

CHRISTINA JONES



Nothing  
to Lose

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TO LOSE

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Christina Jones

CHIVERS

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**for Paul Lovelock:**

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Biker, musician and my lifelong friend. A kind, gentle, funny, happy man who should have lived forever. I will always miss you. I will always remember. You were simply the best.

**also for Nenagh Johnson,**

the most beautiful greyhound in the world. May she continue to enjoy a long and happy retirement filled with luxury and love.

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# Chapter One

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The chorus of ‘Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah’ roared along the aisle, poured through the nave, then soared sacrilegiously up into the sixteenth-century rafters of St Edith’s. The organist, more used to wheezing out ‘The Old Rugged Cross’, gamely tried to keep pace with the toe-tapping mourners. Even the vicar, his elbows resting on the pulpit’s worn carve-work, was clapping his hands to the back beat.

Sandwiched between her fiancé, Andrew, and her parents in the front pew, Jasmine Clegg sang ‘. . . my oh my, what a wonderful day . . .’ as the tears coursed down her cheeks. Her grandfather, currently reposing in his silk-lined, oak-veneered coffin at the top of the chancel steps, would have loved every minute of it.

It was, Jasmine thought sadly, exactly what he’d wanted exactly what he’d detailed more than three years earlier while he and Jasmine had been sheltering from a coastal gale, sharing cheese and onion baps and a tomato Cup a Soup.

‘When my time comes,’ Benny Clegg had waved his crusts under her nose, ‘don’t you dare let your father go for anything mournful like “The Lord is my Shepherd” or “Abide With Me” or – God forbid – “The Day Thou Gavest”.’

Jasmine had swallowed her mouthful of soup quickly, raising her voice above the crashing of the sea. ‘What? Oh, Grandpa – I don’t want to even think about it!’

‘Well I do. When I go, I want a damn good shindig. I want all my friends tapping their feet and smiling. No – listen, love. I want my coffin to go into St Edith’s to “Entry of the Gladiators”, come out to “In The Mood”. . . Benny had gurgled happily here. ‘Me and your gran had some right old time to Glenn Miller . . . and I want everyone to have a rip-snorting singsong in the middle. That Zippy tune would be about right . . .’

He’d started to whistle it cheerfully between his teeth. Bits of bap had sprayed onto the wet shingle and a seagull had swooped down and scooped them up with a shriek of triumph. Jasmine had looked at Benny in horror. He meant it! He was planning to die! He couldn’t! Her grandfather was the only person in the world whom she truly loved. He couldn’t die and leave her.

‘Grandpa! Stop it, please!’ She’d shaken the raindrops from her hair, and shouted against the salt-tanged screech of the wind. ‘I don’t want to hear this! I won’t listen. Anyway, you’d never get away with even a partial-humanist funeral in Ampney Crucis. Not with that new vicar.’

Benny had swigged at the soup and emerged with a vibrant orange moustache. ‘No? You don’t reckon he’d stand for it? Maybe not – he seemed a bit of a miserable sod at Harvest Festival, now come to think about it. He never saw the funny side of the marrows and –’ he’d suddenly regarded Jasmine fiercely – ‘don’t you try to change tack, young lady. This is very important to me.’

‘And you’re the most important thing in the world to me and I don’t want you to die!’

‘Lord love you, I’m not planning on going yet awhile. I just want to get this clear. When I’m dead it’ll be too late, and if I leave the arrangements to your father he’ll go for dirges and things. You know he will, don’t you?’

Jasmine had nodded. The Clegg sense of fun seemed to have bypassed Benny’s only child with vengeance. Her father was the least humorous person she had ever known.

The raindrops were drumming steadily on the corrugated-iron roof, which slapped and flapped above their heads. She’d sighed.

‘If you’re being serious, you’ll have to have some hymns and prayers, especially if you want the service to be at St Edith’s.’

‘OK then, I’ll have a couple of rousing hymns and some nice cheery prayers as a sop to you and the Good Lord, then you lay me to rest on the leeward side of that oak tree with your gran, so that I get the

sound of the sea, the smell of the rain, and the warmth of the evening sun. You'll see to it. Jasmine love, won't you?' 

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And Jasmine, the last remnant of cheese and onion bap stuck miserably in her throat, had nodded.

'Good girl.' Benny had hugged her. 'That's settled, then. And the rain's easing, so how about cheering ourselves up with a pint or three in the Crumpled Horn?'

Now they were in the Crumpled Horn again – without Benny, of course, but all his wishes had been carried out to the letter, and the post-funeral party was in full swing. Jasmine, still numbed with grief, clutched half a pint of Old Ampney ale, and hunched in a window seat. The afternoon sky was pale and luminescent, more like January than early May, sweeping down to the sea. The earlier rain had left everything looking shiny and cold, like stainless steel. It was bleak and cheerless, as only an English seaside village can be on a damp spring day, and the crowded pub was empty without Benny's throaty laughter.

His closest friends, Allan, Peg and Roger, were huddled in the inglenook, their faces woebegone, their elderly hands still clutching handkerchiefs. They'd wept copiously at the graveside, hugging Jasmine, sharing the devastation of her loss. Roger had said that she'd done a wonderful job for Benny. Allan, nodding, had added that if he had to choose a way to die then Benny's had been just perfect: falling asleep in his favourite armchair, as he had, with a glass of beer in one hand and a plate of egg and chips just finished in front of him, and greyhound racing on the telly.

They looked at her now and smiled sadly. Jasmine smiled back, without using her lips, just stretching her face slightly. She'd probably never smile properly again.

Across the crowded bar she could see her mother, looking even more pointed than usual, dressed in stark black, pecking at a sandwich, mentally working out the calorie content. She looked, Jasmine thought, like a hard-eyed, glossy crow raking at a piece of carrion. Her father, dark lounge suit, black tie and too many whiskies, was back-slapping with his council cronies. Andrew, her fiancé, was, as always, networking. Jasmine wondered how many cars he'd managed to sell to the funeral directors. Andrew never missed an opportunity to do business.

Neither her mother nor Andrew would miss Benny at all, and her father would soon recover. They'd found Benny an embarrassment to their social standing, and had avoided even mentioning him if at all possible. To them he'd been an eccentric, scruffy old man with little money. There had been times, Jasmine knew, when her parents had denied that Benny was even part of their family. He'd known that too, and been bitterly hurt by the denial. And now it was far too late for anyone to make amends. She wiped away a solitary tear. She'd never felt more lonely.

'Jasmine – may I join you?'

She shrugged. 'Yes, of course. But I'm not good company.'

John Bestley, Ampney Crucis's sole solicitor, nodded as he sat down. 'No, I understand, my dear. A very sad day. Especially for you.'

Jasmine sniffed back further tears. They hurt her throat. She always cried more when people were kind.

John Bestley played with the stem of his sherry glass. 'You are aware that Benny left his will with me? And that he'd asked for the contents to be divulged here after the funeral?'

'Yes.' She bit her lower lip and exhaled. 'He also told me that you'd said that public will reading was practically a dead art. That it rarely happens these days – except in films.'

'Very true. But your grandfather always had a sense of the dramatic.' John Bestley's eyes crinkled. 'He fancied that this would be a rather theatrical finale to the day.'

Jasmine chased a beer mat round the table. 'He didn't have anything much to leave though, did he? He didn't even own his house. He was always broke. And Dad's his only son, so there doesn't seem to

be a lot of point.’ She picked up the beer mat and tapped its edge fiercely against her glass. ‘I mean John, that if people are going to *laugh*—’

‘No one will make a fool of your grandfather, my dear. Certainly not me.’

‘OK. Sorry. I just didn’t want it to be embarrassing for him. Mum was always so condescending to him about it, you know . . . The little bits and pieces he had were priceless to him, but probably . . . probably . . . just, well, not to other people . . . Oh, I’m sorry . . .’

John Bestley hurriedly handed her a very stiffly starched handkerchief from his breast pocket. ‘There, there, my dear . . . It’ll be fine. Trust me. Shall we get it over with, then?’

Jasmine wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and nodded.

John stood up, clapping his hands. ‘Ladies and gentlemen! If I could just command a few minutes of your time!’

The hubbub died slowly. Heads turned. Jasmine’s parents move closer together, as if to shield each other from the coming humiliation.

Andrew slid into the seat that John had just vacated and squeezed Jasmine’s shoulder. ‘Cheer up! This won’t take long, will it? After all, Benny had nothing to leave.’

Jasmine narrowed her eyes. Through the blur of her tears, Andrew’s regular features and neatly cropped fair hair all shifted sideways a fraction. ‘He had *everything* to leave! Everything!’

‘Yes, well,’ Andrew fumbled his words, ‘of course he did. I just meant that in terms of material possessions, and, well, hard cash, it’s hardly going to amount to the legacy of a lifetime, is it?’

Benny had never liked Andrew; couldn’t see why Jasmine had agreed to marry him. She was beginning to think the same – but she was far too emotional to face any further life-changes at the moment. She needed all the constants she could get.

John, having covered the preliminaries, had started on the bequests in solicitous tones.

‘*To my son, Philip Clegg –*’

Several of her father’s councillor chums immediately looked slightly askance and Jasmine bit back a smile. Nice one, Grandpa! Her father, believing that Clegg was a dead giveaway of his humble origins, had changed his and her mother’s surname to Clayton several years earlier. Jasmine, who had always been proud to be a Clegg, had torn up her deed poll forms.

‘Excuse me,’ John peered over his half-moon glasses, ‘could we have silence, please? Thank you. *To my son, Philip Clegg, I leave my good wishes for his future, my sorrow that he had no interest in the family business, and my binoculars to enable him to see what is happening under his nose.*’

The Crumpled Horn erupted in hoots of laughter. Jasmine, watching her father’s face pucker in noncomprehension, sighed. Benny’s jokes had always been wasted on Philip.

‘The old sod,’ Andrew hissed. ‘There was no need for that!’

John tapped on the table. ‘Please! Let’s get on! *To my daughter-in-law, Yvonne Clegg, I leave my frying chip pan in the hope that she will use it daily and put some flesh on that scrawny frame. While that may broaden her hips, unfortunately I am not in a position to leave her anything which might broaden her mind.*’

Yvonne clutched at her husband with a shriek. Philip patted her hand. Jasmine wished that she could rush across and comfort her parents. She wished that she wanted to. Sadly, she reckoned, considering the way they’d treated her grandfather, Benny had let them off very lightly indeed.

‘That’s totally uncalled for!’ Andrew hissed. ‘Your mother has got a wonderful figure. All the blokes at the dealership think she’s top totty.’

What? Jasmine wrinkled her nose. ‘My mother? That’s disgusting . . .’

‘Of course it isn’t. Any woman with an ounce of self-respect would take care of herself, just as Yvonne has done. I bet she’s still a size ten, and with that fabulous hair . . .’ He trailed off.

Yes? Jasmine’s voice was dangerously calm. ‘Go on.’



Well, nothing, of course, I mean . . .’

John Bestley was still speaking. Jasmine stared at the handkerchief, damp and twisted in her hand. She didn't need Andrew to draw the comparison between her petite, blonde, designer-dressed mother and her dark, plump, untidy self. Yvonne had always seemed rather shocked that her only daughter had the brown eyes, the clumsiness, and the overwhelming desire to please of a capering Labrador puppy. And Jasmine herself knew that she was as far removed from being anyone's top totty as it was possible to get. But the thought of Andrew's smarmy car salesman friends leering over Yvonne was still stomach-churningly appalling.

John cleared his throat. *‘To my three dear friends, Allan Lovelock, Roger Foster and Peg Dunstable I leave the sum of twenty thousand pounds each.’*

Andrew let out a low whistle.

‘Bloody hell!’ Yvonne stopped clutching her husband and, rocking on her stilettos, clutched at the bar instead. ‘This is ridiculous! That money should go to Philip! The will's invalid!’

‘On the contrary,’ John said smoothly, beaming at Peg, Roger and Allan, who looked about as poleaxed as Yvonne, ‘the will is perfectly legal. Now, please, no more interruptions. The last legacies are fairly brief.’

Jasmine was silent. Sixty thousand pounds! Where the hell had Benny got that sort of money? He always lived so frugally, he must have been squirrelling it away for ever. Still, no one deserved more than Allan, Peg and Roger – they'd been true friends for many, many years.

*‘To my granddaughter, Jasmine Clegg,’* John Bestley's voice softened as he motioned his head towards her, *‘I leave all my love. She has been the best pal a man could have, and it has been both a privilege and a pleasure to share her life for twenty-eight years . . .’*

This time Jasmine couldn't stop the tears. They fell soundlessly, the sobs rocking her body. Andrew patted her clumsily.

*‘To her I wish health, good fortune and, above all, lifelong happiness. I would hope that she will always have the strength to follow her own path in life without hindrance from others. She will understand. I also leave her the residue of my estate –’*

‘Christ,’ Andrew sighed. ‘A council house full of secondhand furniture.’

John Bestley adjusted his glasses and looked directly at Jasmine. ‘Would you like to see me privately at the office to go through the specifics, my dear?’

Jasmine sniffed into the hankie and shook her head. It didn't matter. She'd find a home for Benny's bits and pieces somewhere. It was time she looked for a place to rent, anyway. She couldn't go on living with her parents for ever. It was some scant comfort that her grandfather's possessions could one day furnish her own little flat.

‘Very well,’ John cleared his throat. *‘I also leave Jasmine Clegg the residue of my estate in its entirety: my furniture and all my personal possessions for her to do with as she pleases. I also leave her my beach hut –’*

Jasmine caught her breath. The beach hut! She'd almost forgotten that Benny and her grandmother had actually owned the sea-front chalet where she'd spent most of her childhood summer days. It had been her bolt hole all her life. Oh, that was wonderful . . .

‘Council's intending to bulldoze them, so I've been told,’ Andrew said, looking disappointed. ‘You won't get much for it.’

John coughed. *‘Also to my granddaughter, Jasmine Clegg, I bequeath fifty thousand pounds.’*

‘Fifty grand!’ Andrew had perked up. He kissed her cheek. ‘Wow, Jas! That's amazing! You could invest it in the dealership – become a partner.’

Jasmine's mouth dropped open. She wasn't listening to Andrew. She didn't dare to look at her parents. She worked some saliva into her mouth. She couldn't take this in. There had to be some

mistake. ‘Er – John . . . maybe I should come and see you. I mean . . .’

‘Whatever you think best, my dear.’ John’s voice was avuncular. ‘We’ll make an appointment later. And there’s just one more thing.’ He looked down at the papers in front of him. ‘*To Jasmine Clegg leave my business. I know she loves it as much as I do. I have had the licence transferred to her name to come into effect six weeks after my death.*’

‘Business? What business?’ Andrew looked quizzical, then his eyes widened in horror. ‘Jesus Christ! He doesn’t mean . . .?’

Jasmine started to laugh. Her parents were gaping at her across the bar. Roger, Allan and Peg were all beaming.

John Bestley gathered the pages of the will together tidily. ‘Congratulations, my dear. You are now the proud proprietor of Benny Clegg – the Punters Friend.’

Jasmine, not knowing whether to laugh or cry now, was slightly disturbed to find she was doing both.

Benny had left her his bookmaker’s pitch at Ampney Crucis Greyhound Stadium.

## Chapter Two

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‘And just what do you intend to do with this?’

Jasmine sat down heavily, puffing from her exertions, and surveyed both her best friend, Clara, and the Victorian chiffonier, with grave doubt. ‘Goodness knows. I thought it’d sort of slot in.’

‘It’d sort of slot in,’ Clara said, ‘to the mansion it was designed for. It was a tight squeeze in Benny’s front room. It is never – never, ever – going to fit into a beach hut.’

It was a month after the funeral. June had come to Dorset, bringing with it fine weather and the first rush of holidaymakers. The beach hut, one in a row of two dozen perfect 1920s specimens, had a wooden slatted veranda, two main rooms, a minuscule bathroom, a kitchenette comprising two sockets and a gas ring, net curtains, and a line for hanging up wet bathing costumes; and, like its neighbour, was painted in sugared-almond colours. The huts stood in proud defiance along the Ampney Crucifixion sea front; with the skewwhiff wooden steps down to the sands in front of them, and the undulating gradient of the cliffs behind.

Jasmine had already transferred most of Benny’s furniture into the beach hut. The chiffonier was the last to go. Clara, in one of her rare moments either not at work or in the gym, had been co-opted in as heaven-and-shower-in-chief. The chiffonier’s move had taken far longer than Jasmine had anticipated, and they now had an interested audience of small children in shorts.

Scrambling to her feet, Jasmine once again grabbed a corner of the chiffonier. For a few minutes they seemed to be making some headway, then Clara dropped her end of the enormous cabinet with a groan.

‘There! That’s it! I’ve broken a fingernail! Andrew should be helping you with this. I can’t believe he’s let you do the house clearance on your own.’

‘I wasn’t on my own,’ Jasmine panted, tugging futilely at the immovable object. ‘Roger and Allan and Peg helped.’

‘Get real! They’re all eighty at least!’

‘No they’re not. And anyway, they helped me with respect and sympathy, and didn’t mind me crying all the time. Andrew would have mocked.’

‘Yeah, he probably would, the bastard. But still, Allan and Roger must be pensionable by now, and Peg Dunstable is away with the fairies.’

‘She is not!’ Jasmine giggled. ‘Just because she thinks she’s Doris Day doesn’t mean that she hasn’t got all her marbles. She’s a very astute businesswoman, she’s just got a bit of a fixation –’

Clara picked at the flaking nail. ‘You are so naive, Jas, do you know that? Peg Dunstable is total barking. God you’ll make a right team.’

‘Yes, we probably will. Now forget your manicure and my sanity and lift your end.’

They lifted and pushed, but the chiffonier was still wedged at an angle across the veranda. Clara, again examining the damaged fingernail, leaned against the cabinet with a sigh. ‘What we need is a strategy – and the help of a couple of rugby teams. Why couldn’t you have got yourself engaged to a man with biceps, instead of . . .?’

‘Go on, you can say it. You’ve said it often enough. A smarmy showroom-bound wimp like Andrew.’

Clara disliked Andrew even more than Benny had, if that were possible. Jasmine, who had known Andrew ever since schooldays, and who had had no previous serious boyfriend, had been engaged to him for the last three years. They’d sort of drifted into it, sort of stuck together, and certainly Jasmine had never considered ending it. So what if it wasn’t a Grand Passion? Neither of them had expected that, had they? It was safe, it was familiar, and both sets of parents approved.

She grimaced. Her parents would never, ever approve of anything she did again . . .

~~Philip and Yvonne had been incandescent since the day of the funeral. The rows in their five bedroomed mock Tudor detached had raged for weeks. They had culminated in Jasmine, for the first time in her life, leaving home. Silently, she'd packed her suitcase and decamped to the beach hut. Andrew had joined in on the parental front at this point, and told her that there was no way she could live, like some down-and-out, in a dilapidated chalet that was due for demolition.~~

Fired by a fierce determination that she hadn't even known she possessed, Jasmine had told him to run his own business, and had also evaded both her father's and Andrew's insistence that she must invest her nest egg wisely – either in Andrew's car dealership or Philip's portfolio – and had deposited her inheritance in her building society account.

She had a feeling she hadn't heard the last of the matter.

'Tell you what.' Jasmine fanned herself with the flapping hem of her T-shirt. 'Shall we abandon this for a bit and go to the Crumpled Horn?'

Clara shook her head. 'We will not. We'll finish the job first.'

'God, you're so bloody focused.'

Clara looked smug. 'Which is why I'm Sales Director of Makings Paper, while you're – well, God knows what you are.'

'I'm a bookie.' Jasmine grinned at her. 'Or at least I will be as soon as I've had a few lessons.'

Clara gave her a withering look, and once again applied her shoulder to the cluster of carved beechnuts dangling from the chiffonier's corner. 'And have you told your parents and the squirming Andrew that you've jacked your job in yet?'

'Hell, no. They're still getting over Grandpa's legacies and the fact that I've left home. Telling them that I'm no longer inputting boring figures on to boring computers in the boring accounts department at Watertite Windows would possibly be a scrap of information too far at the moment. Hey – I think we've done it! It moved!'

With a lot of scraping and cursing and a shriek from Clara as another fingernail splintered, the chiffonier was finally heaved into place. Sweaty, grimy, and triumphant, Jasmine surveyed it with pleasure.

'Doesn't it look lovely? Oh, thanks, Clara – you're a real pal.'

'I'm mad and so are you. Look, Jasmine, you do know you don't have to live here, don't you? Mum's flat is huge, and it'd be really fun to share and –'

'And I'd drive you crazy by filling it with clutter and making a mess and knocking things over.' Jasmine said, thinking of Clara's pristine minimalism with a shudder. 'No, thanks so much, it's really kind of you – but I don't think even our rock-solid friendship would survive being together twenty-four hours a day. Anyway, I love this hut.'

Clara grinned. 'Rather you than me then – but the offer stands should things get desperate. Right, so now you can stay here and play house while I go and get a takeout from the pub. Any preference for crisp flavour?'

'Not cheese and onion. They make me cry.'

Clara gave her a swift hug. 'Poor thing. Is it still awful?'

'Yup. It's getting a bit better, though. I usually only cry at night now.'

'I should have been here for the funeral.'

'You couldn't help being in Guatemala.'

'Guadeloupe. And it was naff timing for a holiday. I can't bear to think of you having to cope with all on your own.'

'Well, I did, so maybe it was a good thing that you weren't here. Mum and Dad and Andrew were useless, so I had to just get on with it. Anyway, could we not talk about it any more, please?'

‘Yeah, sure. Sorry. So, it’s a pint of Old Ampney and a packet of smoky bacon?’

‘~~Make it half a pint. I want to keep a clear head. I’m going to meet Peg at the greyhound stadium later for my initiation.~~’

‘Bloody hell!’ Clara forced her way through the inquisitive audience of children who were no three-deep on the veranda. ‘She’ll have you doing sugar-sweet smiles and singing “The Deadwood Stage” complete with whip noises and thigh slapping. I know – I’ve seen her do it in Sainsbury’s. I better make it a treble whisky at least.’

Laughing, Jasmine watched Clara disappear towards the prom road and the Crumpled Horn, and she looked proudly at the chiffonier now firmly wedged at the back of the hut. The place was possibly a mite overcrowded, but at least she now had everything she needed to call it home. It’d be fine for the summer months. The winter, with the notorious Dorset gales swooshing in from the English Channel coupled with plunging temperatures, could be another matter altogether, but she’d deal with that when it arose. Right now, she thought, as she delved into one of the dozens of cardboard boxes she’d brought from her grandfather’s house, she was relishing her newfound independence.

‘Bugger off!’ Clara, balancing a tray of beer and crisps, climbed back on to the veranda and glared at the children. The show’s over. Go and watch Punch and Judy. Although, on second thoughts, this is probably funnier.’

‘There!’ Jasmine stood back to admire her handiwork. The chiffonier was now adorned with various pieces of her inheritance – two Staffordshire highwayman figurines, a walnut carriage clock which had stopped five years before, and a pair of slightly verdigrised brass candlesticks. She’d also added her grandparents’ wedding photograph in a silver frame. ‘How does that look?’

‘Like it belongs in a mausoleum.’ Clara shook her head. ‘You can’t be serious about this, Jas, can you?’

‘Deadly serious. Never more serious about anything in my life. Now, where’s the beer?’

Ampney Crucis Greyhound Stadium was possibly a bit of an overstatement. An oval sand track surrounded by dirty and disintegrating white railings, enclosed by three tiers of rickety stands, with a snack bar at one end and a Portaloo at the other, it probably wasn’t anyone’s idea of a good night out at the dogs. However, Jasmine, who had grown up there, standing on a box beside Benny as he set prices, took bets, and hopefully didn’t pay out too much too often, absolutely adored it.

She lingered for a moment in the evening shadows, looking at the deserted track, biting back the tears. It was the first time she’d been here since her grandfather’s death, and she could see him everywhere, hear his voice barking the odds, feel the comforting touch of his worn tweed jacket as she’d snuggled against him on cold nights when the wind came straight off the sea.

The bookmakers’ pitches, three of them, were permanently sited at the foot of the stands. Greyhound racing at Ampney Crucis was very far removed from the bright lights and glamour of the big stadiums. The site had been in the Dunstable family for generations, and Peg was fiercely proud that it was one of the few surviving independent tracks in the country.

God knew, Jasmine thought, trailing her fingers along the wobbling rails, how it had survived at all. With meetings three times a week, all year round – solely for the Dorset locals in winter and with the addition of the bemused Ampney Crucis holidaymakers in the high season – they somehow seemed to manage to scrape a living. Quite a good living really, she supposed, if Benny’s legacies were anything to go by.

Completely alone in the stadium, Jasmine wandered towards the bookmakers’ pitches, shivering slightly as she plunged from the warm evening sun into the towering shadows of the stands. ‘Benny Clegg – The Punters’ Friend’ stood in the middle of the three, ‘Roger Foster – Bookmaker to Royalty’ was to the left, and ‘Allan Lovelock – Honesty is my Middle Name’ to the right. Roger and Allan

both of her grandfather's generation, like Peg, had been permanent fixtures at the Ampney Crucis track all her life. This was the only place – apart, of course, from the beach hut now – where she really felt at home.

She sat forlornly on one of the three orange boxes which made up the rest of her inheritance, and wondered briefly if she could really make a go of it. Could she, in all honesty, become a successful bookmaker? Oh, sure, she'd written up the books for Benny ever since she'd been able to add up standing beside him at the meetings, writing down the bets in the ledger as the punters put them on. She was able to work out winnings quicker than any calculator. But being in charge? Setting prices? Calling the odds? Actually running the business? Would she ever be any good at that? Her grandfather had entrusted everything to her – she prayed that she wouldn't let him down.

'Sorry to have kept you waiting, darling.'

Peg Dunstable swept down the stand steps, her tricked-up hair swinging jauntily, kept in place by a broad Alice band. With her swirling skirt cinched in by a black patent belt, the collar of her poplin blouse standing up, a two-ply cardigan slung round her shoulders, and wearing ankle socks and flatties, from a distance she looked the spitting image of her heroine. It was only close to that anyone could see the wrinkles on the papery skin beneath the panstick, the mesh round the base of the blonde wig, or spot that the inky curly lashes weren't securely attached at the corners. No one in Ampney Crucis would ever have been brave enough to point this out.

'No problem.' Jasmine stood up and brushed the dust from the seat of her jeans. 'I needed a little bit of time alone – to – um – get used to Grandpa not being here.'

Peg hugged her. 'I know, pet. I know. I miss him so much too.'

It was an awkward hug, Jasmine felt, as Peg only reached her shoulder. She could see all the intricate knotted roots of the Doris Day wig.

They stood in silence for a moment, remembering Benny. Then, because she was going to cry, Jasmine shrugged herself free. 'So, where do we stand? The licence is mine in two weeks' time – I know that. And I know Roger and Allan have been very kind and said they'll help me to get started, which is nice of them as we're supposed to be rivals for the same business – and that the meetings are every Tuesday, Friday and Saturday. I don't know exactly what I'm supposed to do.'

'Make money,' Peg grinned. 'And lots of it. That's what Benny did. The money he left was the best that the tax man didn't get wind of. Oh, I know they say you'll never meet a poor bookie, but at a small venue like this one – and with virtually the same punters backing virtually the same dogs every session – it's a miracle that he managed to stash away anything at all.'

Jasmine sighed. 'I know. I was amazed that he had so much.'

'Any ideas what you're going to do with yours?'

'Keep it in the building society just in case I go belly up as the Punters' Friend. No, really. I've never walked out of the only job I've ever had. I'm not qualified to do anything else, and if I make a mess of this –'

'You won't,' Peg said stoutly. 'Once you get the licence through we'll all help you out. I thought you might be thinking of using Benny's cash for the deposit on a house.' 'No, there's no need. I've got the beach hut for the time being, and Andrew and I are getting married next year and –'

'Pah!' Peg clicked her fingers dismissively. A false nail fell off. 'Andrew Pease is a waste of space. He's a freeloader, Jasmine, a smarmy, nasty piece of work, just like your dad.'

'Don't spare my feelings,' Jasmine smiled. 'Say what you really think.'

'Oh, darling! I'm so sorry! Me and my mouth! It just all comes out.'

'I'm glad it does.' Jasmine moved her hand to touch Peg, then withdrew it in case she dislodged the hairpiece or something awful. 'It's about time people were honest with me. I've always just bumbled along, living at home, having Andrew, doing a job I loathed – because Grandpa was there to make

everything all right. Now I've got to stand on my own two feet.'

Peg looked up at her and winked. ~~'That's the spirit. You're not Benny Clegg's granddaughter for nothing, you know. Now, I didn't really ask you to come along here this evening just to bad-mouth your family – fun though it is – I wanted to ask for your thoughts on something I've been pondering for ages. Shall we go up to the office?'~~

Peg's office, at the top of the rickety stands, was a sort of Portakabin on stilts. The bits of it that weren't buried under the racing papers and greyhound form books, were covered with photographs of Doris Day and Rock Hudson. There had been an awful patch, Jasmine remembered, at the time when Rock had been outed. Peg had worn deep mourning and closed the stadium for a fortnight. However, the pictures were anything to go by, his sexual *faux pas* had now been forgiven.

From the window Jasmine could see the sea; the evening tide was going out in little sunburst ripples leaving the sands flat and clean and pale. The roofs of the beach huts, looking like a child's past necklace, were just visible, as was the Crumpled Horn and the narrow streets climbing away from the front towards the church and the housing estates. Bathed gently in the sun's last rays, the village looked peaceful and time-warped. Jasmine allowed the familiar scene to soak into her like a balm and prayed that it would never change.

Pouring two pints of Old Ampney ale from a selection of bottles in the fridge, and switching on the stereo system to allow 'Secret Love' to billow round the plaster board walls. Peg indicated that Jasmine should sit down.

'I've discussed this with Allan and Roger, pet, and they're all in favour. Now, as you're part of the syndicate, we'll need your agreement before we go ahead.'

Jasmine was intrigued. 'It all sounds very hush-hush. You're not planning to nick the Greyhound Derby from Wimbledon, are you?'

'Oh!' Peg looked affronted. 'Who told you?'

'What! You're kidding!'

'Yes, actually, I am.' Peg put her head on one side in a coquettish manner. 'But you're not too far off the mark, to be honest. Now – just take a look at these . . .'

Peg pushed a pile of glossy, laminated brochures through the heaps of newsprint on her desk. Jasmine flipped through them. Romford, Crayford, Wimbledon, Hackney, Walthamstow ... all the huge and famous greyhound stadiums were represented.

'Very impressive, but I don't see . . .'

Peg fished another highly coloured brochure from her desk drawer. 'It's time we were competitive. Oh, I know we can't compete with these big boys as such, but we can certainly do more than we've been doing. I've heard on the grapevine that the Greyhound Racing Association are having a big push this year to update and improve the industry's image; bring dog racing into the twenty-first century. You know, fun for all the family . . .'

Jasmine nodded. The change within the sport had been going on for some time. There were all sorts of family packages on offer, and corporate hospitality, and things like that – every single one of them way out of Ampney Crucis's league.

'And that Sky telly are going to be moving away from the established BAGS tracks and covering the smaller meetings. But this,' Peg continued, brandishing the remaining brochure under Jasmine's nose, 'is what really sparked it off, pet. That new stadium at Bixford. Look at it – it looks like an art deco mutation of the damn Millennium Dome! And they're raking it in! And they've just pitched for the Platinum Trophy for next February . . .'

Jasmine leafed through the brochure. Bixford was in Essex, in the heart of dog-racing territory, and the Gillespie Stadium had been making the headlines for several months. The new Platinum Trophy race, sponsored by Frobisher's Brewery, would definitely be the jewel in their cloth cap. She sighed

‘Yes, well, good luck to them, but—’

~~The telephone on Peg’s desk shrilled. Peg hurled papers aside in a frantic attempt to locate~~ Holding up her hand to Jasmine, she snatched at the receiver. The conversation was brief, cooed, and punctuated by besotted smiles.

‘Ewan,’ Peg said softly, replacing the receiver. ‘He’s done something silly and left Katrina again. He’s coming to stay for a while to let the dust settle. Won’t that be a hoot?’

Jasmine nodded because it would be. She and Ewan had grown up together. Dark, dangerous, delicious Ewan Dunstable, Peg’s beloved nephew, was every woman’s wildest fantasy. He was a serial cheater – but lovely with it. The last time he’d left his wife and holed up with Peg, he and Clara had had an affair that left Ampney Crucis reeling. Andrew absolutely loathed him.

‘Now, back to business.’ Peg patted the golden hair. ‘Where were we before that naughty boy interrupted? Oh, yes. Bixford and the Platinum Trophy . . . Now what we’d thought – me and Rog and Allan – was that, if you re agreeable, we’d pool Benny’s legacy money together, give this place a bit of a spruce up, and rename it the Benny Clegg Stadium.’

‘Oh!’ Jasmine fumbled in the sleeve of her T-shirt for a tissue. ‘Oh, Peg! That would be absolutely brilliant.’

Peg leaned across the desk and jabbed at the Bixford brochure. ‘And, once we’ve done that, we thought we’d really put the old place on the map, and give these Essex geezers a run for their money by applying to stage the Frobisher Platinum Trophy!’



## Chapter Three

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Eighty miles away from Ampney Crucis, on that same June evening, April Padgett was having one of the worst nights of her life – and that was saying something. In her twenty-three years she'd managed to have some humdingers.

The Gillespie Greyhound Stadium's Copacabana Cocktail Bar was packed with its usual designer-dressed Bixford clientele; the air conditioning had packed up; the ice-maker had jammed and immediately defrosted; and someone had been sick behind the token plastic palm tree.

However, far worse than any of these was the sight of Martina Gillespie, April's boss, behind the bar, with the till wide open, clawing her magenta talons through the takings.

'You've been giving them buggers freebies again!' Her squawk quite drowned out the soothing tones of Barry Manilow inside the bar, and the orgasmic shouts of the track commentator outside it. 'Don't deny it! I've been watching you most of the evening. I know what drinks you've served and I know what the float was, and I know this till is short! How did you manage it, eh? My back was only turned for five minutes while I went to check on that fracas in the lavs.'

April groaned. Martina Gillespie had eyes like a hawk, a voice like a strangled donkey, and a face like a ferret. A crew-cut in Tequila Sunrise orange, more make-up than Danny La Rue, and copious amounts of post menopausal body-piercing, completed the picture.

Oh God! Why hadn't she put the money in straight away? Why had Jix appeared in the Copacabana while Martina was sorting out the loo punch-up? Why did she always feel so sorry for him? Why had she given him that damn drink?

April tried smiling. 'Well, no, it's not short really. . .'

'Yes, it is not really!' Martina shrieked, somewhat ungrammatically. 'Do you want this bar job, my lady, or don't you?'

Bloody, bloody stupid question, April thought, still managing to look confused and innocent at the same time. 'Of course I do, but –'

'But nothing!'

A large part of the designer brigade had turned from gawping at the on-track excitement through the huge plate-glass windows, and were listening with interest. As they were all sweating profusely because of the lack of air conditioning and ice, it seemed that a good row might just take their minds off their discomfort.

April shifted her balance on her borrowed Manolo Blahniks, and winced as the circulation started pumping into her toes. 'I was going to put the money in myself later. I just got busy. Anyway, it was only a Fuzzy Navel – without the ice, of course, because of the machine.'

'Only a Fuzzy Navel!' Martina howled, clutching her Versace-clad bosom. 'Only a Fuzzy Navel! Dear God! Have you any idea how much a Fuzzy Navel costs?'

'Of course I have. I've been working in this bar for long enough to know the price of the damn drinks!'

'And don't you come the old acid with me, my girl! I don't want none of your smart backchat, OK?'

God, April thought wearily, Martina was dog-rough under the posh frock. Her vowels, which before the invective had started might have had their origins somewhere around Knightsbridge, were rapidly floating down the Estuary.

'Look, Martina, it was one drink. Just one drink. And like I said, I was going to put the money in.'

'Don't you Martina me, young lady!' The pointed chin had performed some sort of upward manoeuvre and was nearly touching the beaky nose. The selection of diamond ear-studs all winked under the deep-set ceiling spotlights. 'I'm Mrs Gillespie to you – understand? And whose blood'

freebie was it tonight? Another one of your freeloading pals with a sob story about having lost everything on the last race and –'

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'Yeah,' April said, sliding back along the bar, easing her feet. There was no way on earth that she'd tell Martina the drink had been for Jix. It would have meant instant dismissal for both of them. 'That's right.'

Martina gave a triumphant snort. 'I knew it. Well, it'll come out of your wages, OK? Double.'

Bitch, bitch, bitch, April thought, giving a subservient nod. God, the woman must be wired up to the bloody electronic workings of the till to know exactly how much there was supposed to be at any one time.

'Martina – er – Mrs Gillespie – I wasn't trying to steal from you. I fully intended to make the till up at the end of the shift. Oh – and look – I think the ice machine's working again! Everyone will want drinks.'

They both stared at the contraption in some consternation, mainly because neither of them understood it. However, where it had been dribbling lukewarm water only minutes earlier, it was now crackling and frosty. That was a start.

'OK.' Martina, immediately sensing a Gillespie-money-making opportunity slipping away, shoved her cropped head towards April. She looked like an aggressive Swan Vestas. 'But I'm watching you, my girl. Now, get serving – that's what you're paid for!'

'Cow!' April muttered under her breath, as Martina teetered out of Copacabana to spread a little happiness elsewhere. 'Hateful, spiteful, mean-minded cow!'

'Two Alabama Slammers and a Freddy Fuddpucker.' A fairly well-known footballer from the lower echelons, with a simpering brunette on each arm, thrust his way to the front of the perspiring queue. 'And whatever you'll let me give you, darling . . .'

April mixed the drinks, smiling her professional bimbette smile. Any minute now he was going to mention Long Slow Comfortable Screws, or Screaming Orgasms, or Slippery Knobs – or any of the hundred and one risqué names that cocktails had these days. And she would laugh, and look coy, and he'd think he was the funniest man since Chaplin with the most original lines since Mark Twain. And then she'd take his money and he'd give her a knowing look and swagger away, and the whole thing would start all over again.

The footballer had one of those little wispy beardy things that David Beckham had made so popular ages before. He stroked it in what he obviously considered a seductive manner, leaning forward across the bar. 'I bet you're just dying for a Hard Dick.'

April upped the smile, closed her ears, and mixed the drinks.

Oh, how she hated this job! How she hated the stupid frilly French maid costume – God only knew where Martina thought Copacabana was! – which showed her knickers when she bent over, and the stupid lacy nippie cap which meant that however tightly she screwed up her curly fair hair, tendrils of it always escaped. And how she hated the loud, rude people she had to serve, and the even louder and ruder people she had to work for.

One day, she thought, viciously shaking a Kaytusha Rocket for a girl with pink hair and crossed eyes, she'd be out of here. But not yet, of course. Not until she'd saved enough money to achieve her goals.

One day, she thought, as she poured the concoction into a glass and added two umbrellas, a sparkle and a selection of impaled fruit and the cross-eyed girl didn't say thank you, she'd get as far away from Bixford as possible.

One day, when her debts were paid and her savings account was full, she'd move to the country and have a house of her own, with a garden, and a dog, and a proper family ... It was the dream that kept her going: the dream that made working at three jobs a day, nearly every day of the week, even

remotely bearable.

The course commentator was announcing the last race of the evening, and the cocktail crowd swarmed towards the doors, either to savour the atmosphere from the glass and chrome terraces, or to place their bets with the Tote behind the restaurants. None of the designer crowd who frequented the Copacabana, April was sure, ever went trackside to part with their money; they probably didn't even know that there were ranks of bookies on the rails. Greyhound racing at Bixford, for the cocktail brigade, was purely incidental.

She listened to the fruity amplified words, extolling the qualities of each of the dogs, with a thum of pleasure. Another half-hour at most, and then all she had to do was clear up, cash up, and go home.

An hour later, with a black shrug over the top of the frilly maid outfit, the till dutifully balanced, and everything in the Copacabana neat and tidy, April stumbled down the series of spiral chrome staircases. The borrowed Manolo Blahniks were crippling her, but at least she'd managed to wrench off the stupid cap and shake her hair free. The crowds hadn't quite dispersed, and there were still raucous shouts echoing from the shadows as she slipped out of the main doors and into brilliant splashes of floodlighting.

The stadium was lovely like this, she thought, picking her way through an ankle-deep pile of discarded betting slips and fast-food containers: like a huge palatial oceangoing liner, towering in the hot night sky, with lights gleaming from a thousand windows. Oliver Gillespie had certainly hit a winner, siting the stadium as he had between Romford and the M25, and its art deco design meant it was visible for miles. Oliver, she'd decided when he and Martina had interviewed her for the Copacabana, was OK. A bit bluff and brusque, but straight enough – for a self-made spiv, that was.

Oliver Gillespie had made his fortune during the Thatcher years of enterprise for all, by installing snack-food vending machines in an epidemic rash across the country's motorway service areas. They probably wasn't a prepacked pasty not disgorged by a Gillespie Guzzler anywhere in the country. But for all that, and his other more sinister sidelines, Oliver had proved to be a fair employer. However, Martina the shrew was a completely different matter.

April had sensed that Martina, in a desperate attempt to shake off her Canvey Island roots, was always going to lord it over her employee. And she'd been right. Martina had made her life hell. If it hadn't been for the dream, April would have chucked it all in ages ago.

April paused in the darkness, and lit a cigarette. It was her one luxury. Ten cigarettes lasted her for nearly four days if she rationed them to one in the morning with her first cup of coffee, one last thing at night with a glass of plonk before she went to bed, and this one – the best one of all – immediately after she had finished her five hours in the Copacabana. She loved the almost-silence after the frenzy, the smell of the dogs, and the lazy, soporific chat from the bookies as they packed up their carpet bags.

If ever a girl deserved a shot of nicotine, she thought, dragging the smoke into her lungs with relish, it was she did. Especially tonight. She smiled good-nights at a posse of security guards as they passed, their backs to her, poking underneath the stands for inebriated punters or bombs or both. She listened to the excited yelps from the kennels as the last greyhounds were reunited with their owners and swished off in luxury in the back of four-wheel drives. She watched the litter-pickers start their rounds, and the groundsmen with their motorised rakes chug round the track. All the after-the-show people were springing into action, which meant that Jix should have finished his shift soon too. Not much longer to wait.

April had been doing this for two years, ever since Oliver Gillespie had piled his Guzzler fortune into the born-again glamour world of greyhound racing, and opened the Bixford stadium. It was close to her flat, the hours suited her and slotted in nicely with her other two part-time jobs, and she usually got some tips, which she secreted away in a Roses chocolate tin under her bed. She loved the

greyhounds too. The racing side of Bixford wasn't of much interest, mainly because she'd never had enough spare cash to gamble with, but the dogs themselves were gorgeous.

She was captivated by their lean muscled beauty, their good humour, the way they always laughed at their handlers, their enthusiasm, and their huge, beautiful eyes. She'd decided early on that when the cottage in the country with the roses and the family became a reality, the dog frolicking on the manicured lawn would definitely be a greyhound.

She was just grinding out her cigarette stub with a toe of one of the Manolo Blahniks, when Jix dressed as always in purple velvet flares, a soft black leather jacket and more bangles than a Christmas tree. Accessorize, arrived to escort her home.

'You shouldn't be smoking.' He flicked his hair from his eyes and looked accusing. 'You said you'd stop on New Year's Eve.'

'I said a lot of things on New Year's Eve, most of them inebriated rubbish. Anyway, it's my only vice – unlike some . . .'

Jix laughed. '*Touché*. Do I gather that Martina sussed out the Fluffy Navel?'

'You do. She did.' April fell into step beside him. 'And she was not best pleased.'

'You didn't tell her it was for me?'

'Course not. Do you think I'm mad? Look, she thinks I'm the dregs of the Gillespie setup – but you know . . . She grinned at him. 'You're definitely the underclass's underbelly.'

'Cheers. And you should have let me pay.'

'It was my treat. You deserve it. It was just a shame Martina had to be playing I-spy.'

Because they had flats in the same house, Jix always walked home with April. He said it wasn't safe for her to be wandering around Bixford's back streets so late at night. She secretly thought that, should push come to shove, she would probably be the one to protect Jix. Tall, slender to the point of skinniness with long silky hair and the pale, beautiful, androgynous face of a Jonathan Rhys Meyers clone, Jix looked far too delicate and otherworldly ever to inflict any physical damage on anyone.

When she'd first moved into the flat below his, Jix had been like a walking directory. Not only had he pointed out the places to go, and those it was best to avoid, but he'd also – when it became essential to her survival – helped her find all three of her part-time jobs. Jix, it turned out, knew everyone and everything in Bixford. He'd apparently started working for Oliver ten years previously – at the tender age of fifteen – and had been involved not only in the Guzzlers, but several other less edifying Gillespie enterprises throughout Essex. Jix was now on the Gillespie Stadium books as a financial assistant. Jix, April had decided long ago, was the least likely-looking debt-collector that she had ever seen.

They left the stadium, and turned into a narrow street of dark-windowed, three-storey houses and boarded-up shops that had once sold meat and veg and knitting patterns to the older generation and were now the graffiti-ists' dream, and Antonio's Pasta Place, which was still open. The scents of garlic and red wine floated out into the heavy darkness, the candles guttered on the tables, and several Bixford winners were doing justice to ravioli and chips.

April waved at Antonio and his wife, Sofia, through the open door.

'Don't be late in the morning!' Antonio called in a broad Southend accent.

'As if!' April called back.

The exchange was the same every night. To April it was as routine as brushing her teeth. Comforting, really. By midday she'd be dressed in a short black skirt and neat white blouse and be serving pasta to Antonio's business lunchers. Bixford was rapidly becoming very fashionable, like Stepney and Walthamstow, and the streets were buzzing with bright young city traders, and twentysomethings all excited at making Internet millions. Soon, she supposed, the boarded-up shops would become cybercafés and multimedia takeaways and estate agents. It was another really good

reason for leaving Bixford as soon as possible.

~~‘You got your key?’ Jix asked as they stopped outside number 51. ‘I don’t want to wake the boy upstairs by ringing the bell.’~~

April fumbled in her pocket and, finding the key, let them into the hall. Number 51 was divided into three flats: hers on the ground, Jix’s above, and the top one shared by Joel and Rusty, a mixed race gay couple who worked from home in aromatherapy and ethnic cooking respectively. The hall always smelled as though someone were taking a bath in a curry house.

She opened her front door and Jix followed her in. The lamps were alight and April sighed a small sigh of pleasure. It was her home and she loved it. The country cottage and the family and the dog would be heaps better, of course, but until they came along, this would do nicely.

Three rooms – four if you counted the bathroom, which April didn’t because it was about the size of a coffin – all furnished with second-hand junk painted bright colours, the chairs and sofa covered with throws, the dirty carpet hidden under vibrant rugs, and a selection of primary-coloured abstract paintings on the walls. The paintings would have to go, April knew that, but she was hanging on to them for old times’ sake; or at least until she’d achieved her dream.

‘All OK, sweets?’ Daphne, Jix’s mum, looked up from the sofa in front of the television. She’d obviously been enjoying the twin delights of a word-search puzzle book and Granada Men and Motors. ‘No problems?’

‘None.’ April smiled blissfully as she eased off the Manolo Blahniks. The run-in with Martina didn’t count. That was par for the course. ‘What about you?’

Daphne shook her head, gathering her books and pens and magazines together. ‘Not a peep from the little love. Sleeping like an angel.’ She stood up stiffly and smiled adoringly at Jix. ‘Time to take your old mum home, then. Thank the Lord it’s only up half a dozen stairs. I’m fair whacked tonight.’

‘Me too,’ April yawned. ‘Thanks a lot, Daff. See you tomorrow. Sleep tight. ’Night, Jix.’

The door closed behind them, and April slid on the chain and clicked the two locks into place. Daphne was like a storybook mother, April always thought: round and soft and comfortable. Jix was so lucky. Her own parents had separated years before, instantly divorced, and immediately remarried. April had never felt truly wanted by either of their new partners. She’d left home at eighteen, and now they only exchanged cards at Christmas and the occasional telephone call. She’d love to have a mother who was there, like Daff, all the time, to talk to, laugh with, share shopping trips – that sort of thing.

Not that Jix could share shopping trips with Daff, of course. Daphne hadn’t left number 51 for over ten years because of her agoraphobia. It suited her admirably, she said, giving her tons of time for following all the soaps; and, of course, from April’s point of view, the combination of her affliction and close proximity made her an absolutely perfect baby-sitter.

‘It’s an ill wind, sweet . . .’ Daff always said.

April tiptoed into the dimly lit bedroom and peeped at the tiny truckle bed alongside hers. Her daughter, Beatrice-Eugenie, two and a half years old, the most gorgeous child in the universe, and the reason behind the roses-round-the-door dream, slept peacefully. Tired as she was, April allowed herself a few moments of sheer indulgence, just staring with total love, then dropped a kiss on the smooth forehead, pulled the discarded duvet over the tiny shoulders, and crept back out of the room.

Sliding out of the appalling French maid’s costume, too tired to put it on a hanger and knowing that if she didn’t she’d be too tired to iron it tomorrow, she went for the half-measure and folded it over the arm of the chair. Then pouring the dregs from the one remaining bottle of wine in the fridge, she slumped onto the sofa. It was a hot and sultry night. Gone midnight. Beatrice-Eugenie would be awake by six. And April had all three of her part-time jobs to do tomorrow. She lit her last cigarette of the day, and squinted through the smoke at the gallery of paintings around the wall.

Sometimes she really hated Noah for leaving her with all this. Sometimes. Most of the time she still

loved him more than life. She wondered if she would ever see him again.

~~Because of her unhappy home situation, Noah had been the answer to all her prayers. At thirty he~~ been the only grown-up boyfriend she'd ever had. He was tall, with a rugby player's physique – even down to the broken nose and she hadn't believed him when he'd said he was an artist. Artists, she imagined, were – well – like Jix. All sort of ethereal. Noah was anything but. His paintings were screaming blocks of colour which she didn't understand, but which apparently were exactly what the loft-livers were looking for. When he asked her to move in with him, in his flat in up-and-coming Bixford, she hadn't thought twice.

So number 51 had become her home, and Jix and Daff, and Joel and Rusty had become her neighbours, and life had been wonderful. She and Noah had lived on love and commissions for two years. Then, without warning, he'd decamped with one of the warehouse-living, share-dealing women for whom he'd been doing two paintings.

April blew a plume of smoke into the living room. It hovered in a blue stream on the still night air. The memory still hurt. Finding the note, finding Noah's side of the wardrobe empty, finding his brushes and canvases gone from the kitchen cupboard . . .

She stubbed out the cigarette and hauled herself to her feet. Five hours' sleep if she was lucky. Her eyes were already gritty at the thought as she switched off the lamps and the television and drifted into the bedroom. Beatrice – Eugenie stirred in her sleep, her straight hair fanned out in a halo on the pillow. Bending down to kiss her, April wondered how long it would take to give her child a proper life. A year? Two? Could she cope with another two years of non-stop work and scrimping and scraping?

With luck, though, she thought, sliding into bed, it would be sooner rather than later. All she had to do was to find Noah and tell him that he had a daughter. She pushed her head into the pillow, listening to the Bixford night-noises outside. With Jix's help and contacts she'd already searched for Noah for over two years without success, but she was sure she'd find him one day.

April closed her eyes and felt sleep rush in. Noah hadn't even known she was pregnant when he left. But when she found him, when he saw Beatrice-Eugenie, he'd come back, she knew he would.

## Chapter Four

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‘Make that three tricolore salads, then – and one green. Two lasagnes, a spag bol and a seafood risotto. Garlic bread all round, fizzy water – oh, and a carafe of Frascati. OK, darling? Got all that?’

April nodded, smiling her bimchette waitress smile, the one that came slightly lower down the scale than her bimchette cocktail-bar one, and flicked closed her little spiral-bound notebook. Easing herself between the Pasta Place’s crowded tables, she padded towards the kitchen’s swing doors. It was almost two o’clock, and the hordes of lunchtime grazers were showing no intention of returning to their offices. Not that she blamed them: the temperature was in the mid-nineties.

In the kitchen Sofia was leaning out of the trattoria’s window, sucking in the foetid air from Bixford High Street, while Antonio, listening to the greyhound results on a 1960s transistor radio, flipped pasta with confident dexterity.

April wiped the perspiration from beneath her eyes and above her upper lip, and started to fan her face with the notebook. ‘Oh, sorry – yeah, table twelve’s finally made a decision.’ She ripped out the top page and handed it to Sofia. ‘They should be the last, and I put the closed sign up ten minutes ago. God, it’s so hot! Maybe we’ll get a storm to break it up.’

‘Maybe.’ Sofia hauled herself in from the window, studied the order, nudged her husband aside and began frying onions and garlic on autopilot. ‘But, of course, coming from Umbria. I’m used to that weather.’

‘Get away!’ April grinned. ‘You’re from Dagenham!’

‘But my genes are from Umbria,’ Sofia said, snatching at a handful of fresh basil. ‘It makes all the difference.’ April untied her white apron, and flexed her toes inside her sandals. Well, Daff’s sandals, really. She seemed destined to spend her life in other people’s shoes. The previous night’s Manolo Blahniks were Sofia’s pride and joy. One day, when she’d found Noah and reunited her family, and got the cottage-in-the-country dream sorted out, she’d really have to buy a pair of shoes of her very own.

‘Will it be OK if I leave you to wait on table twelve? Only I’m due to meet Jix at the stadium in half an hour and I’d like to see Bee first.’

‘Of course,’ Sofia nodded. ‘You must spend some time with the little ’un. You work too hard, *cara*’

‘Have to. Can’t pay the rent otherwise – and I certainly don’t want my landlord hammering on my door, do I?’

She and Sofia pulled mocking faces at one another. The thought was too awful to contemplate. Number 51 and the Pasta Place, and in fact a good-sized chunk of Bixford High Street, belonged to the Gillespies. Oliver and Martina had bestowed the leases of the properties to their only son on his twenty-first birthday eight years previously, when the Gillespie Greyhound Stadium was in its embryonic design stages and Oliver was still passing backhanders to the planners. As landlords went, Rachman was sweet and peachy in comparison to Sebastian Gillespie.

‘Sod it!’ Antonio dropped the pasta on to the counter with a sticky slap and snapped off the radio. ‘Beijing Bob has just won the two o’clock at Crayford!’

April and Sofia regarded him without sympathy. Living in Bixford, they both knew that gambling was a mug’s game, and that heaping any sort of fortune on to the nose of a greyhound was asking for trouble.

‘How much?’ Sofia raised her voice above the sizzling pan. ‘Not the bloody business tax money again?’

Antonio shook his head. ‘It’s not the money, Sofia, as I keep telling you. It’s the form what damages the odds. Beijing Bob is due to run here at Gillespie’s next Saturday, and I’d hoped to do him ante post. Now he’ll be odds on. No one will give me a decent price.’

April winked at Antonio, shrugged at Sofia, and headed for number 51.

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Beatrice-Eugenie, wearing just pants and a floppy sun hat, was splashing happily in and out of washing-up bowl in the back yard. April paused in the kitchen doorway, watching her with love, and thinking that even if the country cottage and the lawn were not a million miles away, those refinements would currently be wasted on her daughter. At this moment, screaming with laughter, and having a water battle with Jix's mum. Beatrice-Eugenie was obviously in heaven.

Daff was crouched on an upturned bucket, to the left of the doorstep in the high-walled yard. April knew it was just far enough outside not to bring on one of Daff's panic attacks, but still close enough for her to rescue Beatrice-Eugenie in case of an emergency.

'You finished? God, is that the time already?' Daff squinted up at her, temporarily abandoning squirting plumes of water from a washing-up liquid bottle much to Beatrice-Eugenie's chagrin. 'We've been having a smashing time, sweet – and I've put loads of sun block on her so she won't get burned.'

'Thanks.' April squatted beside the bowl and splashed water over her daughter's smooth golden shoulders. 'You be a good girl for Daff, Bee. Mummy won't be long . . . and when I come back we'll go to the park.'

Beatrice-Eugenie wrinkled her small nose, tilted back the sun hat with the nonchalant air of a junior Frank Sinatra, and gave her mother a gappy smile. 'Ducks?'

'Ducks,' April confirmed, kissing the top of the sun hat. It had come from the charity shop next door to the Pasta Place, and despite frequent washings still smelled mouldy. 'And we'll go on the swing too. And then we'll have tea in the garden . . .'

Some garden, April thought, kissing her damp daughter again and standing up: a six-foot-square piece of concrete, walled on all sides, with only the persistent weeds adding any greenery. Still, one day, when she was a proper mother, it would all be different. Right now, she had to shimmy out of the waitress uniform, scramble into something suitable for the afternoon, and be at the stadium before Jix left. Then tonight, in the frilly French maid outfit in the Copacabana, she'd start the treadmill all over again.

'You had something to eat?' Daff resumed the water-squirting. 'I could get you a quick sandwich if you like. Me and Bee had Marmite.'

'No, I'm fine. Sofia and Tonio fed me, thanks. And I've got to dash.'

With a last check to make sure that Daff and Beatrice-Eugenie were fully equipped with Nivea lemon barley water and Pringles, April trudged indoors.

'I thought you weren't coming.' Jix unpeeled himself from the deserted stands and stood up. 'I thought you'd skived off to do a spot of sunbathing in the park.'

'I wish.' April pushed the stray strands of hair back into her scrunchie. 'It's so hot! I really wanted to stay with your mum and Bee and the washing-up bowl.'

Jix laughed. 'Sounds tempting ... So – what do you want to do today? Stick together and take your luck, or split and offer specials?'

'You stick to offering the specials. I prefer keeping my clothes on, thank you. And anyway, it depends who we've got this afternoon. You know I'm no good with the sad ones. I can't bear it when they cry.'

'Me neither.' Jix flipped through his clipboard. 'And I always believe them when they say they can't afford to pay – and I've been doing this for years. Sometimes I wonder why Oliver keeps me on.'

'Because you know far too much about him for him to let you go. And anyway, as debt-collector, you're ace. You never get heavy, and your softly-softly approach seems to work brilliantly. Even when it does take a bit longer to rake in all the money.' She smiled at him. 'And you don't look scary, which'



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