that you went to prison. I rather like bad boys."

Caspar gripped the wheel so tight he thought he heard it crack. "Do me a favor," he said. "Don't open your mouth again until we get back."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally emerged exhausted from Buxton police station into a foggy evening and climbed into a taxi. Tom had said he'd come for her, but Ally didn't want to be a bother. Nor was she stupid. Tom thought she'd cut the cables herself, and that hurt.

The police had arrested Jack on suspicion of attempted murder, fraud and arson. Ally had been shocked they'd do that so quickly, but the sergeant who'd interviewed her said they'd gather all the evidence, liaise with the force in London, and it would be up to the Criminal Prosecution Service to decide if there was a case to answer. Ally gulped when she heard Jack would probably be released that night on bail, but the sergeant said now that Jack was under suspicion, if anything happened to her, he'd be the one they'd come after. Not much comfort if she was dead.

Apparently Tom, Wes and her friends had been questioned too when they got back from weaseling, but none of them had seen anything. Ally felt fairly certain that if she hadn't told the police about Jack's admission, that he'd set fire to his business, they would have dismissed the cut brakes in the way the other incidents had been dismissed.

As the taxi carried her back to Wyndale through the gloom, Ally tried to call Caspar but he didn't answer. Still with the woman Tom had mentioned? Lina? Ally sighed. She'd believed Caspar about the champagne but maybe her trust skewed by her attraction to him? Ally wasn't sure she liked being this needy, but tonight she was scared and wanted Caspar to hold her.

The driver dropped Ally at Caspar's house. When she saw no lights, her heart sank. She paid the fare and got out. Ally called him on the phone, banged on the door and shouted through the letter box. Where the hell was he? With Lina? Ally shivered. She wanted to wait but it was too cold to hang around.

She walked slowly down the road and unlocked the garage. Easier to stay here than return to the adventure center. Anyway, her friends would all be out on their speed-dating trip. She left the light on and lay down on a sun lounger in her coat, pulling her dressing gown over her legs. Laying her hand on her phone, Ally closed her eyes.

And opened them again. When she'd been knocked off her bike in London, hadn't Jack been in Barcelona? Her eyelids fluttered. Maybe that *had* been an accident.

\* \* \* \* \*

How hard was it to kill someone? What had seemed straightforward was turning into a bloody nightmare. Ally cat must have nine lives, but she'd used up a bunch of them. How the hell had she walked away from that crash without injury? The plan had been a broken neck, instant death, but if not, at least hospitalization, which would leave her a sitting target. Easy to finish her off in the hospital with a syringe of air and blame medical negligence, except she hadn't even broken a bone. *Fuck it.* Time was running out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar sprawled on his couch in the dark, staring at nothing. His phone lay by his side. Ally had called him three times, Lina once, his mother twice. He'd answered none of them. He had a call to make, but every time he reached for his phone, he withdrew his hand before he touched it. He needed to speak to Richard, his ex-boss in the Foreign Office, but after they'd last spoken and Caspar had lost his temper, he'd sworn never to contact him again. *The fucking prick*.

The knock at the door made Caspar jump. He'd feared for a crazy moment that the man he needed to call had come in person, but when he heard Ally shout through the letter box, he sank back into the couch.

Worst-case scenario – tomorrow's papers had photos of him and Lina with some stupid headline like *The Spy Who Loves Me* together with an article raking up everything that had happened five years ago, including the detail on Deanna Mantel and her

government minister father. Slightly less worse scenario—a picture of him and Lina looking like a couple.

Caspar knew he ought to call Ally and give her a chance to explain why she'd told people he'd been a spy. He was so pissed off with her, he wasn't sure he could speak without shouting. She'd disappointed him, and more than anyone else, he hadn't wanted her to do that. She was his rock and she'd let him down.

Ally had been incensed by the vicar's wife blurting he'd been in prison, and yet wasn't bragging Caspar had been a spy just as bad? What the hell had Ally been thinking? He'd not given her any reason to believe he worked for the intelligence service. In the ten months he'd been back, no one else had managed to make that leap.

He took a deep breath. They'd not made the leap because they were too ready to assume he'd been fucking some woman in the bar's bathroom while his sister was abducted from under his nose. But not Ally. She wanted to believe the best of him and had inadvertently stumbled on the truth.

This time his fingers settled around the phone and Caspar pressed the buttons. Of course the number might have changed or the call might not be answered. There would be no caller display at the other end. Caspar had a pay-as-you-go mobile with no traceable contract. The sole benefit of the cheap piece of junk he held.

"Good evening, Caspar."

What the hell? He dropped the phone, scrambled to pick it up and swallowed before he spoke to steady his voice. "Hello, Richard."

"You've taken awhile to get in touch."

"I hold grudges for a long time." Like forever.

"You're still sulking?"

Caspar bristled. "Four years in an Albanian jail for something I didn't do. I pissed away every cent I had on my defense and when I'm finally free of bars, I'm treated like a pariah. I did what was asked. I'm still doing it and I've paid a high enough fucking price."

"You killed Bekim Hassan and we made a deal."

"It was self-defense." He'd made sure it looked like that.

There was a snort from the other end of the phone. "Why are you calling? Changed your mind about accepting some help?"

Caspar took a deep breath. "I'm calling to warn you the shit might be about to hit the fan."

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

Caspar walked into The Wyndale Arms, unsure whether or not he wanted Ally to be in there. His ex-boss had made it quite clear what he expected. Caspar's ties with Ally had to be severed in order that Caspar distance himself from her remarks. If he was exposed as a former spy, all those he'd been in contact with in Albania would come under suspicion—dangerous for one person in particular. The woman he'd met in the bathroom of the bar.

Richard insisted the sooner Caspar made the break with Ally, the better. The power of the Foreign Office would ensure no newspaper carried a story linking Caspar to spying in Albania, though Caspar suspected there *would* be a story about him and Lina.

There was no doubt in Caspar's mind that if he didn't break with Ally, life would become difficult for both of them. Richard hadn't needed to spell it out. Caspar didn't care about himself. How much worse could his life be? But he cared about Ally and he cared about his contact in Albania. *Shit, what a mess.* All because Ally had interfered, albeit with the best of intentions.

She wasn't in the pub.

Relief tussled with disappointment.

"Caspar!" Tom called. "Ally not with you?"

"No." Caspar bought a glass of red wine and sighed when he saw his usual seat by the fire occupied by a giggling redhead. He leaned on the bar instead.

Tom came to join him. "You left her at home then?"

Caspar bristled. "Not at my home."

Tom's mouth tightened. "It didn't take long, did it? Christ, Caspar. What the hell's the matter with you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Fed up of her already? Your timing's crap."

A skeletal finger scratched the length of Caspar's spine and poked him until he turned to face Tom. "Why? What's happened? Is Ally all right?"

Doubt clouded Tom's face. "When did you last see her?"

"After you didn't kill her paragliding."

"You passed her in your father's car. There was...an accident just after."

Caspar put his glass down and sloshed wine onto the bar. "What sort of accident?"

Tom moved closer. "The brake cables on Ally's bike were cut. She crashed on Dawes Hill."

"W-what?" Caspar's heart jumped.

"She's okay," Tom said. "Unbelievably. She went to Buxton to give a statement to the police. They sent someone over to speak to me and her friends."

"What the fuck happened?"

"I don't know. I did wonder if she did it herself." Tom stared straight at him. "Trying to get attention. Trying to make you stay with her. Trying to make you want her and not Lina."

Caspar felt as chilled as if he'd dived into arctic water.

"She told me about the incidents in London," Tom said. "Seems farfetched to me to conclude someone wants her dead. More likely she has...problems, though I suppose it's possible one of her friends cut her brakes while we were in the pub."

"One of her girlfriends?"

"We weren't the only ones in the pub. Emma's boyfriend Geoff, Ally's ex-boss Jack and her ex-boyfriend Mark were there too."

Why? Caspar wondered. Had Mark abused her, followed her up here to do it some more?

"I told Ally I'd bring her back from Buxton, but when she didn't call, I did. The guy I spoke to said she got a taxi two hours ago. I thought she'd be with you by now."

"No, she —" Caspar closed his mouth. "I thought she was staying at your place."

Tom glanced around and then lowered his head closer to Caspar's. "I don't think she was too keen after she found a corn snake in her room this morning. One of her friends playing a trick, I think."

Caspar shuddered.

"Talking of snakes, I didn't put that one on Tyburn Crag. I wouldn't endanger life at the top of a cliff. Not even yours. Neil's still improving, by the way. They're talking of letting him out in the middle of the week."

"Good. So where the hell is Ally?"

"Unless she changed her mind about the speed-dating, she must have gone back to her brother's place."

Speed-dating? *Shit.* But sharing with Lina? Caspar doubted it. He gulped his wine and put the glass on the bar.

"Going to find her?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe you have changed."

The glance they exchanged told Caspar repairs had been made to their friendship though there was a way to go.

Caspar took out his phone as he left the pub. *Please don't be a prick like me and ignore this call*.

"Hello." Ally sounded wary.

Caspar held back his groan of relief that she'd answered. "I'm sorry." He figured that was always the best thing to say to a woman regardless of circumstance.

"Why? What have you done?"

Or maybe not.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Finn's garage."

Caspar started to jog up the hill. "What are you doing in there?"

"Bit of woodwork. Thought I'd make a coffee table. If that didn't work out, a coffin."

"Ally!"

"I don't have anywhere else to go."

I am such a dickhead. "I heard about what happened today."

She sighed. "Not sure which was worse, the snake or the lack of brakes. Now I'm not dead, I'm inclined to think it was the snake. Horrible orange thing."

"Are you going to open the door?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm standing outside."

The moment he saw her, Caspar dragged her into his arms and hugged her then let her go just as fast. "Shit, am I hurting you?"

"No." She shot him a little smile.

He pulled her back into his arms. He wanted to hold her and never let her go. The exact opposite of what he was supposed to be doing, but the thought that he might have lost her forever almost stopped up his lungs. Throwing herself under a train? Cutting the brakes on her bike? She needed help. Over her shoulder, he took in the sun lounger and the dressing gown lying on it. She'd been going to sleep in here? In the cold? On her own? *I am such a fucking dickhead*.

One more night wasn't too much to ask. This wasn't the moment to confront her about the rumormongering.

"Come on," he said. "Lock up. We can't sleep on that. Apart from which it's too cold in here to take our clothes off."

Ally grabbed her purse. "Why would I want to take my clothes off?"

"I need to check you all over for injuries."

When her face lit up in a grin, Caspar's heart did a little jig. He switched off the light as they left and closed the door. Ally locked it. He took her hand in his and held tight.

"Tom said you drove past when I was zooming in the other direction. Thanks for not hitting me."

*Christ.* "My father's car. I gave Lina a…lift. She wouldn't let me put the top down." He didn't want to hide the truth from Ally, but this didn't seem the right time to tell her what had happened. Caspar pulled his keys from his pocket and twisted them in his fingers. "I wished you were next to me."

"What? And mess my hair?"

He laughed. The moment Caspar had closed and locked his door, he let out a long sigh. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to bring her here. Ally switched on the light and he flicked it off.

Caspar ran his finger down her cheek. "You're going to think I'm a sex maniac."

"Going to?"

"I blame you. The moment I get anywhere near you, my cock sucks up my entire blood supply and my brain develops a one-track mind." He pushed her gently against the wall in the hall and unfastened the buttons on her coat. "Forgive me?"

"What for?"

"For not moving from this spot until I've come inside you."

She let out a shuddery breath and stared into his eyes.

Caspar threw his coat onto the floor, Ally's followed. He kissed her, melting into her mouth as he stripped her of every item of clothing. As she did the same to him, Caspar leaned into her, pressing his cock into the swell of her stomach, grinding his hips against hers as they exchanged hungry, open-mouthed kisses.

He pulled back for air and rested his palms on either side of her head as he stared into her eyes. Ally was breathing rapidly through her mouth, her chest rising and falling, her beautiful nipples like little raspberries. *Is this the last time I'll touch her?* 

She lifted her hand and traced the arch of his eyebrows with her finger, trailed her fingertip down his nose, over his lips to his chin and along the curve of his jaw to his ear. Caspar copied what she'd done, and when he ran his finger across her mouth and her lips curled up, he smiled. Ally reached for his cock, and he hissed when she tightened her fist around the base and drew her hand up to drag the wrinkled foreskin over the crown. A fat ball of pre-cum rolled from his slit. Ally scooped it up with her finger and thumb and brought it to her lips. Her sigh when she sucked her fingers made Caspar's balls tingle.

He slid his hand down the soft skin of her belly, over the teardrop of curls. Caspar could feel the wet warmth of her folds even before he touched them. He laid his forehead against hers as he eased his fingers over her sex. He'd thought he'd never get to do this again, and now he wanted her so much every cell in his body ached in desperation.

"Ah God, sorry, Ally. I can't wait."

He used his knee to widen her legs, bent and took her in a single thrust, sliding deep, hard and fast.

"I1..." Oh fuck. One thing he mustn't say.

Ally wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted her legs onto his hips. Caspar pressed her against the wall, his hands supporting her backside as he pounded into her.

"Ally, Ally," he gasped.

She was so wet and tight and hot, his cock swelled at her grasp. Even in the thrall of lust, Caspar needed her to come before he did. He pulled her down as he thrust up and Ally worked with him, driving herself onto him, her hands pressing on his shoulders. Her breasts banged against his chest and the brush of her nipples rubbing against him wound his balls into a harder knot. The muscles of her pussy clenched him so fiercely Caspar could hardly bear it yet thought it the most exquisite feeling in the world.

Ally shifted her hips and Caspar gasped at the change in angle, the different sensation against his cock head as if he'd reached some hidden place inside her. His thighs shook with the effort of holding back, with the effort of holding her up.

"Oh God," Ally cried, and her climax broke over him.

Caspar jerked through the clench of her spasms with a flurry of hard, fast thrusts because he had no choice. The need to come overpowered everything. His balls tingled, his cock heated as their bellies slapped together in frantic motion. A lightning bolt hit his head and sent pulses of electricity shooting down his spine. His balls were drawn up so tight to the base of his shaft it felt as if they were trying to climb it. His cock pulsed and Caspar came with a jolt, flooding her with his seed as if he were trying to put out a fire.

They sagged against the wall, and Ally's legs slid down his thighs until her feet hit the floor. Caspar nuzzled into her neck and held her until their breathing eased, until his cock softened and slipped free. He'd been so close to blurting he loved her. His heart pounded at the thought. How stupid would that have been?

He was a dick. He pulled back and smiled at her. "That's taken the edge off."

*Christ, it's official. I* am *a dick.* He needed to think for at least an hour before he opened his mouth in view of what he needed to say to her tomorrow. *You selfish prick.* 

Ally smiled as Caspar leaned against the wall at her side. She took his hand in hers and squeezed his fingers.

"Can we go to bed?" she whispered.

Caspar tried to speak but nothing came out. Probably just as well.

Ally tugged him to the stairs. "There's something I want to do."

Anything.

"I've never tried it before but I want to do it to you." Her face lit in a smile.

Anything.

They were halfway up the stairs when she turned to face him. "We need marmalade, two feet of barbed wire and a nine volt battery."

Ally laughed when Caspar fell over. "Or just my mouth." She led him by the hand into the bedroom. "Lie on the bed. Face up."

Caspar settled with his arms folded under his head. Ally switched on the bedside light on his makeshift table. Her stomach clenched when she looked at him lying there all long and lean and luscious. Her gaze ran from his toes up to his nervous expression and she grinned.

"Why do you have that mischievous glint in your eye?" he asked.

"I want to suck your cock until it's gone hard again."

As if his cock heard, it stirred in its nest, swelled a little, and Caspar let out a deep groan.

"Damn it," Ally said. "Normal men don't recover that fast. You...weirdo. Right. Close your eyes and keep them closed."

She ran back downstairs and opened the fridge. Ran back upstairs with the ice tray and two glass bottles of ketchup. Caspar lay with his eyes closed, his arms by his sides, fists clenched as if he suspected trouble. He was right. Ally put the ice tray on the floor and crawled onto the bed with the sauce. Taking one cold bottle in each hand, she laid them either side of his cock.

Caspar sprang to a sitting position. "Jesus Christ, what the...? Ah." He sank back again. "You could have warned me."

"There would have been no fun in that at all. You don't have marmalade. I've had to compromise. Are you soft again?"

"My balls have taken refuge behind my kidneys and my cock is unlikely to speak to you ever again."

"I'll just leave the bottles there for ten minutes."

"Take them off now."

Ally laughed. "Right." She put them on the floor then laid her head on his belly and blew warm air on his cock. "How fast?"

"The bottles were a waste of time. I'm going to be rigid as soon as you put your lips on me."

"Try not to be."

Caspar growled.

Ally licked his shaft from the root to the head. She liked the different feel of his flaccid cock, the spongy softness, the delicate fragility. She licked him again, head to the root. She could hear Caspar's ragged breathing, feel his chest rise and fall. When she took the tip of his cock in her mouth and sucked gently, his breathing stuttered to a halt. Ally teased the tiny slit with her tongue, used her lips to pull his foreskin over his crest then used them to push it back. She ran her tongue around the ridge below the head and then landed a shower of kisses over his cock as it grew and grew against her face.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"You don't sound sorry."

"I am, I promise. I wish you could just lie there and do that all night."

"I haven't finished with you yet," Ally said. "Keep still."

She reached to the floor and pulled an ice cube out of the tray. As she licked one side of Caspar's cock, she ran the ice along the other side.

"Fucking hell," Caspar gasped.

The ice melted against him, dripping down into his pubic hair. When Ally ran the cube over his glans, Caspar's hips bucked. She popped the cube between her lips and let him feel it along with the heat of her mouth.

"Jesus, Ally."

Another sweep over the winking slit and Caspar bucked again. This time his hips caught Ally's chin and she swallowed the ice. When she launched into a coughing fit, Caspar sat up to pat her on the back.

"God, you're dangerous," she said.

"Ha, and you're not?" He leaned back against the pillows. "How are you at multitasking?"

"Better than you."

Caspar laughed. "Let's see."

He caught hold of her waist and swiveled her around so they lay on their sides, her face against his crotch, her sex close to his mouth. The warmth of his exhalation brushed her wet folds, and a coil tightened in Ally's belly. She trapped the head of his cock between her lips, and after a series of short, hard sucks, Caspar let out a long sigh. One lick over her clit and Ally groaned around his cock.

Caspar shuddered and mumbled into her, "Oh God, do that again."

Ally obliged, but it was hard to concentrate on him when he was teasing her. Finger and tongue spearing her, his lips pressed tight to the hills and valleys between her legs, Caspar made it impossible to focus on pleasing him. Her budding orgasm rose like a kite, still tethered by string but desperate to fly free.

Caspar pressed and stroked and licked and kissed. Ally could do little more than nurse on his cock, her tongue lapping at the crest, her mind swirling, heady on the taste and scent of him. The nip of Caspar's teeth on the most sensitive nub of tissue broke the twine that held her back. Ally came with a strangled gasp around his shaft, swallowing against him as the cascade of sensation swept her away into a cloudless sky.

As the tremors in her body faded and the explosion of release subsided back into its different parts, she once again felt the caress of Caspar's tongue, his delving fingers and his rough cheeks. Ally wrapped her fist around the root of his cock and twisted as she sucked. She heard Caspar swearing into the lips of her sex. Using the tip of her tongue, Ally traced the swollen veins that laced his cock, licked the heavy sac that hung at the base and massaged his balls with her mouth.

Caspar eased away from her with a groan. "You win. You're the best. You can have all my worldly goods. I just need one small favor in return. Me—inside you—now."

She laughed. "You don't have any worldly goods and I already know I'm the best."

With a groan, Caspar spun her round so they faced the same way, Ally on her back under him, his knees pinning her arms next to her ribs. She looked up at his tense face, the tendons in his neck standing out and dropped her gaze to his cock. One lick of her lips and he let out a choked growl.

"Do you have any idea...?" Caspar sighed. "Yeah, of course you do, you little tease."

Ally wriggled one arm free, dropped her hand between her legs and scooped up the moisture gathered there. She wiped her sticky fingers between her breasts and then took hold of Caspar's cock.

"Oh God," he muttered.

Ally slid her slick hand up and down his length, gathering his pre-cum and adding that to the mix so he slipped more readily in her hand. Caspar angled his body so his cock lay between her breasts, and Ally pulled her other hand free so she could press her breasts against him.

"Ally, Ally." He groaned each word as he slid back and forth, his hips rocking, his face taut in concentration.

The sensation of his hot, hard cock sliding between her breasts, the way it looked, made her feel drunk, made her powerful. Caspar closed his eyes and trembled. He pulled away from her breasts and trailed the head of his cock down the center of her chest, over her belly and the teardrop of pubic hair and came to a rest on the folds of her sex. Ally tipped her pelvis and the soft, round head of his cock just penetrated her swollen lips.

Ally wrapped her hands around his hips and tilted her pelvis until more of him slid inside her. Caspar grunted, then began to move, pressing his thick length in as his legs forced hers to widen. He rested on his arms and stared into her eyes as he worked himself deeper, rocking back and forth, sliding in and out, teasing them both with the slow penetration while he held back from thrusting all the way.

She wanted all of him, needed all of him. "You win. You're the best."

Caspar laughed and his cock flexed inside her. Ally tightened her muscles around him and his eyelids fluttered as he hissed. Encouraged, she did it again.

"No, you win," he gasped.

He began to move, pulling back to slam into her. Long, hard, passionate thrusts of hard flesh into soft. They were both wet with sweat, gasping and panting with excitement, with effort, with lust.

"Jesus, Ally. You're so fucking tight."

As Ally arched into his down thrust, Caspar brought his fingers to her clit and rubbed. The telltale streamers of an orgasm on the rise rippled through her body. His

hips moved faster, impossibly fast, and he dragged her with him into a perfect rhythm that lasted only moments before their movements became frenzied, their breathing choppy. As he rubbed her clit faster and fucked her harder, Ally could feel herself going over. Animal cries burst in his throat and she knew Caspar neared his limit.

Each thrust reached her heart and was accompanied by a gasp of her name.

*Oh fuck, I love him.* It wasn't just the sex, though it left her more vulnerable to blurting out those three words. Ally couldn't say it but she thought it.

I love you.

Ally didn't want to come yet, didn't want the sensation to end, that feeling as if her body had been taken over by something greater than her but she might as well have been trying to push water uphill. As the first spasm twisted her flesh, his cock jerked and they unraveled together. Ally pulled his face down and they kissed their way to satiated bliss.

Their breathing eased, their bodies cooled and their minds calmed. Caspar rolled onto his back and pulled Ally on top of him, his arms wrapped around her.

Please hold me forever.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Ally skipped down the hill toward the village. The weather looked crappy, thick gray clouds glowered overhead, but her world grew brighter and brighter. No one out there trying to kill her, assuming Jack wasn't a total idiot, and she had a gorgeous boyfriend who was so sexy he made her mouth water. Caspar still wanted her. She wasn't like all the rest. Everything was going to be great.

She almost felt sorry for Jack. He had to have gone a bit mad to do what he did. Ally still found it difficult to believe he could have been desperate enough to kill her. Though she could see if her death looked like an accident, no one would have checked her emails and even if they had, the chances were small any alarms would have gone off.

So the danger had gone and the future looked rosy. She needed to talk to Caspar about Jack but it could wait.

Ally popped into The Rumblin' Tum and smiled at Rose. "Morning. Bacon sandwich, please."

"Morning, Ally. Coffee as well?"

"Please. To take out. I'm due at the adventure center. I need to eat on the hoof. My friends are leaving this morning."

"I heard about the fun in the pub. My other half's miffed because we went to the pictures and missed it." Rose rolled her eyes. "He wants to buy me a nurse's uniform. So are you...okay?"

The local grapevine had been busy. "Yes. I was lucky the bracken was soft and I missed the rocks. I'm a bit bruised but that's all."

The blank look told Ally wires had crossed.

"I meant about this," Rose said, and put an open newspaper on the counter.

The headline said *Moonraker*. Three photographs. Caspar in a convertible with Lina Moon. Caspar eating cakes with Lina Moon. Caspar holding hands with Lina Moon. *Oh shit*.

Ally dropped a handful of coins on the counter. "Can I take the paper?"

"Help yourself."

She headed for the door.

"You've forgotten your sandwich and coffee," Rose called.

"Changed my mind," Ally muttered.

As she continued down the street, she skimmed the article. Reading it properly could wait until she caught the gist of what it said. Even now, Ally tried to make the photographs tell a different story.

How could they?

Caspar Sanderson... Son of the Earl of Lynham... Sister's murder... Albanian prison... Lina Moon... Cambridge students... Rekindled romance... Filming at Wyndale Hall... Engagement announcement expected... Lord and Lady Lynham delighted.

The pain in Ally's chest scared her. Hard and fierce as though she'd been stabbed. No Caspar to administer CPR. He was the one who'd caused it, though Ally didn't understand any of this. She'd left his bed a short time ago. He'd come to her last night. He'd taken her to his place and they— *Oh God*. Why would he do that if he was involved with that bitch of an actress? How could he lie to her like that?

She walked faster.

He felt sorry for her because of the bike crash. Was that it?

Ally stumbled as she started to run.

The son of an earl? Why hadn't he told her? Even if the papers had exaggerated, it still didn't matter. The photos of Lina and Caspar holding hands didn't have to mean anything. What hurt was that he hadn't told her.

He said he'd given Lina a lift, not that he'd had tea with her, walked hand in hand with her.

That hurt.

Ally had opened her heart and told him everything. Now she could see how little Caspar had told her in return. What had he been doing when his sister had been taken? She'd wanted to think it was something excusable and he'd let her.

She ran faster.

I'm the cheap fun on the side. Okay to fuck but not to marry. And yes, Ally was aware she hadn't known Caspar a week and she wasn't thinking about marriage, but it still hurt. It hurt.

She'd lasted longer than his normal one-night stands. Was that supposed to make her feel better?

It didn't.

After she burst into the adventure center, Tom took one look at her and pulled her into his office. The newspaper fell from her hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar stirred, touched cold sheets on his right and knew Ally had gone. He needed to talk to her. He shouldn't have slept with her last night. It was hardly going to make what he had to do any easier. He turned and his face hit a piece of paper. Caspar read Ally's note. I'll be back soon with lunch. Stay naked. xx He checked his watch. Ten

forty-five. How long did it take her to buy lunch? He froze. *Oh shit.* He was due at Tom's place in fifteen minutes for the modeling thing.

He leapt out of bed. Yelped during a two-minute cold shower. Dressed while he was still wet. Grabbed his keys and ran.

Juno stood by her car tapping her foot when he arrived, panting.

She smiled. "I thought you might have changed your mind."

"Not when a hundred pounds is at stake." He was going to blow it all taking Ally out for a meal and — Oh God, no he wasn't. Could he take her for a meal and tell her then? Would that make it any easier?

Moron.

"Will your fiancée mind?" Juno asked.

"What?"

She handed him a newspaper. "Didn't realize you were a viscount. I should be able to get you lots of work if I tell people that."

Caspar glanced at the photos and the article. Richard told him he'd squash the newspaper speculation—nothing like a phone call from a senior member of the Foreign Office to silence the press, though the *Moonraker* headline showed the editor of this particular paper still had the potential to bite. And, Christ, what were his parents thinking? Still, it could have been a lot worse.

"What do I have to do?" he asked.

"Nothing more than stand and look gorgeous."

Caspar followed her into the building and down a corridor to a small room. She took a towel from her bag, handed it to him and leaned against the door. When he saw her swallow hard, Caspar had a bad feeling. He looked around the room hoping for a rail of clothes and saw nothing. He turned back to face her.

"What's going on?" he asked. "What am I modeling?"

"Yourself." She took a deep breath. "It's a life drawing class."

Caspar ground his teeth. "You want me to strip?"

"Yes."

"Fuck off," he snapped.

She spread her arms over the door. "You said you'd do it. You can't let me down."

"Yes, I can."

"Please," Juno said. "I'm just starting off. I have to make this business work."

"Well, honesty helps," Caspar snapped. "You should have told me what was involved."

"But you'd have said no." She lowered her arms and clenched her fists at her sides. "Look, it's just a group who want to draw pictures of a naked guy. It's not serious. It's fun. I did it in London. I thought it would work up here."

Dots began to join up inside Caspar's thick skull. "Does the group happen to be young and female?"

"Yes."

"Are any of them actual artists?"

"No."

"Is this a hen party?"

"Yes."

Oh fuck. Caspar had assumed they'd come for the weekend and left last night. Not only were Ally's friends a few feet away, waiting to draw a guy with his kit off, but Ally would be there too.

"I can't do it," Caspar blurted.

Juno's shoulders sagged. "Look, I'll give you all the money. A hundred and thirty. I don't want to let them down."

"It isn't the money."

Except, *would* Ally be there? She'd said she'd be back soon with lunch. Did it matter anyway? In fact, if she *was* there, maybe she'd be so pissed off she'd finish with him and save him some heartache. Oh Christ, he didn't want to end things with her. Why did he have to lose the person who'd believed in him when no one else had?

Because he had no choice.

Was that true?

Caspar wondered if his head were going to spin off.

"Please," Juno said.

Even if Ally wasn't there, she'd find out soon enough. Maybe she'd seen the photos in the newspaper. He was going to lose her without even trying. Caspar closed his eyes, took a deep breath and snapped them open. "Okay."

Juno gasped. "You'll do it? Oh that's brilliant. Thank you. I'll keep charge. I won't let them mess around."

Shit. "You mean you're in there too?"

"I have to...direct things."

*Oh Christ.* Direct what? Order his cock not to rise to the occasion? Tell his balls not to play hide and seek?

"I'll wait outside the door while you get undressed."

Why fucking bother?

She left before Caspar could take another breath. Presumably in case he changed his mind. At least he hadn't been expected to strip in front of them. He ought to run fast in the opposite direction but instead he took off his coat, pulled his sweater over his head and peeled off his t-shirt.

After the last sock hit his piled up clothes, Caspar wrapped the towel around his hips. No danger whatsoever of an erection. He slid his hand beneath the towel and pulled down on his cock. *Had the damn thing shrunk?* 

He could do this.

He took a step toward the door and froze.

No, he couldn't.

He took a deep breath.

Yes, he could.

How hard could it be? He wasn't shy about his body. He took his clothes off regularly in front of the women he fucked. They seemed to like what they saw. The only difference was that now more than one woman would be in the room and... *Oh fuck it.* If he thought about it anymore, he wouldn't do it.

Caspar flung open the door and strode out.

Juno beamed. "This way."

He scowled and followed her down the corridor. If he saw Tom, he'd turn round.

Unfortunately Tom didn't appear. Caspar's heart seemed intent on breaking all speed records.

If he saw anyone, he'd turn round.

"Here we are," said Juno.

Damn. Blast. Fuck.

Caspar followed Juno in and looked for Ally. When he didn't spot her on the first quick sweep of six grinning females, he looked again. She wasn't in here. *Thank God*. And thank God none of this lot appeared to remember it was him who'd dragged Ally out of the pub.

"Want to introduce yourselves?" Juno asked.

"I'm Bryony. Single and available."

Had she been the nurse? Where was Ally? A prickle of unease ran down his spine.

"Kerry. The bride-to-be. Still single and I'm thinking about being available." She winked at him.

"Kerry!" they all chorused.

"Delia. Nice to...see you." She giggled.

Had Ally found out he was doing this and decided to stay away? Or did she have a run-in with another snake?

"Hi, I'm Emma. I can make myself available too."

How would she react when she knew?

"Sal. Taken."

Maybe she'd laugh.

"Hi, I'm Jen."

"Hi," Caspar said, and smiled. He wished they'd stop looking at his hand where it clasped the top of the towel.

"Now here's what's going to happen," Juno said. She gave each woman a sketch pad and a stick of charcoal. "The model's going to strike a pose he'll choose himself. You have a few minutes to sketch him and then we'll look at what you've done. Next time you can tell him how you'd like him to stand. No touching. No taking photos with your phones."

Caspar hadn't thought of that. He swallowed hard.

"Want a glass of champagne?" Kerry asked.

"Thank you, that would be great," Caspar said. The less sober he was the better.

He took a large gulp, put the glass on a table and moved to the couch. The six of them lounged on chairs and another couch, staring at him. Well, not at him, at his clenched fist.

Do it.

He couldn't.

Oh fuck it. Caspar forced his fingers to uncurl and he let the towel drop. As though all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room, breathing became impossible. He wasn't the only one affected. The women seemed to be frozen. He lay down before he fell and reclined on his side. At least they hadn't laughed.

"Sorry, I'm late, I..." Ally burst into the room.

*Oh God.* Caspar bent his knee to hide his tackle. How stupid was that? Ally was the only one here who'd already seen him naked. His balls shrank in embarrassment.

There was a collective intake of breath.

"Drop your knee, Caspar," Juno said. "They can't see anything."

That was the idea. He gritted his teeth and changed knees. That was easy compared to dragging up enough courage to look at Ally. He fixed his gaze on the window and hoped like hell he didn't see anyone looking in. Even a cow.

"Champagne, Ally?" Kerry asked.

"Thanks."

Ally's blank voice gave Caspar little clue as to how she felt about seeing him naked in front of all her friends. He still couldn't look at her.

"Here's a sketch pad and charcoal. Sit next to me," said Kerry. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"We all spoke to the police but we didn't see anyone do anything to your bike," Delia said.

"They arrested Jack," Ally mumbled.

Her ex-boss? Why hadn't she told him?

"Christ, did they?" Emma asked.

"Said he didn't do it though," Ally added.

Just as well if she cut the brakes herself.

"You missed a treat last night with the speed-dating," Bryony said.

"Ooh, I think Ally had better things to do." Emma laughed. "Want to tell us why Tom spirited you away the moment you arrived this morning?"

What? Caspar bristled.

"Keep still," Juno said.

Caspar wanted to look at Ally now but still couldn't quite muster the courage.

"And he was in your room yesterday morning when we got up," Emma said.

"Spider," Ally mumbled.

Delia chuckled. "You're the only one of us who doesn't freak out at spiders."

Ally was in my bed on Saturday night. What are they talking about?

"And it was you Tom chose to partner in the paragliding," Jen said.

Caspar hadn't missed that. The bastard.

"You've got a gorgeous cock," someone said.

"What?" he gasped.

Kerry burst out laughing. "Emma!"

"Well, it's true," Emma said. "I wonder what it's like when its—"

"Emma," they all shouted.

"We all want to know," Emma said. "No point pretending we don't. I've never seen a stranger's cock before. Not in real life. Only on the internet."

Another burst of laughter followed that.

"Do you do internet stuff?" Kerry asked.

She's talking to me? "I've never done this before," Caspar blurted.

"Oh, that's so cute," Bryony said. "You're a virgin."

More laughter and Caspar felt his cheeks redden. What the fuck was he doing?

"Okay. Stop now," Juno said. "Let's see how you've got on."

Once they'd begun to look at each other's drawings, they fell about in hysterics. Caspar looked for a stone to crawl under. Sadly, there was no gap under the couch. He felt sure his balls had now shriveled to the size of peas, but he refused to look. He'd thought about draping the towel over his lap, but what was the point?

Every time he glanced at Ally, she was looking down, drawing. Had she seen the newspaper? Was she going to make breaking up easy for him?

"Oh my God, Delia," Kerry said. "What's that thing supposed to be?"

"His arm," Delia said.

Sal chuckled. "You've made his arms longer than his legs."

"You can talk. What the hell is that between his legs?" Kerry asked.

"Can I have a look?" Caspar asked, male pride hoping for one part of him to be in proportion. He wanted to see what Ally had drawn, but she didn't hold up her pad. He couldn't help smiling when he saw the sketches. No worry he'd be recognized. Artists they were not. "You got my arm just right." He pointed to Bryony's drawing.

"That's your hip," she told him, and snorted.

"I like the artistic shading in yours," he said to Delia.

Delia giggled. "That's where I went wrong and tried to rub it out. But it does look good, you're right."

"Another pose," Juno said. "Kerry, you choose how you want Caspar to stand."

"Or lie," Sal said. "Tell him where to put his hands."

Oh Christ. No way could Caspar look at his tackle. He could feel it shrinking.

"This time instead of trying to draw all of him, concentrate on getting one part of your sketch right and work out from there," Juno said.

"Can you stand and cross your arms behind your head?" Kerry asked. "Oh maybe stick one hip out? Pout. No smile."

And balance on one leg and make his pecs dance and sing at the same time? Caspar did as she'd asked and stared into the distance. Usually in the vicinity of Ally, his cock started to look forward to finding a warm, wet home, but the presence of a group of giggling women had been an effective dampener on his libido.

Caspar let his mind drift while he stood in whatever position they wanted. Ally was uncharacteristically quiet. Because he stood here stark, bollock naked? Or had she seen the paper? *God, I need to know*.

There was another outpouring of laughter when they looked at the next lot of drawings, though not a glimmer of a smile from Ally who refused to show hers until the end. Juno laughed so hard she cried. *Lovely*. But when Caspar saw why, a smile slipped onto his face. Juno had told them to concentrate on one getting one part right. Jen had produced a beautiful sketch of the couch.

"I like the build up," Jen said.

"I like my willy," Bryony said. "Look at the wrinkles."

Caspar wished he had one that long. Or maybe not. He took another swallow of champagne. Why wouldn't Ally look at him?

By the end of the hour, with the bride-to-be well and truly teased, Caspar felt exhausted. He could hardly believe it. Tired and he'd done nothing more than stand, lie, sit, kneel and bend over backward from a kneeling position—not comfortable—for the last sixty minutes. The experience hadn't been as horrendous as he'd expected. No one had groped him, laughed at his tackle—only their renditions of it—and if Ally had met his gaze and smiled, he'd have felt better, but she hadn't. And how could he relax when he knew what was to come?

Juno bustled him out of the room and pushed bank notes into his hand.

She beamed at him. "You were brilliant. Would—?"

"Never again," Caspar said.

She sighed. Caspar shut himself in the room where he'd left his clothes and got dressed.

He hurried, but by the time he went back into the other room, it was empty. All but one of the sketch pads had gone. Caspar knew before he walked over that the one left behind was Ally's. His heart felt as though an iron fist had clamped around it. She'd left it for him. Left him. Was that what this meant? They were over? It was that easy? Why didn't he want it to be easy?

Caspar picked up the pad and flicked through it. *Oh Christ*. Ally was a brilliant artist. Sketch after sketch in every pose, though never with detail on his face. Not until the last. That drawing was of only his face. It was like looking in a mirror except Caspar didn't smile much when he did that. This image was of a smiling Caspar, his face alive and alight with joy.

Ally's Caspar.

He dropped the pad and rushed out of the room. No sound of women laughing, but he did hear the noise of a vehicle pulling away. *Please let that be Juno*. Caspar flung open the door and dashed outside to see a minious travelling down the road.

"She's gone." Tom sounded furious. "She saw this."

Caspar spun around to find Tom brandishing a newspaper.

"Lend me your car?" Caspar asked.

"No."

"Please."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not letting you race off in my car."

Caspar stared after the receding vehicle. Shit, shit, shit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally stood around the corner of the building, the suitcase she'd packed for the last couple of days at her feet. She'd been tempted to leave with her friends, to go back to London if only for a few days, but instead she'd waved them off and then slipped out of sight when she heard Tom come out. She always ran from things that upset her. This time she wouldn't.

"You're such a stupid fucker," Tom said to Caspar. "You were the same at school. I'd never have gotten into trouble if it hadn't been for you, but something about you made me jealous even then. I couldn't work out how you could always be up to no good and yet be so popular. I decided if I couldn't beat you, I might as well join you."

"You were worse than me," Caspar said. "Remember when you put the biology teacher's car in the middle of the cricket pitch? You were only eleven. I was really impressed you could drive. And that time you drew a moustache on the portrait of the school founder?"

"And you took the blame both times because you knew they'd have expelled me."

"My father was occasionally good for something."

"He still is."

Ally didn't hear Caspar's answer.

"So is this rumor true?" Tom asked, and Ally's heart thumped against her ribs.

"Which one?"

Oh Christ, how many were there? She chewed her fingernail. Ally felt guilty eavesdropping but no way was she moving.

"That you left Jem while you went to help someone? The way the grapevine is growing, they'll soon have you jumping off a bridge onto a moving speedboat, diving from a dam and wrestling a couple of alligators into submission at the bottom."

"What did Ally say I did?" Caspar asked in a quiet voice.

She chewed harder and made her finger bleed.

"Nothing, but she put the idea in my head that conclusions might have been jumped to, that maybe you'd seen one of your contacts in trouble and gone to help and that it would have been fairly easy to set you up after everything that happened." There was a pause before Tom spoke again. "Were you a spy?"

Ally's heart hammered against her ribs. Why had she ever thought spreading that rumor was a good idea? The only difference between her and the vicar's wife was intent.

"You can't expect me to answer that," Caspar said.

"It's what everyone thinks."

"Ally had no right telling everyone that sort of rubbish."

Caspar sounded furious and she winced. Ally had only said it to Rose and hinted to Tom. And was it rubbish?

Tom sighed. "I suspect she only said something to two people. Me and Wyndale's home-grown tsetse fly. Rose couldn't keep her mouth shut if her life depended on it."

*Damn*. She might not have known that about Rose, but Ally couldn't deny she wanted everyone to think better of Caspar. The downside was he now thought worse of her.

"Did you do what you were sent to prison for?" Tom asked.

"I confessed."

Ally clenched her fists. Why couldn't he tell the truth? Why would he want to make life so difficult for himself? Why —? She gulped. Maybe he was protecting someone else.

"You killed the guy who took Jemima. His family wouldn't let you get away with it so they set you up. Why did the Foreign Office leave you out to dry?"

There was a long pause before Caspar spoke. "Nothing to be gained by raking all this up again."

His self-sacrifice had to be for a reason. Ally's heart beat faster.

"Fucking hell, Caspar. You think this village *wants* to hate you? Or is it that you want to be hated by the village? Does it make it easier to cope with your guilt over Jemima? Ally thought that you— Christ, you're an idiot. Lina Moon will flick you off her nail like a piece of dirt once she's had enough of you. She's nothing compared to Ally."

"I know."

Ally swallowed hard.

"So what were you doing having a cozy tea with her in Buxton? Why does the press think an engagement is imminent?"

A pack of hungry wolves couldn't have dragged Ally away now. She checked over her shoulder.

Caspar sighed. "Lina engineered it so those photos were taken. I'd guess she has some motive of her own. The reporter and photographer knew where we'd be. Ally's jumped to conclusions, like everyone else always seems to do, and she's run."

Ally stepped out from behind the building. "I haven't run."

Caspar's eyes opened wide. She guessed Tom had known she was there.

"But I ought to." She glared at Caspar. "You could have told me about Lina, told me what you were going to do this morning. How would you like it if I stripped in front of your friends so they could draw me?"

Tom gaped at Caspar. "Is that what you were doing in there?"

Caspar faced Tom. "The price for keeping your mouth shut?"

Tom smirked. "I'll let you know." He backed away and disappeared into the building.

Caspar turned back to Ally. "I thought you'd left."

"I was tempted after I saw the newspaper."

"So why didn't you?"

Because you're more tempting. Because I want you to ask me to stay. Because I love you.

"I don't know," she said quietly.

Caspar dragged his fingers through his hair. "You ought to leave. I'm only going to drag you down. I think it's best we don't take this any further."

A dagger in her heart couldn't have been more effective. Ally leaned against the side of the building before she fell.

"All those attempts on my life and words hit me hardest," she said, and mustered a little smile.

"Ally, maybe you need to talk to someone."

She blinked. *I'm talking to you*.

"I think you're letting your imagination run away with you. Telling people I'm a spy, thinking someone's out to get you."

"Get me? Oh God. I thought you believed me," Ally whispered.

Caspar opened his mouth and closed it again.

Her heart verged on stopping. "The flowerpot, the car, the train... No one believed me, but I thought you did."

"If it was Jack, it'll stop now."

Speaking was beyond her. Breathing seemed impossible.

Caspar stared at Ally, pain all over her face, and his head ached as if spikes had been driven into it. He deserved it because of the look in Ally's eyes when he'd told her to leave and when she realized he didn't believe someone had been trying to kill her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and hold her forever, and instead he'd pushed her away and hurt her. Once she was out of Wyndale, he could revert to form and wallow in misery. The sooner she went the better.

"You need to go back to London," Caspar said.

"I don't understand," Ally whispered.

"I don't think I can make it any clearer."

If Ally stayed in Wyndale, she wouldn't give up until she'd cleared his name. But she couldn't be allowed to continue to spread rumors that he'd been a spy. Richard had made that quite clear. Caspar didn't care about his life, but Ally had enough problems without him adding to them.

Photos of Caspar with Lina hadn't made Ally run or the suggestion of an engagement, nor him posing naked, so he had to hammer more nails into her heart.

"What on earth possessed you to go around telling everyone I was a spy?" he snapped.

She cringed. "I didn't go around telling everyone."

"You as good as did when you told Rose. Christ, my own father thinks he has James Bond for a son."

The brightness faded from Ally's eyes and the pain in Caspar's head worsened.

"You said something to Tom too." Caspar made himself bark at her again. "Why did you have to open your fucking mouth? This has nothing to do with you. Do you have some mission in life to put my world right because you can't sort out your own? You trying to make yourself feel good, Ally? Did you do this for me or for you?"

She pressed her lips together so tightly they lost color.

Caspar took a breath. "You asked why I left Jem and I'm going to give you the truth. I left my sister nursing a lemonade and went to fuck a woman in the washroom. Didn't take long but time enough for Jem to be abducted. Nothing to do with espionage.

Everything to do with sex. You know how I like to fuck. Thanks very much for dragging it all back to people's minds."

Oh God. He'd not realized how hard this would be.

Ally wrapped her arms around her body as she shivered in the chill wind. "I didn't ask you. I've never asked you."

"But you wondered just like everyone else."

"I only wanted to help."

"I know." Christ, I know that's what you were trying to do.

She lifted her head and looked straight at him. "Are you engaged?"

Oh God. "More or less."

"Do you believe someone pushed me in front of a train?"

"Not deliberately."

Caspar stuffed his hands in his pockets to stop himself reaching out to her. The pain in his head spread to his heart. Ally's cheeks hollowed and her eyes glinted with tears.

He pulled out the money Juno had given him and thrust it toward her. "Buy a ticket back to London."

She looked at the final nail in his hand and then up into his face. "'Bye, Caspar."

He watched her walk away with her case and wished he were dead.

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Emma didn't know what had Geoff in such a snit. He'd snapped when she'd asked him to stop at a service station so she could use the loo, jumped down her throat when she'd asked him to come with her to have lunch at her parents next week and then given her a look that would have frozen water when she asked him to slow down. The others shot her sympathetic glances that made Emma feel even more vulnerable. He seemed desperate to get back to London. Emma was keen to get back too, though she'd hoped to do it in one piece.

Maybe she did know what had him in such a bad mood. Ally wasn't interested. Emma smiled and then her smile faded. Could be he was pissed off because he'd had to leave Ally in Derbyshire. Maybe he'd spent Saturday and Sunday night with her. Emma hadn't actually seen the tent and Ally hadn't stayed in the adventure center. Had the flirting with Tom been to throw her off the scent?

The worm of doubt in Emma's chest grew to the size of an anaconda and wrapped around her heart. Geoff was going to finish with her. If he dropped her off last, it would be because he wanted to tell her he didn't want to see her anymore. Emma didn't like to end things until she had another guy lined up, but no way was she letting Geoff dump her. Emma's Saturday night teasing of Sean MacAlister had got her precisely nowhere, not that she'd seriously thought she stood much of a chance, but the idea of Geoff preferring Ally cut very deep.

Too deep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack sat in his stationary car, looking at nothing. He was a physical and emotional wreck. He'd had to call a lawyer and tell the police everything. He had no fucking choice. Ally had destroyed him. He'd been stupid to open his mouth and tell her the truth. He'd hoped for compassion. What a joke. Now he'd been accused of attempted murder along with everything else. He wanted to laugh but instead he cried.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mark drove down the motorway, thinking about what to say to his boss.

"Ally found someone she likes better and dumped me."

That wouldn't work. Mark didn't want Frank to think there was something deficient about him.

"Ally decided she wasn't ready for the commitment I wanted to show."

In other words, Mark had misread the situation entirely. That wouldn't look good either.

"Ally's going on a long trip and didn't think it fair for me to wait. But I will."

Well, he'd wait long enough to impress Frank and make sure he kept his extracurricular activities with Belinda out of sight, which was where he wished Ally had ended up.

Off the fucking radar.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally's heart was full of holes, her love for Caspar leaking out. She wanted to run but made herself walk. No use blaming anyone but herself for this mess. She'd been so consumed with making Caspar popular again, she hadn't thought of the consequences of what she'd said. Of course he didn't want anyone to know he'd been a spy. People he'd been involved with in Albania might now be in danger. Ally didn't believe his story about the bar, didn't want to believe he was engaged, but it didn't matter. Caspar didn't believe someone had been trying to kill her and he didn't want her anymore.

She dragged her case back to Finn's garage, and the moment the door closed, she broke down. Burying her face in the cushion on the sun lounger, Ally sobbed herself to acceptance. There *had* been something between them and she'd ruined it by interfering. Caspar was wrong that she'd done it because her own life was a mess. It wasn't.

Hadn't been.

Oh God, maybe he was right.

Ally let out a shuddering breath. So what now? Should she try to put things right? Go 'round the village and apologize? It would only make matters worse. She curled up tighter on the sun lounger. *Engaged?* She'd been in bed with Caspar a few hours ago. How could he be engaged? No, she didn't believe it. She *did* believe he wanted her gone. She'd been warned what he was like and had chosen to think she was different when she was just like all the rest.

Time to pack and leave, though she didn't have anywhere to go. But the thought of seeing Caspar in Wyndale and not having him in her life was too much to bear.

How could everything so right turn so wrong? Caspar wasn't a cruel guy, so why had—?

Ally's eyes flashed open. Had she hit on the truth earlier? He *wasn't* a cruel guy. He wasn't doing this because he wanted to but because he had to, because he was protecting someone. Someone still in Albania. It could be dangerous for that someone if it was discovered Caspar was a spy. What more effective way to get Ally to leave than to tell her he was engaged to someone else and that she'd fucked up his life?

She sat up. Could that be right? Her shoulders sagged as the fountain of hope collapsed to a trickle. It made no difference. Caspar still wanted her to leave.

Ally soaked a facecloth, using the tap in the corner, and held it over her eyes. Crying was pointless. Accept it and move on. That's the way she lived. Always look forward, not back. Run if the going got tough. Ally set up her laptop on the lounger. Maybe she could afford to buy a plane ticket and go to Finn. With a bit of persuasion, he might pay for it.

Twenty-seven new emails. Ally ran her gaze down them and let out a gasp. She'd had a response from the job application "inconsiderate, demanding bastard" looking for a slave. Ally clicked on the email and sighed. She had an interview at Manchester airport. That was convenient. She could not get the job and fly out to see Finn afterward.

Ally read the details.

Tomorrow at two in the afternoon. The Burton meeting room. She had to turn up with a bag packed, ready to leave. A decision would be made by six after all interviews had been completed. *Wow.* Did she really have a chance?

Had Caspar heard too? Ally took a deep breath and opened a new window. She hadn't meant to look at Caspar's password but he'd tapped it in as she watched. Ally logged on and crossed her fingers. A smile spread across her face when she saw the same email in his inbox. His interview was after hers. Oh, what was that message with her name? Ally knew she shouldn't look.

She clicked on it.

Oh God, he'd bought a star for her with money he couldn't spare. She slumped. It was a sweet thing to do but now it meant nothing.

She bit her lip and logged straight out. No point thinking about what might have been. Better to hope he got the job. Caspar would be perfect for it. Ally couldn't do half the things specified in the advert. Though maybe she could add climbing and paragliding to the list now. Oh, and putting up and taking down tents. She'd better go and retrieve the one she'd erected for Geoff.

Ally carted the sleeping bag and the other things back to the garage before she tackled the tent. Getting it back into its bag proved trickier than she'd expected. Ally folded it in umpteen different ways before she finally wrestled it into submission.

"Am I too late to help?"

Ally looked up at Sean MacAlister. "Yep. Great timing."

"It's a gift."

"You mean you waited until I'd finished."

He laughed. "Want me to carry it for you?"

"Please. So how's it going? Your mad wife set fire to the place yet?"

"Not yet. Christ, I'll be in makeup for hours after that."

Ally led the way over the drive. "Is the film staying true to the book?"

"You mean do they have mad, passionate sex and go and live in Hawaii?"

Ally raised her eyebrows. "I think you'll find Rochester is blind for the first two years of their marriage and then he gets some sight back in one eye."

"The director is planning a miracle."

Sean lifted the tent back onto the hook in the garage and hung the bag of poles with it.

"Thank you," Ally said.

"You're welcome." He stared at the sun lounger and Ally's suitcases. "Are you living in here?"

"'Course not."

Sean frowned. "You shouldn't believe what you read in the papers."

Ally blinked. The temptation to blurt everything out was strong but she resisted. Maybe this mess had taught her something. "That wasn't the UK's wettest summer on record?"

He chuckled. "Lina is not engaged to Caspar, nor will she be. She's trying to deflect attention from her rather unfortunate fling with a married actor who has four kids and a saintly wife. I was first choice for the fall guy, but I came to my senses in time. She made sure photographers caught her and your boyfriend having tea in that café."

"He's not my boyfriend."

Sean raised one eyebrow.

"Things didn't work out," Ally said.

"You mean I'm in with a chance?"

"No"

He clutched his heart. "You wound me."

"You'll recover."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rather than sit and mope in Finn's garage, Ally decided to go for a walk. Maybe she'd get lucky and that hunter guy would shoot her—not fatally—and Caspar would feel sorry for her and he'd tell her he didn't really want her to go and they'd— Yeah, right. Imagination running wild again.

Ally headed through the woods toward Wyndale Hall. She didn't intend to get too close, but she was intrigued to see what it looked like before she left.

Big, gray and gloomy was the answer, though the battlements around the top made it look more attractive. The vehicles connected with the filming were parked along the drive, well away from the front of the house. Ally cut back into the woods and looped in a circle, hoping it would take her back to Finn's place.

Something smacked onto the ground in front of her and Ally yelped. *A hammer?* "Damn and blast," a man said.

Ally looked up at a tree house with a broken balcony.

"Shall I bring the hammer up?" she called.

There was a pause before she heard the answer. "Please."

Ally climbed the ladder and stepped onto the wooden surround. She bent to go inside the doorway and cringed. Sitting by a hole in the floor was the man who'd shot the deer.

She handed him the hammer. "I'm trespassing again."

"So I see."

Reassured by the twitch of his lip, Ally looked around. "Wow, this is great. I'd have loved a hideaway like this when I was a child."

"My daughter used to bring her dolls up here and have tea parties. My son pretended to be Robin Hood and fired arrows out the windows."

"Are you mending it for your grandkids?"

"No grandchildren yet."

"Why are you working on it then?"

"Because my children loved it and I rather like it too."

Ally grinned. "Do you sneak up here to get away from things?"

He laughed. "I might."

"I'm Ally." She held out her hand.

"Short for?"

"Alexandria."

"Pleased to meet you, Alexandria. I'm Leonard. Do take a seat."

Ally sat on the floor.

"Do you live in Wyndale?" he asked.

"Not for much longer." To her dismay, her chin began to wobble.

"You don't want to leave?"

"No."

"Then don't go."

Ally sighed. "It's not that easy. The reason I want to stay has made it clear he wants me to go. Only I know he doesn't mean it."

"That made no sense at all. What's this reason's name?"

"Caspar."

"Ahh. Then it does make sense." Leonard handed her a piece of sandpaper and a piece of wood. "Smooth the edges for me."

"What did 'ahh' mean? Are you another one who doesn't like Caspar?"

"He doesn't make it easy to like him. What have you done to upset him?"

Ally had no idea why she was considering unburdening herself to a guy who the last time they'd met had almost shot her, but she wanted to talk to someone and Sean MacAlister hadn't been that someone. Too easy to let him put his arm around her and offer a different form of comfort.

"Promise not to repeat what I say? I've gotten him into enough trouble. I told someone I thought Caspar was a spy."

"Why did you think that?"

She rubbed at the wood. "Because I know Caspar's a decent guy. He left his sister alone and he shouldn't have, and he has to live with that. But whoever he went to meet must be someone he has to protect even now, otherwise why not tell the truth? He wouldn't have left his sister without good reason. He loved her too much. I don't understand why people can't see that."

"Did he tell you that?"

"He told me he'd f—had sex with a woman in the washroom, but he's lying. He's continued to lie to protect someone. He went to prison to protect them too, and I might have put both of them in danger because I opened my big, fat mouth."

"So why did you do that?" Leonard asked.

"Because I wanted people to see the man he really is. He was so unhappy. I thought I could make him smile again."

Leonard passed her another piece of wood. "You know he has a terrible reputation with women."

"Sleeping around is another defense mechanism to keep people at bay. One-night stands mean he never gets involved." But he had with her. Ally swallowed hard.

"I thought he was engaged to this actress," Leonard said.

"No. Caspar said he is, but he isn't. He's using her to push me away, and Lina's using him to deflect attention from—someone she's involved with."

"He wants you to leave Wyndale, he's pretended he's engaged and you're still here?"

Ally rubbed harder with the sandpaper and felt the wood heat under her fingers. "He doesn't know what's good for him, but I don't want to make his life even more difficult. People in the village are talking to him now. Did you know he saved a man's life in a mountain rescue exercise? He volunteered months ago but they never called him. I persuaded them to include Caspar, and if he hadn't been there, Neil might have died."

"I'd heard about Neil. Caspar did a grand job."

"I wish Caspar could find work. He's tried so hard, but you have to say on your application that you've been to prison. What chance does that give him? He's got no money. He lives from day to day. His fridge was empty before I put my food in it. If I leave, who's going to feed him? If I leave, who's going to lo—look after him?"

Ally gulped. "Oh damn. Please forget I said all that. The last thing I should be doing is talking about him. That's what got me into this mess in the first place. Please don't say anything. I'm so stupid."

"No you're not. I won't say anything."

"I better go. I might not want to leave Wyndale, but I want to do what's best for Caspar. Oh God, do you think I should leave?"

Leonard stared straight at her. "You should do what you want."

She got to her feet. "I don't know what I want anymore. Maybe I should leave today. I'm just making things worse by staying."

"No, don't go today. I won't repeat what you've said and you don't leave. The world might look different in the morning." He smiled at her. "Sleep on it."

It would be different because it would be a world without Caspar.

"'Bye," Ally said. "It was nice to meet you." She climbed down the ladder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caspar pushed open the door of The Rumblin' Tum and heard Rose call, "I'm about to close."

"I don't need serving."

She turned and gave him a smile. "Hi Caspar. No Ally with you?"

"Things didn't work out."

The corners of her mouth turned down. "Well done. You almost lasted a week."

"It might have been longer had you not announced to the entire village that I was a spy."

Her cheeks tinged with pink. "I didn't actually—"

Caspar kept his voice level. "Undo it, Rose. I was a number cruncher, an economics advisor. I'm now an unemployed layabout. If I'd been a spy, don't you think I'd have managed to find some sort of work? Keep your nose out of my business."

He turned and walked out.

"James Bond had better manners," she called.

"Keep your nose out of my business – please."

Caspar slammed the door.

He didn't want to go home, didn't want to sit in an empty house with nothing to look forward to. A bus was coming toward him and Caspar reversed course and returned to the stop. He'd go and see Neil in the hospital.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ally woke with a start and almost tipped over the sun lounger. Someone was banging on the door. *Caspar?* She hurried to answer it and gasped when she saw who stood there. "Geoff? What are you doing here?"

"Needed to talk to you."

"Come in."

Ally was confused. She thought Geoff had driven her friends back to London that morning.

"Has there been an accident or something?" she asked.

"Not yet." He chuckled.

Ally wasn't sure what was funny.

"Think we could go for a walk?" he asked. "It'll help clear my head. I've been in the car for hours."

"I'll get my coat."

Ally pulled on her coat, grabbed her purse and locked up behind them.

"Actually, let's get out of this village," Geoff said. "I'll drive us up into the moorland. I want to ask you about Emma."

"Okay. Oh, new car?"

A dark-colored car stood on the limestone chippings.

"Yep."

Ally felt her spirits lift as they pulled away from Wyndale. Leaving was the right thing to do. Being near Caspar would be torture. Not fair to him either. She had no hopes of landing that job, but maybe she could help Caspar secure it. Ally glanced across at Geoff. His brow was furrowed. Had he broken up with Emma? Ally was flattered he'd driven up to talk to her.

"Going to give me a clue?" Ally asked. "Good news or bad?"

"Both."

"Ah." She exhaled. Wasn't that always the way? She stared out of the window. "It's pretty around here, isn't it? Whereabouts do you come from? I don't remember you saying."

"Canterbury."

"I've never been there."

When Geoff didn't say anything else, Ally fell silent too. He'd tell her in his own time. He pulled off the road into a clearing at the edge of woodland that rose up a valley side.

"Let's go for a walk," he said. "Leave your purse in the car. I'll lock up."

"I'll stuff it under the seat."

As Geoff got out, Ally retrieved her phone and pushed it in her pocket. Just in case Caspar... They walked into the woods and the level of light dropped. Ally felt a shiver of unease.

"Has Emma been unfaithful to me?" he asked.

Oh God. "Not that I know of."

"She's never said anything about another guy?"

Ally shook her head. "No."

"What about Sean MacAlister?"

Ally didn't know what Emma had gotten up to after she'd left the pub with Caspar but doubted it was anything involving Sean.

"Just because she fancies him doesn't mean she'd cheat on you." Actually, Ally was fairly sure Emma would've jumped on Sean given any encouragement at all. "She's always saying how great you are."

They followed a track out of the woods, diverted left...right, and Ally had the strange feeling Geoff knew the way. He walked with a sense of purpose rather than strolling.

"Have you been up here before?" she asked.

"I had a wander around while you were off paragliding. There's a lovely spot just above the trees. Brilliant view."

Ally's unease faded. "So did you ask Emma?"

"Ask her what?"

"If she cheated on you."

"The bitch would only lie," he snapped.

*Bitch?* Ally hadn't ever heard Geoff sound so angry, and it had come out of nowhere. When he turned onto a narrower track, Ally stopped. "Where are we going?"

"Just a bit farther."

*I don't like this.* While his back was turned, she took her phone from her pocket and slipped it into her sock. *Oh God, why did I think I needed to do that?* He stopped and looked at her and she rubbed her calf.

"Geoff, what are we doing up here? It's going to be dark soon."

He turned and moved toward her, and as Ally stared up at him, he suddenly looked very big. Where could she run? Was it better to hide?

"I want to ask Emma to marry me," he said, and smiled. "I want to make it perfect."

And he had to drag Ally all the way up here to ask about that? He was lying. He was trying to set her at ease. Hadn't worked.

Run

Ally took one step backward and Geoff caught her wrist. "Careful, you don't want to fall."

Oh God. Ally fought to stay calm and she laughed. "I've had enough falling to last me a lifetime." Let me go and I'll believe I'm being paranoid.

He didn't.

"I'm okay now, Geoff. You can let go."

"Sorry. I can't."

Every bone in Ally's body liquefied and she crumpled. He hauled her upright and dragged her along the track. She opened her mouth to scream and a whimper slipped out. Her head buzzed. Not Jack but Geoff.

"You're really hard to kill," Geoff said, and this time she managed a scream.

Only for it to be cut off when he wrapped his arm around her throat. Ally gasped in pain.

"No one up here to hear you, but screeching women give me a headache, so shut the fuck up."

Ally kicked out and struggled, but he dragged her farther up the hillside.

"Christ Almighty, stop wriggling."

She fought harder until Geoff threw her down and sat on her lower back. She could feel him checking her pockets. Ally groaned. *Can't breathe. Hurts. Don't let him see my phone.* If she could just get a little way away, she could dial 9-9-9 and they'd trace her if she kept the line open.

"Want to know why?" Geoff asked.

She couldn't speak. Ally panted with her cheek pressed against a moss-covered rock. *God, he's breaking my spine*.

"Nine years I've worked for him. Driven him wherever he wanted to go. Put shelves up. Dug his garden. Served him meals. Cleaned up his mess. Wiped his backside literally and figuratively. He said he'd see me all right, said he appreciated what I'd done for him. Then I read his will. The fucking bastard. Ten thousand pounds. What the fuck's that supposed to be? The rest goes to his daughter."

Oh God.

"He never even mentioned a daughter. I can't ask him because I'm not supposed to fucking know. But I found you. Took me awhile and I've had to keep him alive until after you die, otherwise it's going to look suspicious. Once you're dead, I get the lot."

I don't want the money. You can have it.

The weight came off her back and Ally groaned. She tried to scramble away, but Geoff scooped her up and carried her a few more feet.

"Sorry about this. I wish it was one of the others. I like you best out of all Emma's friends."

Ally spotted a hole with rocks scattered around it. A couple of rotting timbers rested across it.

"Please, Geoff. You can have the money. I don't want it."

He tsk-tsked. "You say that now. You won't later."

Ally grabbed his neck. He let her legs free and pulled her hands away from his throat. She kicked out and he dropped her. Ally crashed through the wood feet first and screamed as she fell into the hole. Legs together. Knees bent. One arm struck the side then her feet hit rock and she cried out as she crumpled only to slither to one side and fall again. A tunnel? Ally flailed for a handhold and her hand caught in a crack. The wrench on her arm almost dislocated her shoulder but she pressed herself against the sloping rock and found a ledge for one foot. God, my shoulder, my wrist.

"Dead yet?" Geoff called.

Fuck you. Ally stayed silent, didn't move a muscle. Something crashed down close to her head and she only just managed to swallow her scream. For a moment, she thought Geoff had fallen. Then another rock landed, and Ally realized he was making sure she was dead or at least too injured to climb out. Rock after rock landed on the flat area above her head. If she hadn't slipped into this side tunnel, she'd have been crushed.

After the flurry of rocks stopped, she waited and sensed him waiting too. A foot and a hand hold on a forty-five degree slope had to keep her safe until she was sure he'd gone. Ally listened, heard shuffling at the surface and then nothing. She waited and counted.

On ninety-seven she heard him mutter and then the sound of him moving away. Her eyes had adjusted to the low light. Everything was grainy, but at least she wasn't in the pitch-black. Ally thought about her phone, but she didn't dare reach for it with her free hand in case she dropped it or fell. She ran her fingers over the rocks, feeling for another handhold, and when she had one, did the same with her dangling foot. Little by little, she edged up until she was able to crawl into the bottom of the shaft.

Ally sat trembling on the pile of stones he'd intended to be her tomb, clutching her arm. She felt battered and bruised but nothing had broken. She pulled her phone from her sock and thanked God she'd thought to put it there.

No signal.

Bloody hell, God. Can't I catch a break?

Ally took a deep breath and offered a mental apology.

Sorry, God. I'm still alive. Thank you.

She swallowed a sob. Crying wasn't going to help. Geoff was such a bastard. She'd thought he was a friend, and all the time, he'd been plotting to kill her. He didn't care about Emma. Ally was his target. She was right and no one had believed her. Christ, if she managed to get out, they'd probably claim she threw herself down the hole. If she didn't get out, they'd think the same. When it was light, she'd scratch a message on the rock. Geoff wasn't going to get away with this. Even if she died, they'd find the message one day.

Ally put the phone back in her pocket and stood in the narrow chute. The surface looked about ten feet above her head. No choice but to climb. She got partway and

couldn't get any farther. Nothing to hold onto and too steep to crawl up. She climbed back down and tried the other side of the hole. Within a few feet, she found herself in the same position.

This time, while she was still halfway up the side, Ally reached into her pocket for her phone, pressed 9-9-9, held it as high as she could and yelled for help. When her arm grew too heavy to keep elevated, Ally climbed down and stuffed the phone in her pocket. She'd keep doing that in case there was a signal and she'd yell every couple of minutes on the off-chance someone was passing and not think about the fact that mobile signals weren't good in these desolate areas.

Christ.

She had to try not to think about the fact that she was stuck in a hole on an isolated hillside and it was getting dark.

Christ.

I have a father? Ally gulped. Maybe Caspar had been right and her father hadn't even known about her for a long while. Maybe he still didn't want to know about her. She exhaled. He didn't, did he? Because if Geoff had found her, her father could have found her. He just wanted to leave her money. As if she wanted it. It wasn't bloody fair.

Maybe she could chisel out hand and footholds? She picked up one of the rocks Geoff had dropped and smashed it down onto another. Not even a tiny chip flew off. The chances of carving steps seemed a touch optimistic.

Ally picked up another stone and threw it in the direction of the side passage she'd climbed from. It was always possible there was another way out. It took too long before she heard the muffled thud of the rock landing. The only way was up.

She piled up the rocks to get higher and tried time after time to climb to the surface, exploring with her hands for every tiny hold, frustrated to get within a yard of the top with no way of moving higher. Should she throw the phone out? It was no use to her in here, and if there was a signal up there, maybe the police would trace her. But Ally couldn't bring herself to let the thing go. She clung to the rock, held the phone up and screamed for help. When her legs and arms began to shake, Ally slid back to the bottom of the shaft.

The light had almost gone. She sat on the rocks and for the first time began to seriously think she might not make it out.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Caspar picked up his phone. Unknown caller. He hesitated and then pressed the button. "Yes?"

"Caspar, hello."

He wasn't sure how many more shocks his heart could take today.

"Lu-" Maybe he shouldn't say her name. "How did you get this number?"

"Not so difficult. Friends helped."

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine. Still in my old apartment."

Still living in Albania then.

"I thought of you often but couldn't... I saw the newspaper. Engaged now?"

"No, that was a mistake. Not the story it might have been."

"I wondered. I'm married now."

"Congratulations."

"I'm safe."

Caspar wasn't sure what she was telling him. Why she'd called to tell him that today.

"Good," he mumbled.

"I had a call that made me think you might not believe me safe. I just want to tell you I am. Good luck, Caspar."

She ended the call and Caspar stared at his mobile phone, wondering if he'd imagined all that. Luljeta had been his contact, the woman he'd gone to help and as a consequence lost his sister. Caspar hadn't spoken to her since that night. *She's safe?* What the hell did that mean?

Richard fucking Hanley.

Caspar switched on his laptop and went onto the internet. He looked for a link between Hanley and Mantel and eventually found it. Rumors of promotion in the Foreign Office, Hanley supported by Mantel. *Fuck*.

His phone rang again and Caspar snatched it up.

"Caspar, it's me."

Caspar checked his watch. "It's eleven thirty. What the fuck do you want?"

"Mountain Rescue call out," Tom said. "You're on. I'll pick you up as we pass your place."

Caspar groaned. Why'd the bastard call him?

By the time Tom pulled up in the van, Caspar stood waiting at the side of the road. The door slid open and he climbed in next to Tom. Caspar was surprised to be included. He hadn't gone through the training, didn't think he'd been formally accepted, even if attitudes toward him were thawing.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"We think it's Ally," Tom said.

For a moment, Caspar thought his heart had stopped working. His lungs definitely had.

"The police had a brief emergency call," Tom said. "It came again a couple of minutes later. Faint cries for help. The signal is intermittent but it's Ally's phone."

"What... Why... Where." Caspar tried again. "Where are we heading?"

"Grady's Peak," said Mike.

Which was riddled with abandoned lead mine shafts. What the hell was Ally doing up there? Caspar's heart had decided rapid activity was better than none and adrenaline surged around his bloodstream. She wouldn't have done anything stupid, would she? Because of him? *Oh Christ*. He took out his phone and called her. No answer. Kept trying.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tom pulled up behind a police car, its warning lights flashing. Caspar leapt out and looked around frantically.

Bill put his hand on Caspar's shoulder. "Let Tom handle it."

Caspar watched Tom walk away and talk to a policeman. *Please, please, please.* He repeated the words over and over in his head.

"Help me sort out the equipment." Bill tugged him to the back of the van. "We need ropes, helmets with lights on."

By the time Tom returned, Caspar was ready to explode. "What's happened?"

"The signal was weak," Tom said. "Her phone is somewhere on the hill. No one has spoken to her."

"There are a lot of old mine shafts up there," Mike said. "Some have metal covers, some don't."

"Everyone rope up," Tom ordered. "Helmets on. We'll spread out in a line and sweep through the trees up onto the hill. Every twenty paces we stop. Call Ally's name, listen then shout out your number. Okay?" Tom looked at each man in turn.

Get on with it.

"Check your map," Tom said. "Once we get to the limit of the forest, I don't want anyone falling down a hole. All the shafts should be marked but we can't be sure."

Even as Caspar's brain was shouting *Too slow!*, he knew they had to be thorough. It was a clear, cold night. If Ally was injured — *Stop it*.

On Caspar's left, Mike shouted, "Ally." Once he'd called "Three", it was Caspar's turn. Once the last one in line called out, they advanced up the hill. Each time they came across an old mine shaft, they listened for a response and then marked it with a flag.

Please let me find her. Please let her be okay.

Caspar kept repeating the same thing over and over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Perched uncomfortably on the pile of stones with her back against the wall of the chute, Ally stared up at an oblong of sky. Not a star in sight. When the light came back in the morning, she'd try to climb out, try again to chip some hand and footholds. She didn't need much of a hollow. She'd seen Caspar cling to virtually nothing and had found herself doing the same. No use expecting anyone to come and look for her. No one would've registered she was missing, and if they did, why search here?

Ally struggled to come to terms with what had happened. A father, who so far in her life had shown no interest in her, intended to leave her money Geoff felt was his. Because of that, she had to die. Ironic that she really *didn't* want the money. Ally had spent eleven years longing for a father and then Finn's dad had been more than she'd hoped for. What would he say to her now? *Don't give up. It's never too late.* 

She shivered and tucked her hands deeper into her pockets. Ally had stopped calling for help. There hadn't seemed much point wasting her voice and energy once it got dark, but it was spooky down here. Every creak, crack and rustle made her think—snakes. To keep herself company and to scare off the slithering boogieman, Ally launched into a medley of songs about mountains and made up the words she didn't know. Climb Every Mountain—much too sad, was followed by River Deep, Mountain High—even worse. Then She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain—much better.

"She'll be wearing red lace panties, wearing red lace panties, she'll be wearing red lace panties when she comes," Ally sang.

"I like the black ones better."

Oh God, now she was having an auditory hallucination. That sounded like Caspar's voice. Ally looked up but could see nothing but white light. *Wow, a really bright star.* 

"What the hell are you doing down there?" Caspar asked.

Ally was afraid to answer in case he went away. Oh, but if she didn't answer, he *might* go away.

"Weaseling," she said. "I was so pissed off I'd missed it, thought I'd have a go on my own."

"Stay exactly where you are. Don't move," Caspar said. "I'm coming down."

*Oh God, it* is *Caspar.* Ally stood. Her heart pounded. This was real? She was safe? "Are you on your own?"

"Tom and the others are here."

"Not Geoff?"

"No," Caspar said, and Ally breathed a sigh of relief.

When Caspar's feet appeared overhead, she gulped back a sob. If this wasn't real, it was very cruel to tease her like this. But then Caspar stood in front of her, a light on his helmet and a smile on his face.

"Star boy," Ally whispered.

"Little weasel." Caspar pulled her into his arms. "Ally, Ally," he whispered into her hair. "What the hell happened?"

She melted against him. "Geoff tricked me into coming up here and then the bastard pushed me in this hole. He threw rocks in after me but I'd slipped into a side passage so he missed."

"Oh my God." Caspar gave her a bottle of water then took off his helmet, put it on her head and fastened it under her chin. He rigged a rope around her. "Why does he want to kill you?"

"He told me he works for my father and I've been left something in his will. Geoff gets the money if I'm dead. Not that my father's dead yet, but I have the feeling Geoff's working on that."

"Christ." He stroked her face with his fingers as she drank, and then raised his head. "Ready," Caspar called to the surface.

They hauled Ally out of the ground and she emerged to cheers.

"Hi, Tom, Mike. Oh you're all here. Thank you." Ally blinked back tears, touched that they'd all come to look for her.

Caspar climbed out to stand at her side and she felt his hand on her back. Ally couldn't look at him. This didn't change anything, she knew that, but she felt a shiver of pleasure he'd been part of the team.

"You okay to walk down, Ally?" Tom asked.

"Yep. Do I get chocolate?"

Tom laughed and handed her a Mars bar. One bite and Ally thought it was the best thing she'd ever eaten.

Caspar was next to her every step of the way down. Ally could see lights flashing on vehicles lining the road – police cars and an ambulance.

"How did you know I was there?" she asked.

"Your phone," Tom said. "Once you'd called 9-9-9, it was tracked. We knew your approximate location and then we did a sweep up the hill. But you were lucky."

"I know." She shuddered.

"Over here," someone called as Ally emerged from the trees. Two policemen walked toward her.

Ally unfastened her helmet and handed it to Caspar. "Thank you."

She turned away and he caught her sleeve. "Ally? I don't want you to leave."

She knew that. She understood why he'd said he was engaged, why he'd been sharp with her about the spy thing, why he pretended not to want her. He'd promised on the crag to catch her if she fell and he had, but it wasn't going to happen in the way she wanted. She was on her own. Ally got the message.

"This way, sweetheart," said a paramedic.

Ally remembered when Caspar had called her sweetheart and a pain erupted in her chest.

"I'm okay," Ally said, but she wasn't. Her head whirled, sugar from the chocolate crackled in her bloodstream and the ground wobbled.

All the lights winked out and she fell.

Caspar threw himself forward and swept Ally into his arms.

"Good save," said one of the paramedics. "We've got her now."

Caspar didn't want to let her go but he had to. He watched them lift her onto a stretcher. The door closed behind a policeman and one of the ambulance crew, and the vehicle pulled away.

Tom put his hand on his shoulder. "She'll be okay. It's probably a combination of shock and dehydration."

"I need to talk to the police," Caspar said. "Go back without me, I'm going to the hospital after."

"Okay, see you later."

As Tom turned, Caspar called him back. "Tom, Geoff pushed Ally in there. He was trying to kill her."

"Emma's boyfriend?"

"Pretending to be. This has something to do with a father Ally's never seen, but if you find Geoff, keep him with you and call the police."

"Right. Don't fuck this up, Caspar."

What if he already had?

\* \* \* \* \*

The police car carrying Caspar arrived at Buxton Hospital at the same time as the ambulance. By then, Caspar had told them everything he knew. They liaised with the guy who'd been talking to a revived Ally in the ambulance and there was an alert out for Geoff's car.

Caspar hung back as Ally was wheeled into the hospital, but he wasn't prepared to let her out of his sight. He was relieved a policeman had been left to guard her, but within moments Ally was out of sight of both of them. Caspar paced in the corridor outside her room while the policeman sat on a chair. Caspar couldn't keep still. He was

shocked he'd almost lost her before he'd come to his senses. Would he really have let her walk away even without that call from Luljeta?

Not too far away from Ally's room, a floor higher, Neil lay in bed. That afternoon, Caspar had stood embarrassed as Neil cried and thanked him for saving his life.

"You've given me another chance," Neil said. "We're not all so lucky. I won't waste it."

Ally had exploded into Caspar's world like a supernova. Her energy and enthusiasm had sparked him back to life. She'd made him laugh when he'd been resigned to a future of unhappiness. She'd brought light into his black world. His experiences in Albania, those long years in prison had changed him—he'd thought forever, but Ally had made him see the man he once was, the man he wanted to be and could be if she was with him. Only he didn't deserve her.

Caspar and the cop looked up when the door opened. A nurse and doctor came out.

"Is she okay?" Caspar asked.

The doctor looked at him. "Relative?"

If she'd have me. "Almost," Caspar said.

"She's fine. Just tired and shocked. We're keeping her in overnight for observation."

"Can I see her?" Caspar asked.

"For a few minutes."

Caspar pushed open the door, and Ally turned her head on the pillow and looked at him. When she didn't turn away, he allowed himself to hope.

"How are you?" he asked.

"The doctor says I'll feel better when my body finally rejects the pain-in-the-neck virus that makes my heart pound."

Caspar took a step nearer. "I've caught the same thing but I'm not sure the doctor's right. I don't want to lose something that makes me feel so alive."

"Ah, but a lot of the time it makes me feel crappy." Ally stared at him without blinking.

Shit.

"Hugs are the best medicine," Ally said in a tiny voice.

Caspar released a strangled sob and pulled her into his arms. He lay next to her on the bed and held her against his chest.

"Oh Ally," he breathed the words into her hair. "Don't leave me. Please don't leave me." He pulled back so he could look into her face. "I love you." Caspar watched her eyes fill with tears and he licked the salty drop that fell onto her cheek. "I love you and I—I think that's part of my problem. I'd expected to go through life having meaningless fucks. I never dreamed I'd be lucky enough to meet someone who'd make my life worth living because she's part of it. My world would be empty without you. No one else can fill the hole if you leave me. I love you. Only you. For always."

Ally kissed him. A sweet, gentle kiss and Caspar thought for one heart-stopping moment he was too late, that this was a goodbye kiss, and then her tongue slipped into his mouth, she held his face and they were really kissing. A slow, open-mouthed kiss that made Caspar's head swim with longing.

"Time's — Ooops," said a nurse at the door. "Okay fine. Unconventional treatment but seems to be working. Couple more minutes." The door closed again.

There were things Caspar needed to say. "Lina and I are not engaged. Never have been. The photos were some stupid publicity stunt. The life-drawing thing..." He swallowed hard. "I was offered a hundred pounds to model for an hour. I didn't know what that involved until I got there. I needed the money to take you out. I didn't want you to think all I wanted was sex."

"You don't have to explain," Ally said.

"I don't?"

"I figured it out. You pushed me away to try and get things back the way they were. I only guessed that you might have been spying. I wanted the people in Wyndale to treat you better, to see the *real* you. But if that put someone in Albania in danger, I'm sorry."

Richard had been right to squash anything appearing in the papers, but next week local gossip could have Caspar as a werewolf.

"I've spoken to the woman I met the night Jem was taken. She's in no danger. Doesn't mean I should be blabbing her name, but there is no reason to push you away. There was never a reason. It was all part of my punishment, I think. Deanna's father still wanting his pound of flesh."

"I'm sorry I ever said you were a spy," Ally whispered.

"It's okay. No real harm's been done. The Albanians decided I wasn't a spy then, so why would they think it now?"

Ally wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close.

Caspar lay with his head on her chest and listened to her heart. He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you when you said someone was trying to kill you. I'm not sure you should ever forgive me for that. You believed in me and I let you down. I'll never disbelieve you again."

"Good. I'm from the planet Geldo 12. Sent to Earth to -"

He shut her up with a kiss. "Sorry." Kiss. "Sorry." Kiss. "Sorry."

"I want to go home," she whispered. "We've got a big day tomorrow."

Caspar leaned up on one elbow. "We have?"

"Have you looked at your emails today?"

"No."

"You've got an interview for a job. Me too. That one where the inconsiderate bastard is looking for a multitalented slave."

He frowned. "You've looked at my emails?"

"I think I'd be great spy."

"Bloody hell. You worked out my password?" He gaped at her.

Ally sniggered. "I looked over your shoulder."

Caspar growled. "If you weren't in a hospital bed..."

"Let me get dressed and I won't be. I feel fine."

Caspar listened in amazement as Ally sweet-talked the doctor into discharging her, and then persuaded the police to give them a ride back to Wyndale. Not that he could have resisted her. He held her tight all the way back, still struggling with the thought that he might have lost her.

The two of them stood by the car while the cops checked Caspar's house. He could have done it, but he didn't want to leave Ally on her own.

"You don't think Geoff would turn up here, do you?" Ally asked in a small voice.

Caspar partly hoped he would so he could rearrange his internal organs. "No. My guess is he's driven straight to London in an attempt to maintain the illusion he never left the city after he drove your friends back. Even if he finds out you're not dead, the whole point of what he was doing has been lost. If anything happens to you, he's the first one they'll arrest."

"Except that's what they said about Jack. Oh God, you don't think both of them wanted me dead?" Ally cringed. "Might as well add Emma to that list. She's not going to be happy I've wrecked her relationship with Geoff, even if he is a nutcase."

Caspar hugged her. "When I wished my life was less dull, I hadn't quite envisaged what a whirlwind like you could do it."

"You're fine to go in," said one of the policemen. "I don't think there's much likelihood of him showing up here. We've got a watch out for his car, but any concerns, call us."

Caspar grasped Ally's hand and pulled her to the door. When it was closed and locked, he let out a deep sigh. "You. Me. Bed. Now."

"You. Kitchen. Get. Food."

Caspar laughed. "I'll bring you something up."

Ally wondered how the worst day in her life could have changed to the best. Caspar loved her. He *loved* her. She'd wanted to say it back but didn't want the first time to merely parrot him. Ally stripped as she walked up to the bedroom, laying a trail of clothes for Caspar to follow, and climbed into his bed naked. Everything was going to be fine now. Ally shivered. Well, it would when Caspar was in here to warm up the bed. Ally tucked her head under the duvet, and scissored her legs as she thrashed around. She bucked and flailed, kicked and wriggled, trying to generate some heat.

"What are you doing?" Caspar asked.

Ally popped her head out. "Having sex with the invisible man."

Caspar laughed and offered her a plate of toast. "Is he any good?"

"He's tricky to keep hold of. Never sure which bit I'm grabbing." She sat up, sank her teeth into the hot, buttered toast and sighed. "Lovely. Mmm."

As Ally ate, she moaned louder and louder. Caspar watched her in amusement as he stripped.

"Yes, yes," Ally gasped, and he took the empty plate from her.

"Good toast?"

"The toast? No, the invisible man has a wickedly inventive tongue."

Caspar was still laughing as he slipped under the covers. "You lied," came his muffled voice. "You're not wearing red lace panties as you come."

Ally sighed as Caspar slowly slid two fingers inside her. He dipped in and out to spread her moisture in tight circles, rubbing her clit with each thrust, pressing it with the heel of his hand. He kissed across her belly, his slightly rough chin following his whisper-soft breath until his face joined his fingers at the junction of her legs. Ally melted into the bed, tension pouring from her, memories of this evening's fear dissipating under Caspar's touch.

Her fingers spearing his hair, all Ally could do was remember to breathe while his tongue teased the swollen bud of her clit. And breathing wasn't easy. Air burst in and out of her mouth in hard, noisy gasps. Caspar licked her, sucked her, ate her until her world shrank, the bedroom disappeared and all she knew was the pleasure of his touch, his clever tongue and his thrusting fingers. He pulled her closer and closer to the brink of paradise and then snatched it away by drawing back.

Ally pulled his hair. "Caspaaar," she wailed, and felt him laugh against her, the vibration rippling into her belly.

Then his fingers thrust again and touched some point inside her that made her hips buck off the mattress. His tongue was back on her clit, the high-speed flutter reaching her heart. Ally was caught in the flow. No way out. No way back. Nothing could stop this, not even the end of the world. A rush of heat spread from her epicenter and the quake that followed engulfed her in waves of pleasure so intense she cried out.

Even as the feelings faded, she wanted more.

Caspar's head emerged from the duvet next to hers and he was on her in a heartbeat, mouths together, his lips pressed to hers, his tongue kissing her tongue while their bodies melted along their lengths. He rolled so Ally straddled him and she pushed herself up, her knees on either side of his hips. Caspar's hands settled on her breasts and he rolled his thumbs over her nipples. They moaned at the same time and then laughed together.

"A perfect pair," Caspar said, and when he looked into her eyes, Ally knew he meant more than her breasts.

She came up on her knees and angled his thick cock until it rested against her folds. Caspar ran his hands down the sides of her body and gripped her hips. Ally lowered herself as slowly as she could, fighting Caspar's tug, squeezing her muscles around his cock as she engulfed him inch by inch. Caspar groaned and his hands trembled against her. Ally loved seeing him slide into her, watching him disappear, feeling him so hot and hard inside her.

Once he was buried to the hilt, Ally twisted her hips and clenched around him.

"Oh God," Caspar blurted.

Ally pulled his hands from her hips, threaded her fingers through his and held their joined hands in the air between them. Then she began to move against him, raising and lowering her hips with tantalizing slowness. Caspar's face was taut with concentration. She moved faster and he grunted.

Would sex always be like this? Ally wondered. So beautiful it made her heart hurt? He thrust up into her down stroke, his cock reaching deep into her, and Ally felt as though she were breaking apart. She heard herself whimpering, and something hot and golden burst inside her. As she closed her eyes and flew into the abyss, Caspar's fingers tightened around hers and his cock swelled and jerked inside her.

"Ally," he whispered.

The sensation of warmth as his cum bathed her pussy triggered another spasm from her muscles and she clenched around him. Caspar hissed and Ally opened her eyes.

"Phew," she gasped. "Thought you were a snake."

Caspar pulled her down to lie on his chest. "You're not frightened of my pet snake, are you? It's ferociously protective of his nest. No other snakes will dare come anywhere near while he's around."

He pulled the duvet over them and wrapped his arms around her. Ally felt safe. She almost said the words and then bit them back. The moment had to be right. She'd keep them in her head for now.

I love you.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

Caspar held Ally's hand on the bus to Manchester airport. "You do know this is a waste of time?"

Ally glared. If he said that one more time, she'd thump him. "No, it's not." She'd had to lever him out of bed, force him to get dressed and they'd almost missed the bus.

"I can't see the point," Caspar said, and sighed.

"If you keep going on about it, I...I won't show you my trick with cherries."

Caspar clamped his lips together and pretended to draw a zipper across. Ally unzipped his mouth.

"I don't want to go," he blurted. "I don't want a job that will take me miles from you. Though the chances of getting it are zero."

"Hey, what if he offers it to me and not you? Maybe I'd like a job that takes me miles from you."

Caspar smirked. Ally loved that he was confident enough to know she didn't mean it.

"How many interviews have you had since you came home?" she asked.

Caspar sucked in his cheeks. "A couple."

"So look on this as experience. I bet you've forgotten what to do if you get asked awkward questions. Like what's your worst fault? Or what would you do if a bear rushed into the room brandishing an axe and a chainsaw?"

"An axe and a chainsaw?"

"He's an ambidextrous bear."

Caspar laughed. "What should I do?"

"You need to perfect a technique like looking thoughtful and counting to ten or asking a question back or praising the question they asked. That sort of thing."

"In the meantime, the chainsaw has wreaked havoc."

Ally glared. "It's hypothetical. To see how you handle stress."

"Okay. Well, I'd make sure the interviewer was between me and the bear."

She laughed. "You might get asked for your worst fault. What are you going to say?"

"Lack of coffee makes me grouchy."

Ally smiled.

Caspar squeezed her fingers. "What do you do if you're asked a difficult question?" "Cry."

He laughed.

"It's true. That's how I got the job at Paxton's Precious Metals. Rent was due, I was desperate and it worked."

Caspar raised his eyebrows. "In retrospect?"

"Maybe it wasn't such a good job." The attempted murder charges against Jack had been dropped, but he'd probably do time for insurance fraud and arson. Plus there was an ongoing investigation into his dealings with some Russians with Ally's emails part of the evidence.

"Maybe?"

"It was okay until Jack went weird. But this job might be wonderful. You wouldn't need to do it forever, but it would look great on your CV. And if you get it, I'll come and live close by." So long as it isn't somewhere expensive. "I mean he might have said 24/7 but you have to have some time to yourself. That time of course will be mine."

"What if *you* get offered the job?"

Ally guffawed. "We both know that's not going to happen. But maybe he'll need a cleaner or something."

She tried to hide it but suspected Caspar heard the tremor of uncertainty in her voice. No way was she qualified for this job, but Caspar was, and if it was offered, she'd make him take it. Ally tugged on his hand and nodded to the window. "We're here."

The bus pulled up at the terminal and they stood.

"I'll bring the bags," Caspar said.

Ally grabbed hers. "Mine's not heavy."

"I can't believe he expects someone to walk away from everything and start work this afternoon," Caspar said as he stepped off the bus.

"He probably wants to see how responsive we are to instructions."

Caspar smothered his laugh. "No, you're not going to get the job, Ms Right-Left-Right."

Ally thumped his shoulder.

They made their way to the business center in Terminal One and Ally was surprised how nervous she felt, considering this was a job she had no hope of getting.

"How do I look?" she asked as they walked down the corridor.

She wore a dark blue suit with a pink shirt and pink high heels. Her interview outfit.

"Good enough to eat," Caspar said.

He looked too good to eat. Ally hadn't seen him in a suit before. She'd trimmed his hair after breakfast, and when he'd emerged in the dark business suit and white shirt, she'd been rendered speechless.

They stopped at the door to the interview room, Ally smoothed down her skirt and read the notice pinned there.

"Wait here until the inconsiderate bastard is ready for you."

She snickered and slumped on the chair. Caspar settled next to her.

"Have you thought about going to see your father?" he asked.

Pick your moments, why don't you. "I've thought about it." A lot.

"And?"

"Decided not to. If he wants to see me, I'm sure the police will tell me. If I turn up on his doorstep, it'll look like I'm after his money and I'm not. Except..."

Caspar leaned back in his chair. "Except what?"

"Well, maybe he *did* try to find me and couldn't. My birth mother's vindictive and unbalanced. She might not have even told him about me for a long time. I had to keep her surname until I was legally old enough to change it to Everton. Maybe that made it harder to find me. I still think he has to make the first move."

The door next to them opened and a small, bald, tough-looking guy in camouflage pants and jacket came out, dragging a scruffy, wheeled bag. "Next one," he said, and walked off.

Ally stood, picked up her bag and put a smile on her face.

"Good luck." Caspar stroked her hand.

"He won't know what hit him."

Ally walked in, closed the door and looked around. The room was empty. Well, there were two easy chairs and a low table, a coffee machine with cups but no inconsiderate bastard. There was another door on the opposite wall and Ally wondered if she was supposed to go through it. Was this some sort of initiative test? She put her bag down and crossed the room. Taking a deep breath, she pulled open the door.

Shit.

And closed it again. How had she managed to miss the washroom sign? The guy was tall, dark and had his back toward her as he stood at the washbasin, but she'd caught his startled glance in the mirror.

Ally retreated to the chairs and slumped down. A folder sat on the table. Inches away. Did it hold details about them? What did it say about Caspar? And her? She sat on her hands. He came out of the bathroom and she leapt to her feet.

"I am so sorry. I decided to check if you were all right. It occurred to me that you might have had a heart attack and need CPR or perhaps had fallen and cracked your head on a washbasin and be bleeding to death and might need a tourni...quet." Her voice trailed off as she took in his incredulous expression.

"And where would you put the tourniquet if my head was bleeding?"

"Round your neck."

He laughed and Ally sighed with relief.

"Sorry. I can read. I just didn't on this occasion."

He held out his hand. "Ally Everton?"

"Inconsiderate bastard?"

His jaw twitched. "Please take a seat."

Good thing she was already in deep lust with Caspar because she was sitting next to strong temptation. Shining black hair, navy-blue eyes and an aura of tightly coiled energy about him that drew her like a magnet. He looked the same height as Caspar but more muscled. A few years older. White shirt, navy chinos and — flip-flops. *Oh.* 

"Did you dress yourself?" Ally asked. Shit, I said that out loud.

"I accidentally set fire to my shoes. This was the best I could manage."

Ally's eyes widened. "You really do need help, Mr..."

"Adam Kesey. Call me Adam. Tell me why you want this job."

Ally took a deep breath. "I'm going to tell you why the best person for the job is sitting outside that door."

"I already know what I need to about Caspar Sanderson."

White heat flared in Ally's chest. "No you don't. He can do everything you had on that list, he's loyal, he's really smart, he's sharp and he's fun and —"

"He's been in prison for—"

"He was set up. He did everything he was told to do and the Foreign Office hung him out to dry. He lost everything. His sister, his reputation, his family and friends. No one will give him a chance and it's not fair. A few days ago he saved a man's life. Yesterday, he helped save mine. He could be great if only someone would give him the chance. He already shines for me and he could for you."

Adam stared straight at her, and Ally met his gaze. "At the moment, I'm interviewing you. How many languages do you speak?"

"One and a bit of French. Caspar speaks five."

"Can you dive, ski, sail, ride or climb?"

"I don't see why not. Caspar..."

He rolled his eyes.

"I can cook," she said.

"Good."

"So can Caspar," she whispered.

"Do you love him?"

Ally unclenched her fingers from the arms of the chair. "Yes."

"You do realize this job involves a lot of traveling. I require an assistant who can anticipate my every need, someone I can shout at and laugh with. Someone who enjoys reading *The Financial Times* at the bottom of a ski slope. Someone who'll pick up my clothes and sort out my mess. Someone who knows how to keep their mouth shut."

"Why don't you get married? A wife would do all that, apart from the last part obviously."

Adam scowled.

"You won't find a wife with a face like that," Ally said. "Smile quick before the wind changes."

He started to laugh and didn't seem able to stop. He wiped the tears from his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "I wish I could give you the job, I really do, but—"

"I'd be crap at it. I know. But Caspar wouldn't."

Adam nodded at her bag. "Did you pack?"

Ally shook her head. "It's empty. Did you really expect someone to start work this afternoon?"

"I want someone who says yes, not no."

"Caspar always says yes." Ally forced herself not to cross her fingers.

"He's a lucky man," Adam said.

"No, he's not. Not yet."

"Send him in." Adam stood and held out his hand. "It was good to meet you, Ally."

She squeezed his fingers. "I don't want to hold him back," she whispered. "I want him to be the best he can."

"He is a lucky man."

Ally carried her bag outside and blew out a sigh of relief. "Your turn. He's a really nice guy. He didn't shout once. Mind you I didn't have time to get left and right muddled up. Tell him the best place to read *The Financial Times* is at the bottom of—"

"A ski slope," said Adam behind her.

Ally cringed.

After the pair of them disappeared inside the room, she slumped on a seat. Maybe she'd done too good a job of selling Caspar. What if he actually got the job? Would she have to give him up? A year. He only needed to do the job for a year. She could wait. She could fly out to see him so long as it wasn't too far away. Only, what if Adam wanted Caspar to leave with him tonight?

Ally bit back a groan. The bag thing was just a test, wasn't it? Would Caspar go? Oh God, she'd have to do the same as he'd done to her and *make* him leave.

Caspar's interview took ages. Ally wondered if that was a good thing. She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"You fucking bitch."

Fear skittered down Ally's spine. She screamed as hands wrapped around her throat.

\* \* \* \* \*

An icy wind twisted around Caspar's heart. Ally's in trouble.

"Excuse me," he said to Adam and jumped to his feet.

He flung open the door and saw a well-built guy struggling with Ally, dragging her down the corridor, no one else around. He had his hands around her throat and she was trying to pull his fingers off as she kicked back at his shins. Caspar's heart lurched and he bolted after them.

"Keep back or I'll kill her."

Caspar didn't stop. He barged into them both, slipped his hand between Ally and the man, squeezed hard on his balls and kept squeezing. The guy let out a piercing cry and Ally slithered to the floor, choking.

As the guy bent over, Caspar slipped behind him, wrapped his right arm around the attacker's neck and pressed hard on the carotid arteries, using his other arm to maintain the hold as he maneuvered him to the ground. Within a few seconds the guy went limp. Caspar lessened the pressure but kept his arms where they were until he was sure he wasn't pretending.

As he stood, Ally rushed to his side. Caspar held her against his chest but didn't take his gaze from the figure on the floor. He knew he was holding her too tight but he couldn't help it. He might have lost her, just as he'd lost his sister. If he hadn't heard Ally scream...

"It's Geoff," she whispered.

"Are you okay?" He tipped her back to look into her eyes.

"Yes."

Two security guards came running down the corridor, and Ally explained what had happened. Geoff came round as they cuffed him, groaning about his balls. He was lucky he still had them. Caspar's heart pounded as fury blazed around his bloodstream.

"The Derbyshire police are looking for him," Caspar said to the guards. "He's wanted for attempted murder. He's presumably trying to flee the country."

When Caspar noticed the red marks on Ally's neck, he wished he'd kept that chokehold on a little longer. He turned and saw Adam wide-eyed in the doorway, staring at them.

"I need—to think about this. I'll be in touch," Adam said. He went back into the room and came out holding Caspar's bag. "You travel light." He put the bag down and closed the door.

Ally grabbed the bag before he could reach it. She glared and unzipped it. "You didn't pack anything."

"You think I'd get on a plane and leave you?" Caspar reached for her bag and opened it. He looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

Ally shrugged. "I knew I wouldn't get it."

He laughed. "Let's go home."

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Barbara Elsborg

The bus was pulling into Wyndale when Caspar's phone rang. He looked at the screen and groaned. "My father."

"Yes?" Caspar snapped into the phone.

"Can you come for dinner?"

"It's not Wednesday."

"How observant. Still?"

"If I can bring a friend." Caspar looked at Ally.

"Obviously. Seven."

Caspar pocketed his phone as they got off the bus. "We're summoned to dine with my parents within the hour."

The color washed out of Ally's face.

"What's the matter?" Caspar asked in alarm.

"I keep forgetting you're titled. How do I address your father? And your mother? Should I curtsey? Walk backward? Oh God, I don't like oysters."

Caspar laughed. "My mother hates oysters. Lord and Lady Lynham are their titles. Don't curtsey. Don't walk backward. Just be yourself."

"Where do they live?"

"Next door."

She frowned. "You don't have a next door."

"Wyndale Hall?"

"Oh." She bit her lip.

"Is that a problem?"

"No." Ally's smile looked forced.

He slung his arm over her shoulder as they walked up the hill from the bus stop. He loved her, but did she love him? Caspar felt that she did, but Ally hadn't told him.

Her phone rang and she pulled it from her purse. "Hello?"

"Hello, Ally."

Caspar could just make out Adam Kesey's voice. His heart jumped into his throat. He was going to offer the job to Ally? Caspar wasn't sure he could feel happy about that.

"Hi Adam." Ally gave Caspar an anxious glance.

"Is Caspar with you?" Adam asked.

"Yes."

"You've got the job."

Ally stumbled to a halt. Caspar heard what Adam said and felt as though his feet were dissolving into the pavement. He wanted to grab Ally's phone and yell that Ally was his. No point trying to smile his congratulations, that was beyond him.

"No, thank you," Ally said.

"Wait," Adam shouted. "You can't say no. You wanted me to offer it to him."

Ally tensed against Caspar's side. What the hell did that mean? Both Ally's reaction and Adam's comment. What had Ally said at her interview?

"You mean Caspar's got the job?" Ally asked.

Something was missed by Caspar in his annoyance. "What –?"

"Both of you," Adam said. "You're obviously joined at the hip, but I'm not doubling the pay. In fact I'm tempted to reduce the salary because I have a feeling you're going to cost me a fortune, but I've never had such an entertaining afternoon. I want you both."

Ally stood in openmouthed amazement.

"Ally, are you still there?" Adam asked.

When she opened her mouth and nothing came out, Caspar took the phone from her hand. "You've rendered her speechless. A useful attribute."

"Hi, Caspar. Did you hear what I said?"

"You're offering the job to both of us."

"Yes. I need to be in New Zealand next week. Flying out of Heathrow on Monday. Shall I send your tickets?"

"Can I call you back? I need to give CPR to Ally."

Adam laughed and cut the connection.

He's given us the job? Caspar couldn't believe— "What did you say in your interview?"

"That I wasn't prepared to accept the job unless he took you on as his chauffeur."

Caspar raised his eyebrows.

"I just told him you'd be brilliant." Ally tugged him up the hill. "You know right from left. What more could he need?"

"Do you want the job?"

Ally stopped walking. "Don't you?"

"I asked first."

She looked straight at him. "Yes, but I want you more. If you don't want to take it, neither do I."

"I like him."

"Me too."

They were both hedging. Caspar wanted the job but needed to know Ally did too. He pulled her on. They were in sight of his front door.

"The plus points," Ally said. "New start. Something wildly different. Good pay. A chance to shine. I might get to see where they filmed *Lord of the Rings* and we'd be together."

Caspar unlocked the door and they went inside.

"On the minus side," Ally said. "Life with a moody guy who shouts and squeezes his toothpaste from the bottom—"

"How do you know Adam — Oh, you mean me." Caspar spun her against the door and kissed her. "Shall." Kiss. "I." Kiss. "Ring." Kiss. "Adam." Kiss. "And." Kiss. "Say." Kiss. "Yes?"

"Make him wait. We don't want to look too desperate."

Caspar unbuttoned her coat. "Are you desperate?"

"Yep."

"Good. Me too."

He edged her toward the stairs. Before they'd reached the top step, Ally was sprawled facedown, clinging to the carpet as Caspar stripped her of her clothes.

"Put the water on so we can have a hot shower before we go," Ally mumbled.

Caspar kissed his way up her leg. "I'm trying to drive you wild and you're thinking about showers?"

He licked the back of her knee, and Ally slithered down two steps. When he trailed his tongue over her bottom, she scrambled up three. Caspar grasped her hips and tugged her down.

"This is like snakes and ladders," he said with a laugh.

"Do they have big snakes in New Zealand?"

"They don't have any."

Ally spun onto her back. "Call Adam now and say yes."

"I've something more important to do."

Caspar scooped her into his arms and carried her the rest of the way. He paused by the switch for the water heater and Ally flipped it on. Caspar laid her gently on the bed and took off his clothes. His stomach muscles clenched as she rolled onto her knees and looked at him over her shoulder. Caspar ate her up with his eyes before he stepped forward.

"Open your legs," he said.

Ally pressed her forehead into the pillow and moved her knees farther apart. Caspar grabbed his balls and pulled down on them. He could see she was wet, her folds glistened in the lamp light. He knelt on the bed and ran his fingers down the crease of her butt and into the silky dampness of her folds. She let out a smothered groan and arched higher into his touch.

Caspar dropped his head and licked her, pushing his finger into her as he teased her with his tongue. The taste turned his thoughts to mist. All he could think about was bringing Ally pleasure, exploring every inch of her body, driving her wild, making her moan. When he slid his thumb over the pucker of her asshole, she groaned. He sucked her clit while he dipped his finger in and out of her pussy and then pressed his thumb against the tight ring.

"Oh God," Ally moaned.

He wet his thumb with her cream and swirled it around her anus, urging the muscles to relax and let him in. Caspar kept licking her folds, stroking with his fingers and then his thumb slipped inside, and Ally whimpered. She rocked as she squirmed against him. He could feel the heat pouring from her as her body fell into sexual thrall. She wasn't the only one. His temperature had soared.

Caspar played her with infinite care, fingers, thumb, tongue in perfect harmony. Ally was perfect. He wanted this first time to be perfect.

"Sexy, sexy, star girl," he whispered into her sex. "Christ, you drive me crazy with longing."

Pulling back, Caspar dragged his cock between the crease of her buttocks. He spread her cheeks and pressed the blunt head against her asshole.

"Caspar," Ally whispered.

"Can I?"

"Condom. Oil?"

"Don't move." Lounge. Wallet. He was back in a flash, condom on.

"Stop if it hurts?" Ally asked.

"God, sweetheart. I don't want to hurt you. We don't have to do this."

"I want to try."

Thank fuck. "I'll stop the moment you tell me to."

Caspar ran his oiled palm up and down his protected cock then held up the bottle to let a trickle slide over Ally's anus.

"Ohhh," she groaned.

He pressed his crown against the tight entrance to her body, swirling in a circling motion and slipped his fingers around her hip to slide two fingers into her pussy. Ally arched back against his cock and he groaned at the pressure on his sensitive glans.

"I shouldn't," Ally said.

"Who says? If you don't like it, I'll stop."

He rocked against her, the inside of his thighs rubbing against the outside of hers. His head ached almost as much as his balls. Caspar pressed himself against her, his cock making slow and gentle pushes as he willed her to let him in.

"Don't try to relax," Caspar said. "Do the opposite. Try and push me out."

Ally groaned as Caspar's cock slid into her. He gasped against her back, his breath tickling her spine as he stretched her, filled her and Ally couldn't believe how good it felt.

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"Jesus, Ally."
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"It didn't work," she grunted.

Caspar froze. "What?"

"I tried to push you out and you slid in, you sneaky bastard."

He laughed and Ally let out a shuddering wail. "I felt that. You're not allowed to laugh, cough, sneeze or move."

"We're going to stay like this forever?"

"It does feel nice."

"Only nice?"

Caspar pulled his hips back and Ally went with him. "Arrgghh. You're too big."

"No I'm not."

He pushed forward again, and Ally trembled as she felt him sink deeper inside her. Caspar took his fingers from her pussy and caught hold of her hand. Ally had to press her head to the bed to stop herself from collapsing.

"Feel me," he whispered, and slid his finger into her pussy with hers.

"Oh God." Ally could feel his cock moving inside her.

Caspar began to thrust more forcefully, and Ally felt as though every muscle in her body were clenching. Caspar forced the pace, fucked her harder, moved his finger faster and dragged her finger with his. His teeth nipped her shoulder, and Ally leapt off the high board into the blue. Wave after wave of pleasure rippled through her while Caspar shuddered into her back.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Ally gasped.

As the tremors died away and the world righted itself, Caspar tipped on his side and held her tight. His cock still buried inside her, he slid his hands to her breasts and leaned over to kiss her. A sweet, gentle, loving kiss that stole Ally's breath.

"Did I hurt you?" Caspar whispered.

"No. Well, it hurt a little bit and then it didn't."

"What did if feel like?"

Ally sighed. "Intense. Different. Naughty. Oh God, you felt enormous."

He looked deep into her eyes and whispered, "I love you."

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

Ally had a sinking feeling in her stomach as Caspar took her hand and headed toward Wyndale Hall. Why hadn't it occurred to her before this was where his parents lived? If only Caspar had told her the guy who'd almost shot her was his father, she wouldn't have poured out her heart in the tree house.

"Sure I look okay?" Ally asked as Caspar tugged her past the broadcast vehicles lining the drive.

"You don't look okay. You look fantastic."

She grinned and Caspar groaned. "Lose that cock-erecting smile. In fact, avoid me altogether while we're there, otherwise my mother is going to freak."

"It'll be fine. I won't drink from the finger bowl or burp, I promise."

"We don't have to stay long. When we get back, I'll call Adam and tell him yes."

She squeezed his fingers. Her heart was doing cartwheels. Should she admit she and Leonard were on first-name terms? Oh God, why had she opened her mouth? Had she said anything about Caspar not getting on with his father? Ally's mouth felt like she'd been caught in a sandstorm. Maybe she could take ill. Now. Before they got to the house.

"There it is," Caspar said. "Too large for my parents, but they'll never move."

"Would you want them to?"

"No, I don't suppose I would. It's been in the family for generations." He pulled on the old doorbell and a clang echoed inside the hall. "Remember. My father is an idiot. Ignore him. Don't curtsey and don't fart."

"Hey, I never fart."

The door opened on the last word, and a man glared down at them. Ally had never seen him before and she wanted to kiss him. So it hadn't been Caspar's father in the tree house. *Thank you, God.* 

"Hello, Barnes," Caspar said, and dashed Ally's hopes.

"Good evening," said the man in a way that made it sound anything but.

Caspar gestured for Ally to go in first and he followed. He helped her off with her coat and handed both of them to the butler. Cables and equipment lay all over the hall floor, but Ally's jaw dropped at the magnificence of the place. Painted ceiling, curved staircase, fragile-looking furniture. *Don't sit down in case you break something*.

"Your parents are in the small dining room," Barnes said.

Caspar took Ally's hand. "No need to announce us."

"Small dining room?" she whispered.

"There are a lot of rooms in this house and I think the film crew has taken over most of them."

They turned at the end of the corridor and Caspar hesitated at a closed door. *Oh good, he's changed his mind and we're leaving.* 

He pulled her round to face him. "I know my mother will like you. It would be nice if my father did too, but don't worry if he's...abrupt. It won't be you he's objecting to but because you're my choice."

Want to bet?

Ally tensed as they walked into the room.

"Caspar," said an elegant woman with Caspar's dark hair.

When her eyes lit up at the sight of Caspar, Ally wanted to kiss her.

"This is Alexandria Everton. Ally to her friends. Ally, this is my mother, Lady Lynham."

"Pleased to meet you," Ally said. She stumbled as she walked forward, and Caspar grabbed her. "I wasn't going to curtsy," she blurted.

His mother smiled. "Delighted to meet you, Alexandria."

Ally shook her hand. She had long, delicate fingers and wore beautiful rings. Maybe Ally could just stay here and —

"My father, Lord Lynham."

Ally waited for him to say they'd met. She lifted her head as she shook his hand.

"Pleased to meet you. Again," he said.

Caspar raised his eyebrows. "Oh yes, you nearly killed her."

His mother gasped.

"Nowhere near," said his father. "I'm much too good a shot."

"Hey, why didn't you tell me it was your father?" Ally asked Caspar. Then she blushed, remembering what she'd called his father.

"We've been hearing all about you," said his mother, and Ally's heart stopped. Now Caspar was going to hate her again for blabbing.

"Have they caught the man who tried to kill you?" his mother asked.

And Ally exhaled. She saw Leonard wink at her and knew in that instant what had been said in the tree house would stay there.

"Yes," Ally said. "This afternoon. Geoff tried to strangle me, and Caspar grabbed his b— Caspar floored him."

Caspar pulled out Ally's chair and patted her shoulder before he sat next to her.

"I thought you were thrown down an old mine shaft?" His mother raised her eyebrows when she caught Caspar's wide-eyed expression. "Martha knows everything that happens in the village. This week has been more entertaining than the television."

"The bastard also pushed Ally in front of a train," Caspar said. "That was why she came up to Derbyshire."

"Oh my goodness." His mother gaped at her.

"I think I must be the luckiest person in the world." Ally turned to face Caspar. "In fact, I know I am."

Caspar slid his hand on her knee under the table and squeezed.

"Talking of luck," said his father. "Boris was asking after you, Caspar. Seems to think he might have a job you could do."

"Boris Talbot?" Caspar snarled the name, and Ally flinched. "The head of the economics division of the Foreign Office? The same Boris Talbot who left me to rot in jail?"

"Said to ask you to give him a call," his father said. "Something about a post in Washington. He said not to worry about Richard Hanley."

Ally heard Caspar's sharp intake of breath.

"That would be quite a step up," Leonard said. "The British Embassy in Washington—nothing higher I'd think."

Ally felt like a sandcastle being washed away by the sea. She was going to lose him. Everything she'd built was falling apart. He wouldn't want her tagging along, and in any case, she could only stay in the States for a couple of months at a time. He was being offered his life back, which was what she wanted, but it meant giving him up.

"That's brilliant, Caspar," she heard herself say.

"You think?"

*Oh God, he sounds wrong.* Too cold, too calm.

"Why would Boris Talbot call you?" Caspar asked.

His father shifted on his chair. "I called him."

The air thickened. Ally knew trouble was brewing but had no idea how to stop it.

"Why would you do that?" Caspar's voice was icy.

"Because Boris is no friend of Mantel and this has gone on long enough. Boris pointed out to me that Mantel lost Deanna, his daughter, too, and I know all too well how far a parent will go to protect even the memory of his child. I should have seen it before. Calling Boris seemed one way to say I'm sorry. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt and I didn't. I was too blinded by grief and...fury to listen to what my heart tried to tell me. I know Jemima would have seen no evil in anyone. No one could watch her every second of every day." Leonard took his wife's hand and held it. "We're both sorry."

"We didn't realize how you were struggling, going hungry," said his mother. "You looked pale and thin, but I thought..." She floundered under Caspar's gaze and glanced at her husband.

"When you didn't ask for more money, we guessed you'd sold your grandfather's medal and I seethed quietly because you were too proud to ask for help." His father's jaw twitched. "We let you down."

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Ally didn't dare look at Caspar.

He took his hand from her knee and she gulped.

"I wish you'd felt able to talk to us," said Leonard.

"It seems someone has been doing the talking for me," Caspar snapped.

Ally could feel herself shrinking like the proverbial Alice. The room grew larger while she grew smaller and smaller. She wished there was a rabbit hole to shoot down.

"Don't you dare, Caspar," whispered his father. "Don't you dare ruin this."

Ally stood while she still could and faced Caspar. "Sorry. I only ever wanted to make your life happier, to make you smile. I wanted people to like you. I wanted you to be the man I saw and not the one you pretended to be. I'm sorry if you got hurt again, but I thought it would be better for you if I took the risk and failed than never to have tried." She looked across the table. "Sorry for spoiling your dinner."

Ally bolted for the door, but Caspar got there first. "Running again?" He grabbed her hand and turned to face his parents. "Ally and I have been offered jobs working as assistants for Adam Kesey."

"The man who runs Mirofax, the anti-fraud company?" Leonard asked.

Ally sagged. She hadn't even asked Adam what he did, but she'd heard of Mirofax. It was huge.

"We're taking the jobs," Caspar said.

"What about—" Leonard closed his mouth when his wife looked at him.

"Congratulations to both of you. Leonard, we'll have champagne."

Ally let herself be pulled back to the table. When Caspar stroked her palm with his thumb, she dared to hope everything would be all right.

Caspar sat and ate—he had no idea what—with Ally's words ringing in his head. "I wanted you to be the man I saw and not the one you pretended to be." How could she change his life so much in less than a week? He didn't deserve her. He didn't deserve her loyalty, friendship, kindness or her love, but he wanted them. Oh Christ, how he wanted them.

She sat there, making his parents laugh and smile, and it was as if he were watching photographs come to life in developing fluid. They were the parents he remembered. A father who'd taught him and his sister how to ride and how to swim. A mother who'd played hide and seek and given them her clothes to dress up in. They looked younger, healthier, full of—color.

Things had been said that had been better left unsaid. Five years wasted except for the lesson in humility Caspar had learned. But Ally was right. He shouldn't ruin the future by thinking about the past. His father hugged him as they left, and Caspar felt his heart swell. Now all he needed was to hear three words from Ally.

He held her hand tight in his as they walked down the drive. The night was cold and crisp. The stars were out.

"You know why there are stars in the sky?" she asked.

"Why?"

"To show you how high you can dream. You know why there are so many stars?"

He shook his head.

"So there's enough for us all to dream big. Do you want the job in Washington?" Ally whispered.

Caspar pulled his phone from his pocket and called Adam. He swung Ally round so she could hear and wrapped an arm around her.

"Caspar," Adam said.

"We'd like the job. We'd love the job."

Adam laughed. "Tickets to New Zealand on their way. I fancy the idea of seeing where they filmed *Lord of the Rings*. Sort that out, Ally?"

"Yippee, I love you," Ally shouted into the phone.

"You haven't seen me first thing in the morning. I'm like a bear with a chainsaw." Adam ended the call.

Caspar put his phone back in his pocket. He knew she didn't love Adam, but he didn't like that she'd said it to him. *Christ*. He didn't want her to see Adam first thing in the morning. He walked faster.

"Don't worry," Ally said. "I'm going to find him a wife."

Caspar laughed.

Ally banged her hip into his. "Hey, it's not going to be easy. He's rich, successful and good-looking. Women are going to want him for the wrong reason."

"So why do you want me?"

"For the right reason."

"Which is?" Caspar asked.

Ally took his hands and spun around him. "Because I love you."

Caspar thought his heart would explode. He yanked her into his arms and kissed her. Ally slid her hand between them and laid it over the hard ridge in his pants. "This is another reason," she whispered.

"You want me for my body?" Caspar tugged her faster down the drive.

"If that's all right with you."

"I daresay I can cope."

"I love everything about you," she whispered. "I love the way your fingertips feel on my skin. I love the salty taste of your cock. I love the way you tremble when I run my hands down your back to the dip at the base of your spine. I love how when your eyes open and you see me, a huge smile spreads over your face. I love that you can tell right from left."

Caspar chuckled. "I love everything about you too. I love watching your face when you come. I love kissing the soft skin of your inner thigh. I love the way your arm tightens around me even when you're asleep. I love that you can't tell left from right."

Ally gasped and pointed up into the sky. "Oh my God, a shooting star. Maybe it's the one you bought for me." She winced. "Oops. Sorry. Change your password. But first make a wish."

Caspar looked up and laughed. It was a plane. Ally lifted her arm and pretended to catch the star. She kissed her fist and gave it to Caspar to kiss.

"Have you made a wish?" She threw her hand into the air and opened her fingers.

Caspar stared into her eyes and smiled. His star had risen. That star was Ally.

"Don't need to," he said. "My wish has already come true."

### 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 <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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