

**The
Chocolate
Is
The Life**

Kerri Thomson

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The Chocolate Is The Life

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Chapters One through Five

*I have tried to keep an open mind,
and it is not the ordinary things of life that could close it,
but the strange things, the extraordinary things,
the things that make one doubt if they be mad or sane.*

- Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

ONE

September 10th

Frankie MacSweeney stood in front of the full length mirror that dominated an entire wall of her best friend's spacious bedroom, dressed in Victorian evening wear, wondering how the hell she managed to get herself into this situation. It had started innocently enough; these things often did.

But I will admit, she thought to herself, I do look pretty damn good.

Her best friend Louise had been known to astound her on the rare occasion with excellent taste and superb attention to detail. The room she was standing in, even the house itself, stood as testament. Once a humble carriage house on her family's sprawling seaside estate, Louise would proudly announce that she had made it into a real home all by herself to anyone who'd listen. She had single-handedly transformed both floors of the dark timbered structure into a symphony of texture with soft cream-coloured walls offset by carefully chosen accent pieces in vibrant hues of red and pink, and the resurfaced oak floorboards shared space with plush ornate carpets. And the dress that Louise had selected was definitely another example of her discerning eye.

The shade of purple of the velvet gown was, without question, perfect; its depth and richness gave Frankie's usual deathly pale skin the illusion of fine porcelain. Louise had then somehow managed to coax her pin-straight ginger hair into soft waves that swept over the front of one shoulder, and lightly rimmed her hazel eyes with a smoky grey pencil and some matching shadow. She then stained Frankie's lips a deep plum, just a shade darker than what she was wearing, which seemed to put even more colour into her skin.

Apparently, Frankie noted, Louise had drawn the line at makeup when it came to faithfully recreating a proper Victorian look. Not that anyone would be paying much attention to her face.

The dress was an architectural masterpiece, its sole purpose to intensify those most feminine of attributes. Or, put more simply, in this dress Frankie had some serious tits and ass. A small miracle, considering she considered her own physique much more boyish than bombshell. She had always been too tall, too thin. A pasty Yin to Louise's far more exotic Yang.

Louise sauntered back into the room just then, catching Frankie admiring herself.

"Ooh, looks like Pinocchio's become a real girl after all," she cooed. Frankie glared at Louise's reflection as she stood behind her, smirking in triumph.

"Don't try to be clever, Lou. It doesn't suit you. Stick with what you know."

Louise faked a wince before hip-checking Frankie out of the way so that she could take her place in front of the mirror.

"Soooo... which one of my boys will be first to fall tonight, do you think: Alex, Quinn or Dr. Jared?" She mused aloud as she turned from side to side, checking her dress from all angles.

Frankie sighed, failing to disguise her eyeroll. *Here we go again.* For as long as she had known her – nearly the better part of a decade, in fact, since they had met at the tender age of fourteen - Louise had kept an array of hapless blokes strung along, each one more utterly smitten with her than the next. And, seeing as the party fell on the eve of her friend's twenty-third birthday, Frankie was relieved that some things never changes.

"I've lost track of which one's which. Please, do enlighten me," she replied dryly. Louise huffed at her in annoyance.

"God Frankie, don't you *ever* listen to me? Let's see... well first, there's Dr. Jared. He's this hot nerd at Daddy's factory, a chemist or doctor or something. He's on contract while they do some product testing and other stuff but more importantly Daddy's had him over for dinner a few times and he's been panting after me ever since. Not really my type – way too intellectual – but he totally worships me."

"Umhmm," Frankie was back at the mirror, fiddling absentmindedly

with her hair. She really did listen...sometimes. Fortunately, though, Louise hadn't taken much notice – she was on a roll.

“Then there's Quinn, from the American office. He's VP of marketing strategy or something. I don't know what exactly, but who cares? He's beautiful and *completely* obsessed with me. Absolutely filthy too! You should see some of the texts I get—”

“Right, heard enough about Quinn. *Next*,” Frankie cut in before she could really get going. Louise took her attention away from her own reflection just long enough to roll her eyes.

“You can be such a prude. How does James put up with it?”

“Trust me, James has nothing to complain about whatsoever,” Frankie shot back, but not before flinching defensively. While it was true that their sex life was just fine, thank you very much, she knew that he would probably be more than up for a little more of the sexting and dirty talk Louise was always on about before she'd had the presence of mind to stop her. Frankie just didn't think she could do it without laughing hysterically. It was something she had always attributed to being Scottish; her people just weren't wired that way.

“And speaking of James,” Louise drawled, wagging a finger entwined in her long dark hair, “you can tell him from me that just because he gets called away last minute to work on some fancy European merger, that in no way absolves him of the obligatory birthday gift. The invite was extended and accepted; a gift is therefore customary, whether he shows up to the event or not.”

“Yes, yes – I'll be sure to tell him the first chance I get. How dare he mess with the gift ratio? Never mind that it's a huge honour for him professionally to have been chosen to go. I mean, just how selfish can one person be?” Frankie was struggling to keep a straight face, especially after that final comment. But she could hold back no longer, bursting into laughter once she caught sight of Louise's pursed lips, crossed arms and the impatient tapping of her foot.

She managed to compose herself and turned the conversation back to Louise, a device she often employed to avoid just such a situation.

“Now, you were saying something about a third gentleman?” Frankie had half-turned away as she asked so that Louise would not catch her checking her mobile, just to be sure she hadn't missed a text or email from James. She mostly didn't want her to see the worried look on her face. It

was unlike James to go for more than a few hours without some form of contact: a text, a short but sweet email, a Facebook poke or some cheeky Wall comment. She had known he'd been extremely nervous yesterday before leaving for his trip. It was the firm's oldest and most important client, and he couldn't wrap his head around the fact that they'd chosen him to broker such an important deal. He had only just qualified as a barrister a few months earlier.

"Ooooooh, I've saved the best for last: are you ready for this? It's Alex Tompkins!! I am *so* getting diamonds..." Louise squealed, jolting Frankie out of her concern for her fiancé long enough to allow what she had said to fully sink in.

"Wait," Frankie held up a hand cutting her off again, this time in disbelief. "Do you mean Alex Tompkins, as in Tompkins Toffees? Um... couldn't that be considered a conflict of interest?"

"A what? How'd you mean?" Frankie rolled her eyes. Again.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Is Tompkins not a direct competitor to Chadwick's Chocolate? Or is comparing toffee and chocolate the same as apples to oranges and there is really no comparison, therefore no conflict?"

Frankie had known that Louise was never one for paying attention to such things but even for her, this was thick. Head-up-her-arse thick. How could she not think that there was something wrong with dating someone who happened to be a major competitor to her family's business?

"I don't know what you're on about, but Daddy actually approves of this one," she replied in a curt tone. "He was over the moon when I told him I was planning to invite Alex. Even offered to hand-deliver the invitation! We've known each other for ages, you know – since middle school – so really it was only a matter of time. And of him getting clear of that horrid girlfriend of his. Astrid, I think her name was. Assface, more like—" *Apparently she's gotten her head stuck so far up there the oxygen has been cut off to her brain*, Frankie thought.

"Right...back up a minute. Your father offered to deliver an invitation to his only daughter's birthday party to a bloke he pretty much knows will end up shagging her senseless that night right under his nose? Isn't there something a little bit eww about that whole scenario?"

Louise ignored the point Frankie was trying to make entirely, choosing instead to fixate on the only thing that mattered to her.

“Ooooh, do you really think we’ll end up shagging? So far it hasn’t gotten any further than a quick drunken snog and some over the shirt—” She began to jump up and down, clapping her hands in excitement like a child at her first visit with Father Christmas.

“*Louise!* How many times must I beg... no details! I’ve got far too vivid an imagination, one that enjoys working against me at that.”

“Okay fine – ruiner – but I still don’t get what you mean,” Louise pouted. “Shouldn’t I be happy that Daddy finally approves of someone?”

Frankie sighed again. It was not an uncommon sound.

“I’m just saying it seems a little odd that a father would so willingly get involved with his daughter’s love life, especially after showing such an aversion to it for so long,” Frankie explained carefully, trying to avoid sounding too judgmental. “That it’s gross should go without saying. Makes me wonder what he’s really up to.”

“Why does everything have to be some huge conspiracy with you?” Louise scoffed. “Why can’t it be as simple as Daddy just wanting what’s best for me?”

Frankie shook her head. Another familiar habit.

“So naïve you are. Fathers don’t want what’s best for their daughters, not really. They want what’s most comfortable for them, especially when it comes to men. Have you never noticed? My father has only ever been good with boyfriends who haven’t posed too much of a threat, not all Rebel Without a Cause. The ones that are safe, non-threatening, kind of vanilla – you know? Like James.”

“How flattering,” Louise deadpanned. “I’m sure that James would love to hear that you think of him as vanilla. But it wasn’t always that way, was it? No sooner was the comment out of her mouth than Louise clapped both hands over it, eyes widening as Frankie shot her a deadly glare.

Although their relationship was built on a solid foundation of good-natured ribbing and general cattiness, there were lines that each of them knew not to cross. Most of the time.

“God, Frannie, I’m sorry. Went too far there, didn’t I?” Louise was genuinely contrite.

“S’all right. That’s all in the past now; there’s no reason to dwell on it.

Besides, James and I are in a much better place these days.” Frankie tried to brush it off. It was Louise’s party, and she wasn’t about to ruin it. *Desperate times call for desperate measures*, she thought as she tried to come up with a quick way to break the uncomfortable silence that had befallen them.

Louise gave a little shriek and began to giggle as she dodged, rather deftly, the pink ruffled pillow that Frankie tossed at her head.

“No, no...I deserved that,” she conceded once she’d finished laughing. Frankie smiled. And just like that, the awkward moment was gone.

“All I’m saying is that my dad just wants someone who can look after his crazy daughter, and who won’t break her little heart. James is, in his mind, his ideal,” said Frankie as she took Louise’s place in front of the mirror, circling back to her original train of thought. “But your father is a power-hungry balls-to-the-wall CEO-type from a wealthy, world-famous family. He’s going to want someone for you that he’s comfortable with, someone more like him. No offence.”

“None taken,” Louise said thoughtfully as she toyed with the pillow Frankie had thrown. “You know, for a paranoid lunatic, sometimes you make a lot of sense. They are a lot alike. Alex is an arrogant ass, which is kind of what makes him so hot. Oh shit, wait—Daddy is not hot...”

“Ummmmm right. I think Freud might have a few things to say about that.” And it was Frankie doing the pillow-dodging – a red faux fur one this time – but fortunately for her Louise had horrible aim. The two began to giggle uncontrollably again as it bounced off the opposite wall, nowhere near its intended target.

“If I had to guess,” Frankie said finally, returning much to Louise’s delight to the initial question, “then I’d have to say all three of your boys are going to slip and land in puddles of their own drool once they get through the front door. You are crazy hot in that dress.”

Her compliment, for once, was completely sincere. The gown’s shimmering crimson velvet only served to showcase how physically perfect Louise was, clinging to the curves she had in all the places where they should be. She’d kept her makeup quite spare, save for her trademark glossy red lips. Her dark hair was swept up and piled loosely atop her head with just a few stray tendrils left loose to wisp strategically against her collarbone, her shoulder and the base of her neck, all of which were lightly tanned but not garishly so.

With Louise nothing was left to chance; strategy was everything. In

this, as with so many other things, she and Frankie were polar opposites. It really was a wonder they got along so well.

Frankie had never really had much by way of strategy; with her, there was no agenda. When it came to her appearance she had always taken more of a wash and wear, take it or leave it approach. But in that moment, as she looked at her reflection standing side by side in the mirror with Louise, she was shocked to discover that for once in their many years of friendship Frankie felt like her equal. Physically, anyway. Most of the time that sort of thing never bothered her, but there were certain instants – like wearing a beautiful beaded velvet gown, for example – that Frankie wanted to be remembered for being something more than a bitchy smart-mouth ginger.

After a final primp they were ready to make their way over to the main house, to where the party was being held in the ballroom. Frankie knew that she should be more accustomed to her friend's lifestyle, but it was such a long way from the narrow two up-two down row house in the centre of Brighton she'd spent most of her own teenaged years in that she didn't think she was capable of it. Whenever she saw Chadwick Manor all dressed up for an event, its ancient Tudor beams lit softly from a rainbow of ground lights, she had the overwhelming urge to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

She often felt like she had been cast in a supporting role with the film that was Louise. And there was more melodrama to be found there than a full-scale Merchant-Ivory period production. Tonight, she was certain, would be no exception.

Guests were starting to arrive but Louise had insisted that they needed to make a grand entrance so they remained hidden, dressed in full party attire, peeking through the curtains to check out what everyone else was wearing.

“Lou,” Frankie whispered, without really knowing why she felt the need to whisper seeing as it was just the two of them. It may have had something to do with the bottle of Veuve champagne that Louise had uncorked for them to indulge in as they waited.

“Oh look, there's that cow Marianne! What is she like wearing a dress that tight? She looks like a velvet-covered stuffed sausage,” Louise cackled before realizing Frankie had spoken. “What was it you were saying?”

“I just wanted to ask you something, actually.” This was definitely the champagne talking because Frankie, despite having always been curious,

would never have had the guts to mention it otherwise. Louise continued peering out the window, only half paying attention.

“So...your dad. Is he, like...would he be the richest bloke in England?” To Frankie’s surprise, Louise didn’t even blink.

She considered the question carefully, almost thoughtfully, before answering.

“Nooo, definitely not the richest,” she replied finally. “There’s the Royal Family, obviously, so that’s like three or four right there. And then there’s the bloke with the beard from Virgin, and the woman who wrote the Harry Potter books. I think Daddy may be somewhere in between those two? Don’t pay much attention, really... Ooh no – did you see how wide Sarah Jane’s ass is in that dress? Some women were not built for bustles, that’s for sure!”

Frankie could only shake her head. Partly out of disbelief, but more because she was annoyed with herself. Both for having the poor manners to ask such a thing, as well as for thinking that Louise would have given any real thought to such a thing.

It was at once her best and most baffling quality rolled up into one: the utter cluelessness as to just how important her family’s empire was, not just to her personally, but to the country if not the entire world. The Chadwick family had been the major driving force behind chocolate becoming such a staple in the United Kingdom. It was Louise’s great-great grandfather, if Frankie recalled her history correctly, that had made the leap from a lucrative Brighton shipping business into confectionary goods after picking up a failing chocolate factory at a bargain price. *Hell*, Frankie thought, *I’d wager I know more about her family tree than she does*. However, she did have something of an advantage there. She’d had to study those kinds of forgotten facts in school as part of her confectionary diploma.

And then again, I could just be a right jealous bitch and completely overanalysing the situation, as I am so prone to doing. When it came down to it, Frankie loved Louise: tantrums and dramatics and all. She couldn’t give a fig about how much money her family had. She knew her friend well enough to know first-hand that money does not necessarily buy happiness. It just made some things in life a lot easier.

It was going on quarter past eight by the time Louise and Frankie took the path toward the main house. In the dimming light of early evening Frankie could see the vast gardens stretch behind it, the winding paths

between the hedgerows and flowerbeds glowing faintly with the light from wrought iron lantern posts, before almost appearing to drop over the edge where the horizon met the sea. She knew from countless games of drunken hide and seek that there was a rock wall that separated the garden from the edge of a cliff by several metres, but from this distance it just continued on into oblivion. They passed beneath the elegantly carved arches of the heavy oak doors into a large entryway that led to the ballroom. Frankie always thought every party was a spectacle at Chadwick's, but the event coordinators had certainly outdone themselves with this one.

The path leading to the ballroom was marked with a red carpet that wound its way from the edge of the circular drive, up the granite stairs and through the doors down to the ballroom, bordered with heavy velvet ropes and garlands of fragrant roses still on the vine. Silver urns sat around the edge of the room and overflowed with wild red roses and pink calla lilies – Louise's favourite flower combination – as the chubby fingers of small plaster cherubs drew back the silk chiffon draperies that cascaded down the walls and the floor-to-ceiling lead paned windows that were adorned with yet more flowers. A string quartet played strains of what sounded like Mozart from a platform mounted in the far corner. Rich red and pink damask-printed silk covered long tables that lined the walls opposite the door. One was piled high with gifts wrapped in brightly-coloured paper, while another appeared to be straining from the weight of the silver platters filled with food. Its centrepiece was a large seven-tiered damask print cake sumptuously decorated with red and pink buttercream and adorned with roses and lilies that had taken Frankie the better part of a week to finish. But the colours complemented her dress perfectly.

Strategically, of course.

Party guests decked out in full Victorian garb were milling about, gingerly balancing plates and glasses as they chatted and flirted. All conversation ceased once Louise and Frankie stepped into the ornate stone and marble entrance. The band struck up a lively rendition of "Happy Birthday" as the guests joined in, clapping and singing along. Louise smiled graciously as she made her way slowly to the centre of the room whilst Frankie - ever the dutiful friend who knew her place - demurely fell into step a pace or two behind. This was not her moment.

Louise stopped in front of her father, who stood waiting for the song to end, and kissed him lightly on the cheek as the applause died down.

"Thank you Daddy," she said coyly, handling like a pro the wireless microphone her party planner had handed her. "And thank you, all of you,

for being here and for humouring me by dressing up on such short notice. You all look so fantastic. But never mind that... don't let me keep you from your drinking!" The crowd laughed on cue as the band went back to playing and guests continued with their conversations.

"Happy birthday, darling," Frankie heard Louise's father mumble, giving her arm a squeeze as he moved off to speak with some of the more mature guests. Work colleagues he had invited, as tradition dictated, to come and pay tribute to the golden child. He murmured a quick greeting and compliment about the cake when he passed Frankie's way, punctuating it with a wink and a gentle squeeze of her shoulder.

For such an uptight businessman, she thought, there were moments where he bordered on nice...warm even.

"Incoming," Louise whispered, elbowing Frankie sharply. She looked up to see a rather nervous-looking man in a blue frock coat moving in fast. His eyes were locked on Louise in a hazy blend of panic, lust and liquor. He gulped down his last bit of champagne before closing the distance.

"H-h-happy birthday, Louise. You look bloody...ahh, that is to say, umm...positively radiant this evening," he stammered out, blushing madly.

Frankie suspected that he had practiced his opening line for almost as long as it had taken her to make Louise's cake. As faltering as it was, it was rather endearing nonetheless. Frankie's heart went out to him in that moment; she knew that Louise could so easily crush him like an insect. And he was Scottish, one of her people, making her feel all the worse. You poor bastard.

"Oooh, Dr. Jared, aren't you a sweetheart!" His blush deepened as he managed to stutter something nearly incoherent in reply.

"Oh, umm ah, Louise," he added, "you know that I'm not really a doctor. I just have a PhD in bio-chemistry..." Perhaps there was more fight in him than Frankie thought. Until...*uh oh*.

Louise oozed forward – oozed being the only term to describe such a move – so that she could lean into him, offering full view of her cleavage. She traced her index finger lightly across his cheekbone to the corner of his mouth down to his chin, which Frankie thought she saw tremble slightly.

Dr. Jared – or rather, just Jared – dared not take a breath.

"I know, silly," she giggled flirtatiously. Frankie was frequently

astounded at the dizzying speed with which Louise could go from sex kitten to ingenue. “I just like calling you Doctor, Jared. Perhaps we could play sometime?”

“Play what, exactly,” he squeaked, barely capable of a response. Louise leaned in further still, pressing her chest right up against his. It was a move Frankie recognised instantly.

“Doctor,” she whispered. There it was. *The Kill*, as Frankie had often called it.

Louise patted Jared’s jacket lapel dismissively and began to giggle as she turned away, leaving the poor man sweating and shaken. Frankie was certain he would be whipping a handkerchief out of his pocket to mop his brow once their backs were turned. Not that she could blame him.

“One down,” Louise muttered as she sashayed away in triumph, with Frankie close behind, downing her own glass of champagne and grabbing another for each of them from a passing waiter’s tray.

“You know, Lou, it really isn’t nice to play with your food. I thought that poor fucker was going to have an aneurysm or something.” But Frankie had to cut her lecture short.

“Two to go.” Louise wasn’t paying attention to her in the slightest, her sights too firmly set on her next victims.

Two young men were standing in a corner of the room, laughing, oblivious to what was headed their way. One of them sported a black top hat and coattails while the other was fully kitted out in English riding gear, complete with impeccably shined riding boots to the knee. Frankie pegged him as the American. But it was Top Hat who was first to notice.

“Louise,” he crowed, arms opening wide. She allowed him a greeting kiss, one on each cheek. He took her hand and turned her slowly, pirouette-style, to get the full view.

“You could kill in that dress, my dear. You are perfection.” He kissed her hand before releasing her. She giggled. What the fuck, Frankie thought in disbelief. Was she blushing?

“Why thank you, Alex. You aren’t looking too shabby yourself,” she replied shyly.

Could it be that Lou might just have met her match in this one?

Not to be outdone, Riding Boots grabbed her round her waist and spun her round so that he could plant a kiss squarely on her lips. Thank Heaven for him that he was ridiculously good looking, albeit in that irritatingly clean-cut American way, or that move could have easily earned him a swift punch to his finely-chiselled jaw. Frankie knew that Louise didn't like it much when the prey manhandled the merchandise without permission.

"Happy birthday, baby," he breathed into her ear, making Louise visibly shiver as he kissed her again before noticing that she wasn't alone. "Who's your little friend?"

"This is Frankie MacSweeney, my bestest friend in the whole wide world who happens to be moving back to open a chocolate shop. She'll be staying with me, whether she likes it or not."

Frankie tried not to roll her eyes as she moved forward to shake his outstretched hand, not enjoying the way his eyes swept over her frame hungrily. Louise introduced Riding Boots as Quinn and Top Hat as Alex, although she had already managed to guess their identities by process of elimination and instinct.

The group chatted as the other guests came and went, stopping in to give Louise their birthday wishes. She was getting slightly distracted by the ever-mounting pile of loot that was accumulating on the gift table, and becoming a bit of a brat. Frankie decided it would be safe to leave her in Quinn and Alex's hands while she went out for some air on the terrace. It appeared that Dr. Jared had the same idea.

He was leaning forward with his elbows resting on the granite wall that separated the terrace from the gardens, staring off toward the sea in the distance as if pondering some great mystery of the universe, completely oblivious to everything around him.

"All right, Dr. Jared?" Of course, Frankie thought too late, I couldn't just mind my own business and leave him to it. He jumped as he turned round, startled.

"Oh, hello there. Just enjoying the evening. My apologies - I didn't have the chance to introduce myself earlier: Jared Skylar. You must be Frankie."

Away from Louise, Frankie couldn't help but notice that this version of Dr. Jared seemed much more friendly and confident, perhaps even a little bit charming. Bizarre, considering the quivering mess he'd been reduced to

not but an hour earlier.

“I am indeed. How did you guess?”

“Louise speaks of you often –that and I recognised the red hair. She seems almost jealous, the way she goes on about it.”

“Really?” Frankie didn’t bother to hide her surprise, thinking he must have been mistaken. Louise had neither need nor reason to feel jealous of anyone. For anything. Ever.

“Oh yes – she adores your hair. And she’s always going on about how clever you are. I sometimes get the feeling she wished she were a bit more like you.”

“Well...um. That’s news to me,” Frankie finally managed after taking a few moments to process. “To be honest, that doesn’t sound like the Louise I know at all. But then, you’re obviously quite fond of her, so maybe you just see her a bit differently.”

And with that, all of his awkward nervousness from earlier suddenly returned as Jared began to blush madly.

“It’s true. I am, quite fond,” he sighed. “But sadly I’m not even in the running. When other people are around, I just get so nervous and start babbling on like an idiot. She must think me just another lovesick fool. And can I blame her? That’s exactly what it must look like.”

Frankie patted his arm sympathetically.

“If it helps, it’s not anything she isn’t already used to. I’ve seen worse, believe me. And you have obviously had other, far better conversations with her than the one I just witnessed. Those mustn’t have been so bad, eh?”

He gave her a sad half-smile, appreciating that she was trying to make him feel better about something they both knew was kind of a lost cause.

“I guess not, no. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

They stood together in comfortable silence for a few moments, watching the sky above the sea turn from dark pink to a deep, rich purple as night took hold.

“I’m really not a doctor, you know. Louise just likes calling me that.

I'm not sure why I let her," Jared said finally, almost as though he were talking to himself.

"Because you humour her, as we all do. So what do you do then?"

"I'm an industrial biochemist, actually. I've been hired in to evaluate the existing product formulas at Chadwick's and find where improvements could be made. It's all supposed to be very hush-hush, of course, what with everything that's going on with the company right now. But then, I'm sure you know all about that."

"How's that?" Frankie was genuinely puzzled.

"Oh," Jared replied, embarrassed again, "I just assumed because you were so close to Louise and the family that you would automatically know."

It seems that I'm not the only one giving Lou too much credit, Frankie thought, in thinking that she actually paid attention to the intricate machinations of the company that made her way of life possible.

"To tell the truth, I really don't know that much about it. I do know there's been talk of some sort of merger but with who or what's at stake, I haven't a clue. Lou rarely talks business with me. And it's not really any business of mine either."

"Not yet. But aren't you the one opening up the chocolate shop?"

Shit, Frankie cursed to herself. Had Louise told absolutely everyone about that? Good thing it was a plan that Frankie was in the process of actively following through with.

"Well, yes, but I would just be purchasing my chocolate from Chadwick's. What goes on in their boardroom really has nought to do with me. And it's not like I could really do anything about it anyway."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong," Jared corrected her, a serious tone creeping into his voice that Frankie recognised instantly. It told her she might want to get comfortable because she was in for a bit of a lecture.

"What goes on in that boardroom directly affects you as a purchaser. That's where they make all the crucial decisions, from sourcing raw materials to labour costs to formulation changes. Basically, anything that could dramatically alter - for better or for worse - the quality of the chocolate they produce and by extension any product made by anyone who uses it. When you factor in that the trend over the past thirty years has been

toward extreme cost-cutting with the sole goal of maximising profits, with everyone looking to do things on the cheap regardless of what it might do to the integrity of their product or their brand, what you're left with is an entire market filled with inferior product.”

Frankie would typically have zoned out as soon as the term ‘cost-cutting’ was dropped: that was how little interest she had when it came to corporate affairs. But something in the way Jared was speaking kept her listening, almost hanging on his every word. His passion was infectious. It was like he made her care, at least in that moment, nearly as much as he did. A good thing too, seeing as she was on the brink of her own business. Like it or not, she was going to have to learn to start caring more about the things she'd always found mundane: the business side of having her own business.

“And there is absolutely something you can do about it,’ Jared clearly wasn’t finished, “you could find a supplier whose ideology might be more in line with your own. And there are a few out there, if you’re willing to look hard enough. For example, I’ve heard about this one company, in Switzerland, I think... I’ve been trying to learn more and compare it to my own research for Chadwick but finding any information on this place is proving to be pretty damn difficult. Anyway, apparently the owner is trying to bring things back to the way they were before the only thing people cared about was money. He’s focusing on things like quality and craftsmanship, on happier workers. On bringing a sense of pride back to it all.”

“Oh,” was all Frankie could think of to say in response. Somewhere in the back of her mind Switzerland seemed like it should be ringing some bells of familiarity, but the three or four glasses of champagne she'd already downed had seriously hampered her ability to focus on why.

Jared smiled, almost sheepish, as if by way of apology.

“Sorry for the rant. But it’s something I feel rather strongly about. However, this is neither the time nor the place.”

“Hey, I’m no stranger to the rant,” she was quick to reassure him. “I’m also good friends with the tangent, so I can completely appreciate where you’re coming from.”

He smiled in response, not the sheepish grin from before but something closer to that of friends sharing a mutual understanding.

“So, tell me about your shop, then. Louise mentioned you were looking to open up quite soon...in the Lanes, is that right?”

Frankie brightened, as she always did when the conversation turned to her favourite topic.

“Hope to, yes – but space in the Lanes is not as easy to find as I’d hoped. Plus there’s still that pesky bank loan business to deal with. But I’ve got that appointment set for later this week, so once that’s sorted I can really get stuck in. After I know what I’m working with.”

“Well, yes – I suppose that would be important, wouldn’t it?” Jared replied, “I’ve never opened a business myself. I’d imagine there’s an awful lot to think about.”

Frankie nodded in agreement.

“Oh, there is. I’ve even got lists for my lists now! But lucky for me I’ve been dreaming this shop up since I was a wee girl, so once I get going it should all come together. Unless, of course, I change my mind at the last minute, which I am very prone to doing. That’s when things will really fall to shit, and I’ll be well and truly fucked.” Frankie shrugged in a matter-of-fact way before beginning to chuckle in spite of herself.

She didn’t know Jared well enough to be nearly so candid, but it was the booze talking. He looked slightly taken aback. Frankie wasn’t sure if it was her brutal honesty or the casual profanity that laced her statement. He seemed incapable of a reply at first, unsure of whether to laugh or offer condolences, and stood blinking at her in silence until Frankie reassured him that she was joking. He was visibly relieved, any awkwardness between them evaporating as he asked what the name of her shop would be.

“Oh, but that’s the best part,” Frankie clapped her hands together in a gesture that would have been more characteristic of Louise. “It’s going to be called MacSweet. Like my name, but with Sweet instead. Isn’t that absolutely adorable? It’s like I was born to do something like this, isn’t it, with a name like that...”

Jared laughed and nodded, although Frankie thought that she could detect a slight nervousness that still lingered beneath the surface. She decided it would be a good time to swap the champagne for some water. Paranoia and drunkenness were never a good combination.

Frankie realised that they had been on the terrace for quite some time. Exactly how long, she couldn’t tell, but it had been enough for Louise and Alex to come round looking for them. The two of them did look quite cosy together walking arm-in-arm, Frankie thought. But she also noticed that Alex’s eyes were not glazed over with lust in the way that Louise’s were. It

was possible that she was just confusing lust with drunk; the two so often went hand-in-hand with that girl. Her hair was a bit of a tattered mess, her mascara smudged across one cheek, and she was tiptoeing barefoot, weaving slightly with her Louboutin peep-toes dangling from one hand. And yet, she still managed to look better than most women did on their best days. Bitch, Frankie whispered to herself in admiration.

She was about to suggest that they hit the ladies for a bit of a clean-up when out of the corner of her eye she caught some movement in the garden.

“Wait -- who’s that?”

All eyes turned to in the direction Frankie was looking. Although difficult to tell at such a distance, she thought she had seen a man – quite tall – dressed in what appeared to be a light grey top hat and frock coat. It stood out against the dark sky as the moonlight shone without obstruction. To Frankie, it was as though he’d stepped into the spotlight, centre stage. She watched, unable to breathe, as he stood facing the terrace from the very bottom of the garden where it met the wall near the cliff. And Frankie could almost feel that, had it not been so dark, they would have been locking eyes in that very moment. The thought of it sent an unexpected thrill through her.

The moon ducked behind the clouds, plunging the garden into utter blackness. By the time it came back, there was no sign of the stranger anywhere.

“Probably just another party guest out for a wander... maybe even a shag,” Alex quipped dryly. Frankie cringed as Louise leered at him.

“Mmmmm. A shag sounds nice right about now, doncha think,” she slurred lustily. Frankie thought she had been aiming for sexy, but had consumed far too much champagne to pull that off with much success. Alex looked more amused than anything else; Jared was equal parts horrified and devastated. It was the perfect time for that visit to the powder room.

“C’mon, Lou. Let’s get you cleaned up a bit first, eh?” Frankie glanced in apology at both men and hurried Louise off to the nearest washroom.

“I don’t think Alex fancies me,” she wailed, her voice ricocheting off the wall tiles.

Frankie had Louise propped up against the vanity’s counter in an

attempt to keep her from swaying side to side, trying to wipe some stray eye makeup away with some damp tissue but her head kept lolling around like a rag doll.

“He won’t even give me a proper birthday kiss,” she whimpered. Frankie sighed.

“Well, maybe that has more to do with you being stinking drunk – and I do mean stinking, because you fucking reek – and he’s just being a proper gentleman,” she offered hopefully. Louise seemed pleased with that answer.

“You think so?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“He’s so beautiful, though, I just want to—” Frankie cut her off before she could give any more detail. Louise had a long history of sharing her bizarre and graphic sexual fantasies, and she knew enough to stop her when the hand gestures started.

“Yes, Lou, he is - quite beautiful. But then again. so is Dr. Jared. In his own way.” And Frankie was being honest.

While Alex could be considered universally attractive with his light brown hair that fell perfectly in place, crystal blue eyes and finely chiselled features, Jared was more an acquired taste that one could easily become accustomed to. Dark reddish-brown hair and lively brown eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses, angular bone structure, and a smile that bordered on naughty when he wasn’t busy flipping out over how beautiful Louise was.

“Well of course, Dr. Jared is nerd hot, but he can’t compare to Alex or Quinn. Oooh...where is Quinn? I bet he’d shag me.” So it was to be one of those nights, then, protecting Louise’s virtue. What little was left of it, anyway. Frankie sighed again, this time in resignation.

“Let’s get back to the boys, shall we?” She helped Louise off her perch on the counter and out of the bathroom. To her surprise, Dr. Jared was waiting just outside the door.

“Is she okay?” He looked genuinely concerned. Louise launched herself at him.

“Frankie thinks you’re hot,” she sang out loudly, wrapping her arms around his neck. Jared struggled to stay standing in spite of the sudden

onslaught, quietly turning a deep shade of purple as Frankie felt her own face grow hotter. She managed to stammer something of a dismissal, laughing it off, then together they took the drunken Louise back outside for the fresh air of the terrace. Alex was waiting with a large bottle of mineral water.

“I can take care of her from here,” Alex said, catching Louise as she threw herself at him. He had seen the doubtful look on Frankie’s face, and was quick to assure her he had no ill intent.

“Don’t worry, Frankie. She’ll be safe with me, even from herself. I won’t let anything happen to her. Promise.”

From Frankie’s perspective he seemed fairly benign, almost trustworthy, as he sat on one of the wrought iron benches with Louise’s head in his lap. Every now and again she would lunge for his trouser zipper with her teeth, and each time Alex would gently redirect her face back to the water bottle. Jared and Frankie watched as Louise mewed in frustration, but after a few more thwarted attempts finally gave up.

Satisfied that her friend was in good company, Frankie pushed her way back into the party to look for the stranger she had decided to dub Grey Top Hat Man. She was convinced that he had not been at the party before she had spotted him in the garden. Someone that tall would be hard to miss. She weaved her way in and around the party revellers, some of whom were dancing, all of them flirting outrageously with anyone who’d pay attention. The air of desperation seemed so thick Frankie could almost cut it with a cake knife. There were moments she could feel herself being watched, that prickly feeling at the base of her neck, but when she turned she could not tell who it was doing the watching. At one point she thought she’d glimpsed the tails of a grey coat rounding the corner at the end of the hall. She followed, heart pounding. But there was no sign of him anywhere.

God, Frankie, get a grip, she muttered aloud to herself, aware she was close to spiralling out of control. *Why should I give such a fuck who this bloke is?*

She went back out to the terrace finally, almost walking straight past the bench where Alex was sitting in her preoccupation with the stranger. He had a completely passed-out Louise cradled in his lap like an infant as he gently stroked her hair. Jared stood to one side, pretending to be looking out toward the grounds, but Frankie knew better. She knew he was there to ensure that Alex was being true to his word.

She also knew his heart must be breaking. Frankie quietly went over

to stand beside him.

“She seems to be doing okay,” Jared reported as he continued to stare into the garden.

“Well, yes, but that’s only because she’s passed out. I’ll have to figure out how to get her to her bed after everyone leaves.”

“I could give you a hand with that, but I don’t think I’m the one she’d want helping,” he replied miserably.

“I’m sorry, Jared. Louise is my best friend, but most of the time she has truly awful taste in men. You seem like a really decent bloke and unfortunately that’s just not what she’s looking for right now.” Frankie was a firm believer that sometimes it was better to just tell it like it is. And from what she’d seen, Louise could do worse than Alex. She certainly had done in the past.

Jared seemed to agree.

“Alex seems pretty decent himself. A lesser man would have hurried her away into the garden and had their way with her.” *Speaking of the garden...*

“So, any sign of our elusive top-hatted friend?” Frankie was trying to be nonchalant about it, but it sounded desperate even to her. And yet, she was powerless to stop herself.

“Not a soul, top hat or not,” Jared frowned. “Why? Someone you know?”

“No, don’t think so. Just curious.” It wasn’t something she could explain. It wasn’t something that should even be affecting her at all in any way, but there it was.

“Maybe it’s your fiancé coming to surprise you.”

Frankie had mentioned in their earlier conversation that James was supposed to have been her date but had been called away on business at the last minute. The idea that he had come to surprise her made Frankie laugh out loud.

“James isn’t that tall, for a start, and he wouldn’t be caught dead in a top hat. It would flatten his hair. And considering I haven’t heard so much as a peep from him since he left, I’m going to guess that he’s far too caught up with this business deal to even be thinking about me.”

She didn't mean it as a bad thing. James was a lot of things, but spontaneous he was not. He's solid, sometimes forgetful but often practical. Like a favourite pair of trainers. They weren't terribly glamorous, but you loved them nonetheless.

"So do you think it's someone else you know, then?" Frankie tried not to frown at his persistence. Without much success.

"I've got no idea who it could be. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just that you seem rather...interested...in finding this person. A person that you don't think you know."

Guess I'm not quite as subtle as I thought, she thought in dismay. Which again begged the question – why did she care? Jared had just called her out on it, and she had no idea how to respond.

The entire situation left Frankie with only one option. Lie.

"I'm just naturally curious," she said again. "And if it's someone here crashing the party, like maybe a tabloid reporter looking for front page fodder, I'm sure that security and Mr. Chadwick would want to know about it." As answers went she thought it sounded fairly convincing, if a bit of dirty pool by throwing Jared's boss into it. But she wasn't sure she had him convinced as he looked at her for a minute or two longer than he should have. *When in doubt, change the subject.*

"Holy shit! Is that what time it is?" Although it was early by their past partying standards, Frankie couldn't believe it was only just passed midnight. Time seemed to have flown by. "Does that offer to help put Lou to bed still stand?"

Jared and Alex both helped Frankie carry the unconscious Louise out to the carriage house. Thank Christ she didn't wake up, Frankie couldn't help but think; she surely would have started shouting something about a threesome. But the trip wasn't without its perils.

En route, Quinn had emerged with a lazy smirk from somewhere amid the dwindling party guests, his ascot looking slightly askew. He asked if he could lend a hand after seeing the other men struggling with Louise's dead weight, but Frankie promptly assured him that they had the situation well in hand. While she was sure that he must've been a lovely bloke and all, there was something about him that just screamed 'date rapist' to her. Of course, that could just have been her natural mistrust of Americans talking.

The three of them deposited Louise safely in her bed, very much alone. Frankie returned to the main house and what was left of the party with Jared and Alex close behind to let Louise's father know that the birthday girl was officially out of commission and it was time to wrap things up. Fortunately, things appeared to be winding down of their own accord, with everyone either too tired or drunk to bother looking for Louise to say a proper goodbye.

She returned to the carriage house to get ready for bed herself. After locking the doors and making a final check to ensure that her best friend wasn't choking on her own vomit, she realised how completely exhausted she was. It was tiring business trying to protect Louise from herself, she remembered thinking as she drifted off.

Frankie had just settled into sleep when she was awakened by a noise somewhere outside her closed bedroom door. She bolted upright in bed, ears straining and nerve endings tingling. Another sound, that time the echo of footfalls on the slate tile that covered Louise's kitchen downstairs. But she was certain that she had locked everything up tight – she was just too paranoid not to. Maybe the latch hadn't worked?

Alarmed and bordering on terrified, Frankie reached for the closest thing she could find that might work as a weapon – which in Louise's house was a curling iron – and tiptoed downstairs to confront the intruder.

But there was nothing.

Only silence, save for the soft billowing of the silk sheers covering one of the French doors to the path to the main house, indicating that it was open. Frankie raced outside to find herself alone on the terrace of the main house in silence once again. The night sky had fallen to inky black darkness, with only a few slices of moonlight to light her way.

She turned to head back to the carriage house when, without warning, Grey Top Hat stepped out of the shadows.

“Who are you?” Frankie was finding it hard to breathe and was almost certain he could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

Without a word, the stranger took her into his arms and began to dance with her around the terrace even though there was no music at all. Frankie thought it was a waltz but couldn't be certain, having never waltzed before in her life. She tried to look up at him, to catch a glimpse of his face, but her attempts were in vain. The stranger seemed impossibly, unnaturally tall, his top hat a pale grey in the moonlight that somehow left the rest of

his features obscured. It was so dark that the only thing that was clear was his profile, which held the promise of exceptionally fine bone structure. And the way he made Frankie feel. How he held her in his arms, how they moved together so seamlessly as they danced; for reasons she could not explain or even understand she felt safe in this faceless stranger's arms.

Safe. And happy.

Round and round the terrace they went, and soon he was spinning Frankie faster and faster. She wanted to cry out for him to stop, that she was going to be sick from the spinning, but she found that she was enjoying it far more than she maybe should have. She didn't want it to stop. In fact, she wanted more.

"Kiss me," she whispered, doing her best to parrot Louise's sexiest *come hither* tone.

The stranger seemed only too happy to oblige and as he leaned in to meet her lips, a single beam of moonlight took that exact moment to slice across his face, illuminating it completely.

It was Dr. Jared.

Frankie's eyes flew open. She was in her bed once more, this time fully awake. At least she thought she was. The only sound was that of her own heart hammering in her chest.

What's wrong with me, she thought. She was happy with James, wasn't she? She most certainly didn't need to be dreaming about other men. Shaking her head to clear it of the lust and guilt she felt, Frankie got up to get some water from the kitchen.

Downstairs she noticed that one of the French doors was open. She felt a creeping sense of déjà vu begin to crawl beneath her skin. The silk curtains were blowing, the same way they had done in her dream. Cautiously she made her way toward them. And although it was the very last thing she wanted to do, Frankie reached for a curtain and yanked it open to look outside.

It was there that any resemblance to her dream ended. The night was so bright and clear that Frankie could see clearly all the way past the main house to the garden, and to the lone figure that wandered there. But this figure was not wearing a grey top hat, but rather a flowing gown. A nightgown that even from a distance looked suspiciously like the one she had slipped over Louise's still-unconscious head earlier that evening.

It was then that she remembered Louise's penchant for going walkabout in her sleep after having had too much to drink. And sure enough, it was her that Frankie could see at the back of the garden out past the terrace.

She sighed, berating herself for not locking the bedroom door from the outside somehow, and slipped on some old Keds that lay on a rug by the door before heading out after her friend. Louise was standing motionless in the middle of the large expanse of lawn that lay between the house and the wall, her back to Frankie, facing out toward the sea.

At least this time I won't have to chase her, Frankie muttered to herself in relief.

"Lou," she called gently. She had heard that it was a bad idea to wake a sleepwalker up, but she was tired and needed to get Louise back inside. There was a chill in the air that wasn't there earlier, with a mist moving up from the water below. It made the garden look uncharacteristically creepy.

"Louise," Frankie called again louder, more urgently this time. She was almost directly behind her when Louise spun around, so fast and unexpectedly that it startled her.

"Jesus!" Frankie shrieked in alarm.

Louise then collapsed in a dead faint at her feet. Frankie leaped forward in an attempt to catch her, but it all happened too quickly.

"Louise? Lou? Lou! Can you hear me?"

Frankie gently reached to check Louise's pulse at her throat: it was fast but mercifully there. Her initial panic began to subside. Louise was breathing in short shallow breaths, as if she'd been running all night and her lungs were struggling to catch up. Frankie sat, pulling Louise as far into her lap as she could and as she began rubbing her arms to try to keep the girl warm.

After a few minutes that felt more like a lifetime, Louise's eyes fluttered. She seemed to be struggling to regain consciousness.

"Where am I," she whispered, wiping at her mouth as if it were dry.

Louise tried to sit up and looked around, obviously confused. It was then that Frankie noticed for the first time that her mouth and cheek were smeared with some dark substance, something that she couldn't quite

identify in the darkness.

“You went walkabout again in the garden. But Lou...what in the hell have you got all over yourself?”

Frankie could see once she'd moved that Louise was holding something in her hand. Louise looked down at it, frowning. In her hand she clutched a chocolate bar. Given where they were, Frankie thought that it wasn't so unexpected. But then she got a closer look at the packaging.

It wasn't a Chadwick's bar that Louise was holding onto so tightly; it was a Fitz Cocoa Cream, a bar that had been out of production for well over a hundred years.

TWO

September 10th

James checked his Blackberry again. No email from Frankie, no texts. He knew that she was with her best friend, who could very well be taking up all of her time and then some, but he also knew that it wasn't like his fiancée to go so long without so much as a quick 'love you' text. *Maybe she didn't get my email*, he thought. His host had mentioned that phone and Internet connections in the Alps were sketchy at best. But ever since he'd been picked up by the hired car from Zurich airport the previous afternoon and then driven up a narrow winding road to a house that appeared not only to be sitting on top of a mountain but built into the side of it, James had tried unsuccessfully to shake a growing feeling of unease.

Perhaps it was because this was the first big assignment with his law firm, also the first time he'd been allowed to fly solo, so he was eager to show them he was up to the challenge. Or maybe because he had been expecting more of a Swiss ski chalet like the travel adverts always described and not the sprawling behemoth of concrete, steel and glass that greeted him. Very cold and industrial the house looked, though its interior was almost like it came from a different space entirely: lots of dark wood and tapestries and a labyrinth of hallways branching out from the centre block. He felt as if he could get lost rather easily; one wrong turn and he'd never be seen again, which would be enough to throw anyone off their game.

Or perhaps it was the creepy butler, Guillaume, who had greeted him with hair as white as the snow that capped the mountains and skin that

looked like bleached out parchment. Since there had been nothing but the listings of past properties and acquisitions in the file, James wasn't sure what to expect of the firm's most venerable client, the Comte Alfonse Defleur. He had naturally assumed that the small whisper of a man was he. As it turned out, he couldn't have been more wrong. The real Defleur was the polar opposite: tall and broad in that lean muscle sort of way that James had always wished he was, and just a few years older than he was himself.

It left him feeling both foolish and lazy, wondering what he'd been wasting his time on while this man was out conquering the corporate world, racking up accomplishment after accomplishment while apparently having enough time for regular visits at the gym.

James was soon surprised to learn that his host was not the uptight conservative businessman he had grown accustomed to dealing with in London, but much more of a 'Jack the Lad'. Not long after their initial meeting, they were getting on like a house on fire. *Perhaps even the beginnings of an epic bro-mance*, he thought in embarrassment. That is, until James and his nerves got in the way and he tripped over his laptop bag, sending both him and its contents sprawling across the dark-paneled library where the two men had been chatting. Defleur was on his feet in a flash, helping him retrieve the contents.

James shuddered in humiliation at the memory. He recalled the way Defleur had looked at a photo of Frankie he had picked up, one that James had taken just that past summer on a rollercoaster at Brighton Pier. Her red hair was flying in all directions, like a fiery halo, her cheeks slightly pink from the cold seaspray. She was laughing, but then again Frankie was always laughing. Usually at him.

It was his favourite picture of her, and it appeared that Defleur enjoyed it as well. Maybe a little too much for his comfort.

"Who's this?" James remembered him asking, his voice so low that he wasn't sure that he was speaking at all.

"Oh, that's Frankie. My *fiancée*," James had replied, trying to casually snatch the photograph from Defleur's hand. His unyielding hand; James had to really work at getting it back from him. It was only when his host

seemed to realise the peculiarity of his behaviour that Defleur seemed to check himself, muttering something about how James was a very lucky man as he reluctantly let go of the photograph.

The event had marked a bit of a turning point in the evening. It was not long after that when Defleur had excused himself, citing some urgent business that he needed to attend to, but not before showing James to his suite of rooms that occupied one of the wings of the house.

James pulled himself out of his reverie, reminding himself that it was a brand new day. A whole new opportunity to make a good impression and hopefully get them back on track to that easy camaraderie they had shared earlier. *But in order to do that, James thought, I have to get my lazy arse downstairs. And stop feeling so damned jumpy.*

Someone had brought a loaded breakfast tray into his bedroom while James had been sleeping, which only seemed to further add to his overall nervousness given that he was fairly certain that he'd locked the door before going to bed. He was a Londoner, and to not lock a door wasn't even an option. But he wasn't so disturbed by the food's appearance as to keep him from devouring everything he'd been given: soft, buttery croissants with fresh fruit and yoghurt served with a steaming carafe of freshly brewed coffee. He had realised that, between all his various travel connections yesterday, he had forgotten to eat. And the coffee, the smell of the coffee alone was out of this world. It made his eyes roll back into his head in pleasure. He wasn't sure if it was the altitude messing with his senses, but it was almost as though he were eating for the very first time in his life. He had never had food like it.

His moment of joy was cut short, though, when he realised that he had forgotten to adjust his watch when he'd landed and could not remember if Switzerland was an hour ahead or behind. A rookie mistake, to be sure, and one that could cost him dearly. If he had more time, he would surely have spent a few minutes quietly banging his head against the wall at his own ineptitude.

Am I early or late, he thought frantically as he threw on his clothes, quickly brushed his teeth and ran some water over his face and hair before hustling down the nearest set of stairs.

By the time he reached the bottom step, he saw to his own mounting horror that he had no idea where he was or which direction to take. He had been so tired and out of sorts the previous evening when Defleur had led him through the hallways that he could not recall how to get back to the library. The stark white walls and mahogany doors, even the Turkish-style floor runners, that all looked exactly the same did not help the situation in the least. James stood and listened intently for anything that might set him in the right direction. He could not detect any sound from anywhere. Nor could he see anyone down the seemingly endless labyrinth of hallways.

James shivered despite the woolly jumper he wore beneath his suit jacket. And that it was still technically summer. As he stood still attempting to recover his bearings, he could feel his head begin to spin. Rather quickly, that spinning gave way to nausea. It was making him feel even more disoriented than before.

He thought he heard a noise behind him in one of the passages that branched out from the base of the stair, the sound of a door that was just being opened. It was a slightly metallic jiggle of a doorknob turning, the subtle creak of hinges unaccustomed to use whining in protest. James's heart jumped into his throat and began to thump wildly as he whirled round, scanning the multitude of identical doors lining the walls. Further down the hall the light appeared to grow dimmer, as if the shadow of someone or something were physically blocking it. In his panic he couldn't be sure if it was a trick of the mind. He thought he could faintly detect a dark shape beyond one of the doorframes, a shape that he wasn't about to go investigate.

Enough, James, get a grip for Chrissake, he cursed his overly active imagination. *If Frankie were here, she'd give you a good slap back to your senses.*

After being frozen in place for what felt to be ages, James managed to calm himself enough to convince his legs to carry him down the hall as fast as they could. In the opposite direction of whatever it was he thought he had seen. Behind him he fancied that he heard a soft giggle - a distinctly *feminine* giggle - and the sound of a door coming to. He wasn't about to turn around to confirm it.

If only Frankie were here to slap me.

He rounded a corner, that last sound inspiring him to move even faster, where he suddenly found himself face to face with the library doors he'd been looking for. He stood outside them, panting to catch his breath as much from the quick sprint as the terror that had spurred it, trying to determine his next move. He wasn't familiar with the protocol in this situation: was he supposed to knock or wait till someone came to fetch him? *But how would anyone know I'm here if I don't knock or announce my presence in some way? A subtle clearing of the throat, perhaps?*

He didn't have long to weigh his options when the double doors suddenly flung open. Defleur was standing there.

James thought that his mind was playing tricks on him once again because, for a split second, Defleur looked utterly terrifying. His stature was much larger than what he'd recalled from their initial meeting the night before; his eyes were narrowed, shiny and preternaturally shrewd, like a shark sensing its prey. *Or maybe, James thought dismally, I've just been watching far too many shark documentaries lately on the telly.*

In an instant it was gone, as quickly as it had appeared, and Defleur was back to his confident and completely non-predatory self. *Gone because, of course, it was never even there to begin with,* James reasoned as he willed his heart to slow down to a more normal pace. He wondered again if there were such a thing as too much fresh air.

Defleur, ever the gracious host, asked how James had slept and if his rooms were to his liking. He was dressed casually, dark jeans and a grey knit jumper with a white tee peeking out from underneath, making James feel foolish in his Topman suit. He quickly removed his jacket, thankful for both his jumper and that he hadn't had the time to wrestle into a tie, as Defleur sank into one of the library's many leather chairs and motioned for James to take the one opposite.

"So how was breakfast? I wasn't sure what you would like, so I just had the chef prepare a little of everything."

James assured him that it was fantastic, and that he wasn't accustomed to waking up to food in his room. This made Defleur laugh out, a boisterous belly laugh that bounced off the high ceilings before being

swallowed up by one of the many shelves of books lining the walls. It did nothing to calm James's nerves.

"I gather, then, that that lovely fiancée of yours does not serve you breakfast in bed? I'm sorry if it startled you. I realised that I'd forgotten to give you the tour so I had it sent up to make sure you didn't starve trying to find the kitchen. This place can be a little... difficult...to navigate at first."

Defleur was up again and moving restlessly about the room. James thought he could sense an air of the predator he thought he'd seen earlier, only this time it was more like the prowl of a caged tiger. A distraction seemed in order.

"So your house... It's not at all what I was expecting," James commented before hastily adding "in a good way, of course."

"Thank you. I actually designed and built it myself. The ancestral home is just south of Geneva, and that would be much more in line with what you would expect with a family such as mine. But I am not... anything like them, really. Not at all."

Defleur had stopped pacing to stare out the window, deep in thought.

"So you're a bit of a black sheep, then. I can relate."

James was trying to appear cool, but falling a tad short of the mark. In reality, he the only thing he knew about being a black sheep was what he'd learned from dating Frankie. James had always done his best to follow in his successful big brother's footsteps, which was exactly what he was expected to do. Becoming a barrister instead of a property developer was the closest thing to rebelling James had gotten when it came to his family.

Defleur appeared startled, as if he were just remembering that James was there.

"I suppose you could say that," he replied with a weak smile, which was soon followed with more silence.

James, unnerved with the abrupt change in his host's demeanour, asked for the time so that he could set his watch to rights and proceeded to

prattle on about the work he had planned that day, like making charts and drafting out contracts in triplicate. Defleur seemed to have become lost in a world of his own as he turned back to continue staring out the window.

Without warning, he spun around, so fast it made James almost jump out of his chair.

“What would you be doing today if you weren’t stuck here working with me,” Defleur barked at him. His eyes had grown cold and hard again, similar to what James had thought he’d seen earlier.

“Well uh...I guess I would be in Brighton with Frankie. Her best friend is throwing a major party this weekend at her estate down there,” he replied after swallowing hard, trying to collect himself.

“Estate, you say?” Defleur’s eyebrows raised in faint interest. “Does she come from a wealthy family, then? I had family once in that part of England. I wonder if it’s someone I might know?”

James managed to catch himself before he insulted his host by laughing laugh out loud. *Anyone he may know?*

“It would be unlikely that you wouldn’t know them, actually,” he chuckled. “It’s the Chadwicks.”

He wasn’t prepared for what happened next. One minute Defleur was daydreaming out the library window, the next he was towering over James in his chair shaking with what seemed to be fury.

“Did you say *Chadwick?*”

James began to inch further back into his chair, wishing desperately that it would swallow him whole, as he tried to imagine what is what that he’d said or done to make Defleur so angry.

“Yes, as in Chadwick’s Chocolate,” he replied slowly, his voice shaking. “I just meant of course you would know them, because everybody does. But you especially, given the line of business you’re in.”

James knew he was babbling, something he had always been prone to when his nerves got the better of him. His babbling nearly gave way to a

hysterical giggle before he managed to stop himself from adding something flip like they practically invented chocolate. *Because that*, he thought, *would be just about the wrongest thing I could say right now*. He was certain that Defleur was getting ready to tear him a new one as he slammed his hand on a nearby desk before swiftly moving across to the other side of the room.

“Oh yes, of course *everyone* knows them,” Defleur hissed, finger jabbing into James’s direction. “But what is it that you know? *Nothing*. Chadwick lied and cheated to get what he had. That bastard stole everything he ever knew from...”

If James had thought Defleur was scary before, nothing could have prepared him for how terrifying he was in that moment. His hands were shaking as though he was about to break something, his eyes flashing black with rage. But then, just as quickly, all of Defleur’s anger was suddenly gone. As if he had just caught himself behaving badly and needed to put his suave billionaire mask back on.

And just when James believed that things couldn’t possibly have become any more bizarre, Defleur smiled. He just stood there and *smiled* at him as if nothing had happened at all.

“I... I do apologize for my outburst,” he said quietly as James struggled to keep himself from running out of the room. “It’s just...that... I happen to feel very passionately about my business, and my business *is* chocolate. I – well, my family and I – have worked very, *very* hard for everything. For what you see here and in your files upstairs. I am – how would you say – easily irritated when people speak to things that they don’t fully understand. Of course none of this is your fault—” He motioned for James to wait when he began to stammer an apology of his own.

“This is the history you’ve been given,” Defleur continued, although James really had no idea what he meant by that. So far as he knew, history was history: it was the same for everyone. “It’s been spoonfed to you. There would be no way you could know any differently. It’s hardly common knowledge, and time has all but erased its memory. But some of us,” he tapped the side of his head in a knowing gesture “have a longer memory than most.”

Defleur appeared to have calmed down by the time he finished speaking, returning to the ornate leather chair behind the oak desk that dominated the room. James held his breath and hovered at the edge of his seat, waiting to see if he would explain further. He was rewarded with a long silence before realising that this was not something that Defleur cared to share, at least not any time soon. Not with him.

Still shell-shocked by the on and off anger switch that the Comte seemed to possess, James began his own apology.

“I’m so sorry, Mr—I mean, Comte—Defleur. It was never my intention to offend—” Halfway through, Defleur was waving his hand again, declaring that there was no need for any more apologies.

“If anything, James, I should still be apologising to you. That little... episode...was most unforgivable. Shameful, really. Believe me when I say that I will most definitely make it up to you.” Defleur tapped his chin thoughtfully before speaking again.

“How does a little ski trip sound?”

James knew in his logical mind that he should have politely declined his host’s offer, it being his first day and that he should really be working, not going skiing with someone as mentally unstable as Defleur appeared to be. Yet he was powerless to say no.

So yeah, maybe he did go a little American Psycho there for a minute, James reasoned with himself, *but he’s just really into his work is all.* That kind of passion he had seen before, in his own life, through Frankie. Knowing full well that she would hurt him for even daring to think it, Defleur had reminded him a little of her just then. They shared the same sort of fire whenever they talked about chocolate. It was something James only wished he had. There was nothing he felt anywhere nearly so passionate for, save for maybe women or football. Even then, it seemed to pale in comparison to whatever it was that Defleur and Frankie felt.

James knew that the similarities between the two was likely the only reason he hadn’t shat himself and cut out immediately regardless of the consequences. Because if he could handle a little Scottish firecracker like Frankie, he should be capable enough to hold his own here.

In her own way, Frankie was just as terrifying.

Defleur led the way out of the library down yet another passageway, this one appearing to head in the opposite direction from James's room. After a series of turns, he opened another dark wooden door that looked exactly like all of the other doors that they had been past. The sound of it reminded James of that morning, of what he had thought he'd heard outside his room. His stomach rolled uneasily at the memory.

He followed Defleur into what appeared to be a games room. A giant snooker table sat dead centre flanked by ultra-modern looking black leather couches. One wall supported a giant projection screen television, along with a cabinet housing the sort of elaborate sound system that James could only fantasise about and every single gaming console ever made. With games. The wall opposite was devoted to sports equipment. Skis and poles, goggles, scuba gear, rackets of varying shapes and sizes: everything that anyone could possibly need to go skiing or swimming, play tennis, or for any other leisure activity a guest might feel like engaging in during their visit to Defleur's remote mountain compound.

James could barely keep his jaw from hanging open. It was the bachelor pad to end all bachelor pads unlike anything he'd ever seen. His efforts to mask the admiration written so clearly on his face were in vain, earning a chuckle from Defleur as he closed the door.

"And here your butler told me that the *library* was your favourite room in the house," he muttered.

"Believe it or not, he's right," Defleur laughed out loud. "It is. I'm surprised the old man even noticed at all."

He was already across the room sorting out ski equipment for the pair, pulling out jackets and gloves and poles from a large closet that lay hidden just beyond the wall of sporting goods. James was beginning to wonder if maybe Defleur had a little resort business on the side.

"I take it you're a bit of a sporting buff, then?" James asked as a way of distracting himself from his own surprise. Even Louise – who did her fair share of entertaining – had nowhere near this kind of set-up at her father's estate.

“I actually don’t come down here as often as you might think,” he replied, tossing James a set of outerwear that happened to fit him like a glove. “I keep it around more for the benefit of my guests than myself.”

As James was zipping himself into the ski jacket, he realised that something wasn’t quite right.

“Wait a minute,” he blurted, more to himself than anything else. “Isn’t it a little early for skiing?”

Defleur was already making his way down another corridor that James could only guess led to somewhere outside. He wasn’t sure if he had heard him.

“Not for us,” Defleur called back over his shoulder. “Come on.”

James struggled into the rest of his gear and hurried after him, trying without success to remember the last time he’d been skiing.

Defleur was well ahead of him, striding his way through a meadow that stretched beyond the door. Once outside, James was surprised to see that what he’d originally thought of as a solid rock face that the house was cut into was in fact part of more than one mountain. Two that he could see at least, perhaps more. He could see that the lake that lay directly beneath his rooms at the far section of the house was more of a river that threaded along a meadow that led into a small valley and another clearing.

James could hear what sounded like machinery humming away in the distance, a sound so completely at odds with the picture-perfect mountain landscape. It wasn’t until he entered the valley and looked up that he could see where it was coming from. And what he saw had stopped him dead in his tracks. *A snow-making machine?*

He blinked, shaking his head to ensure he wasn’t hallucinating. It seemed so impossible, like something that would only exist on a film set or one of those luxury resorts for the insanely wealthy he’d seen on travel programmes. Not on someone’s private property. And yet there it was, churning out enough snow to keep a modest run going. It even had its own lift. James was officially speechless.

“I guess there really is such a thing as *too much money*,” he mumbled as he forced his legs to move again.

“What can I say?” Defleur shouted back as if he had heard him, something that considering the distance James wouldn’t have thought possible. “I love to ski. Come on!”

Defleur was in high spirits once more, more like the person James had met the previous evening, as he flipped his goggles down and patted the lift seat next to him.

James was quick to learn once he finally finished getting all his gear in order that skiing was very much like riding a bike: you never really forget how, but you’ll still fall on your ass a few times. After a couple of runs, however, he finally started getting the hang of it.

And a couple more runs after that, he noticed that he was actually having fun. For the first time since arriving in Switzerland, he was beginning to relax.

They had been skiing for a couple of hours in a comfortable silence, with James enjoying the feeling of the wind in his hair and the crisp mountain air in his lungs, when Defleur abruptly turned to him after he had reached the bottom of the run. James thought he had seen him typing on his mobile as he slowed to a stop and wondered vaguely how he was able to get reception. The last time he had checked, there were no bars to indicate service at all.

“I’m so sorry, James,” he said quickly as he tucked his mobile beneath his ski jacket, “but I’ve been called away. To Geneva. A family emergency.”

Must be serious, James thought as he watched Defleur pull off his gloves and step out of his skis as if he couldn’t get away fast enough. James wasn’t sure how to respond, then realised too late that his uncertainty must have been showing plainly in his face.

“Please, stay and finish your business here – I insist. I would hate to keep you from your lovely fiancée a minute longer than what’s necessary. Guillaume will make sure that you have everything you need, and I shouldn’t be more than a day or so. But in the meantime...” There he

paused, looking as if he were about to say something more before deciding against it.

“Well... just enjoy yourself, James,” was all he said after a long pause. “My home is your home.”

Defleur had begun to walk away as he spoke but then he stopped, turning look back at James one final time.

“But please...just be careful not to wander about too much. These mountains all look the same if you aren’t accustomed to them. And if you think the house would be much safer for exploring, you’re mistaken.”

His tone was serious, his eyes hard as stone. James watched in fascination as his expression changed again, like the flip of a light switch, into something far more jovial. Almost teasing.

“I just mean that the place can feel like a bit of a maze, and I wouldn’t want you to get lost. Never to be seen or heard from again. Hah!”

His laugh was more of a bark that echoed back from the stone surrounding him, making James feel as though the whole valley were laughing at his expense. Far too confused by the entire morning’s events, he didn’t feel much like joining in. Defleur gave him a small, oddly formal salute as he said goodbye, reminding him once more to be careful. And with that, he turned his back and continued toward the house.

Apparently, there was to be no further discussion on the matter.

James wasted no time getting out of his gear and all but ran to catch up with his host, but the Comte was in far better physical condition. He resolved in that moment to cut back on his smoking. He saw Defleur disappear into the house but by the time he made it inside himself, there was no sign of him. He had simply vanished as if into thin air. So James did the only thing he could think to do – he made his way back to his rooms and got started with his work, just as he’d been told to.

He wasn’t sure what to make of it all. He had no idea what could have made Defleur bolt so quickly. He had thought he’d seen him checking his phone so perhaps he had received some sort of message, but James was

fairly certain it was not a family emergency. He didn't know why, it was just something he felt.

Everything is so surreal here, he thought, listening to the house and its silence close in around him. It was the isolation and the eerie quietness of it that unnerved him most; it was so different from the buzz and hustle he was used to in London. James couldn't imagine what life must be like for Defleur, up here in the mountains all alone with that creepster of a butler. But seeing that his host had just up and left, with no indication of when he might be back, it would appear that James was about to find out for himself.

Flipping open his laptop, James checked his email again. Still nothing from Frankie. His mobile gave him the same blank story.

He sighed and opened up a new email message, this time to his brother in Australia. He figured that he would just continue with his work and in his spare time keep emailing people until he got a response from someone. Until then, he got the distinct impression that he was in for some very long and very boring days ahead.

THREE

September 16th

Frankie was beginning to worry about Louise.

She had been behaving rather strangely ever since her party, even for her. Over the years she become accustomed to Louise's many special idiosyncrasies, but this time it was different. Something even Frankie herself had not seen before. And when it came to Louise and bizarre behaviour, she had thought that she'd pretty much seen it all. Perhaps it was something as simple as a birthday, the dismal prospect of yet another year passing with no real plan for the future to speak of, that had set her off. *But this is Lou*, thought Frankie. That girl wasn't in need of a plan. She was set for life.

And yet there she would sit, alone in her room, munching away on those bars of chocolate as if there were no tomorrow.

That the Fitz Cocoa Cream bars had appeared out of nowhere was in itself quite odd. If Frankie hadn't known better she would have thought that, considering Louise's father did own the most famous chocolate company in the world, finding chocolate at random throughout the property was to be expected. Her dad was constantly bringing work home when they were younger: prototypes of products not yet available in the shops for his daughter and her willing friends to sample and enjoy. And more importantly, to provide that all-important feedback, the essential cornerstone of any successful brand. But because Frankie had known something about chocolate history, she was well aware that the Fitz brand

had been discontinued long ago, not long after the Chadwick family had purchased the struggling business in the late 1800's.

Although she was by no means an expert, she had written her final research paper on the history of English chocolate for school. She had found the whole story rather fascinating:

Fitz & Company had begun making chocolate in the late 1700s, at first in the back of a small bakery shop right there in Brighton. By the early nineteenth century they had devised a way of using the new industrial technology which led to the mass production of chocolate. The company had stayed a family company that was handed down in succession and quickly grew to become the largest confectioner in Britain, giving England the first ever chocolate bar. It was around then that the Cocoa Cream was created. However, what goes up must come down.

In the late 1870s the Fitz in charge at the time was killed in what history had vaguely labelled as a machinery accident at the factory. Not long after, his two sons who had taken over the business and were woefully lacking in experience found themselves incapable to cope. They had ended up selling the company that had carried their family name for the last century to Archibald Chadwick, a newcomer to the chocolate trade but no stranger to the world of big business. However, the formula for the famous Fitz Cocoa Cream bar had died with Thomas Fitz and, after several failed attempts to recreate it, Chadwick's decided to discontinue the bar all together in 1895. It went down in the history books as the nation's first favourite teatime treat. Frankie had seen a picture of it, had even downloaded one for her presentation. That presentation had earned her the best mark of her entire school career, and was something she wasn't likely to forget.

But how one of the wrappers from those long extinct bars had come to be sitting here in front of her in Louise's kitchen some hundred years later was a bit of a mystery.

Frowning, Frankie picked up the wayward piece of paper, just one of the many discarded wrappers that Louise had left scattered throughout the house in her wake. The colours on the label were faded, its typeface rounded and old-fashioned. If she wasn't already convinced that such a

thing were impossible, Frankie might have actually believed that this bar had come from the days when Queen Victoria reigned. However, the silly romantic in her – and deep down, one did exist, contrary to popular belief – really wanted to believe that she was sitting here with this original bastion of British confectionery. But it was too much of a stretch. The pragmatic and practical side that had always won out in such situations understood that this was nothing more than a very clever marketing tactic, one that Frankie caught herself buying into completely.

Perhaps this was one of the formulas from Chadwick's that Jared had been talking about. It was entirely possible that he had somehow managed to recreate the original Cocoa Cream formula using modern methods not available to chocolate makers from that time period. From there, it wasn't too difficult to believe that the marketing team had taken and ran with that as the concept, devising a whole campaign right down to the painstaking creation of the packaging to original standards.

The whole retro thing is terribly chic these days, Frankie sighed inwardly as she tossed the wrapper aside.

She didn't have time to dwell on it. She would just have to remember to ask Louise later where those chocolate bars came from. And how she seemed to have a neverending supply. Because Frankie had much bigger things to worry about than the expanding state of her friend's backside: her appointment with the banking manager was today.

She had dragged Louise out yesterday, convincing her to put down the chocolate long enough to go location scouting with her, when they stumbled upon the sort of space that Frankie had only ever fantasised about for her shop. It was a rare corner unit in Brighton's most famous shopping and tourist district featuring quaint half-timbering and shuttered, leaded windows. It had also apparently operated as a café in a previous life complete with a fully functioning – and legal – kitchen area set up already in the back. And it was available for let.

A quick visit to the estate agent representing the property told her that the money her grandmother had left her would last about six months in this space. As it happened starting a business in the right location, specifically such a high profile spot as she had chosen, just wasn't feasible

with so little money. Or so the agent kept telling her. Fortunately, Louise had come out of her chocolate-induced haze just long enough to take control of the situation and do what she does best. That poor young man didn't have a chance as she unleashed the full force of her charms on him. Expanding backside or not, she was still smoking hot by anyone's standard.

The agent agreed to hold the property until Frankie had spoken with the bank, promising her first offer rights. And again, luck appeared to be on her side: her bank appointment had already been set up for the following morning. Frankie decided not to mention that her original plan was to use her inheritance for the bulk of the costs and maybe get a five thousand pound business line of credit. She knew she would need to add an extra zero to that number if she wanted this place.

And want it she did, so desperately she could almost taste it.

Nervously, Frankie donned one of her grandmother's classic Chanel suits, another part of the bequest that had been left to her. This one was a cream tweed with navy detailing, and she took a moment to swoon over its exquisite tailoring. *It's too bad Nan couldn't have left her sense of style to go along with it*, she thought with a pang of sadness, rifling through Louise's oversized walk-in closet for some suitable shoes. And just when she'd become convinced she would be lost inside for all eternity, impaled on a Jimmy Choo stiletto, she emerged with some barely-worn nude Valentino pumps that looked responsible and practical, yet sexy nonetheless.

Valentino. She could picture her Nan's subtle nod of approval as clearly as if she were standing there in front of her. *With shoes like those my dear*, she could hear her say, *how could anything possibly go wrong?* Frankie felt her eyes mist dangerously. She missed her so much.

Facing the mirror and resolutely refusing to let any of those tears fall, she attempted to twist her stubborn straight hair into something resembling a chic chignon. Since Frankie hadn't a clue what she was doing when it came to those things, she was forced to call for reinforcements. Louise had managed to tear herself away from her latest pile of Cocoa Creams for the second time as many days, long enough to wipe her hands haphazardly against her yoga stretch pants and pin Frankie's hair up better than any professional ever could in less than five minutes. Frankie found the

chocolate stains in the corners of her mouth more than a little disturbing and tried to avoid looking at her face while Louise reworked her makeup.

“There. All done.”

Frankie stepped back from the mirror and examined the sophisticated stranger that stared back at her. This stranger’s hair was not hanging off her head in some sad ponytail, but pulled back in a way that was elegant but not too stiff. Her makeup was far less slap and dash, and much more polished and understated. The suit and shoes ended up as mere set dressing in comparison. *Whatever Lou’s done to me, she thought, it’s genius.*

“Imagine you’re a loan manager -- would you give me obscene amounts of money after meeting with me today?” Frankie asked with a twirl that ended abruptly with an awkward half-curtsy and the near-miss of a twisted ankle.

“In a heartbeat, as long as you don’t do that. Ever.” Louise replied without hesitation. She paused before adding somewhat acidly, “you know, you don’t *have* to go through with this silly bank thing. They’ll *drown* you in interest charges and penalties.”

Frankie stopped admiring herself, and turned back to face her friend.

“We’ve been through this already, Lou,” Frankie sighed. “Our friendship is far too important to me to risk fucking it up over money.”

One thing that had been repeatedly drilled into her head during her business classes was how it was generally considered a bad idea to borrow money or go into business with friends and family. While there were exceptions, most of the time people ended up bringing along their personal history, issues and emotions which usually led to poor decision-making and trivial infighting. Ultimately it would lead to the destruction of not only the business venture, but the relationship. And for Frankie, she didn’t think it was worth the risk. Louise also knew her well enough to realise it was useless to argue, that once made up her mind was nearly impossible to change. Not unlike Louise herself.

She let out a sigh of resignation, and nodded.

“You better get going. Don’t want to be late, do you?”

She tossed Frankie the spare keys to her Mercedes and left the room without another word. As she left, Frankie thought she could hear the sound of another Cocoa Cream wrapper being torn open. She imagined she could hear the sound of it hitting the carpeted floor of her bedroom as the door shut behind her.

With another sigh, Frankie headed to the garage to figure out which Mercedes the keys in her hand belonged to, hoping to hell she could remember how to drive.

Stepping into Lloyd’s bank branch in North Street had always felt a bit like stepping back in time. Frankie supposed that the same could be said for many other buildings in Brighton, but this one had always been her favourite. Built sometime during the nineteenth century, the glass on the teller windows shone like mirrors in ornately gilded frames, and the tiny offices that lined the walls on either side were dark wood-paneled cubicles with frosted glass for privacy.

She walked up to the heavy oak desk that held court in the middle of the room, following the directions of a sign indicating that was where visitors were to check in.

Frankie cleared her throat, practically gasping for air through her nervousness. The elderly, bespectacled lady manning the desk glanced up at her through wire-framed glasses perched at the end of her nose.

“May I help you?” With those four little words, Frankie felt as though she were transported back to school and had been sent to the headmaster’s office for bad behaviour.

“Uh yes, actually,” she managed to sputter, before steadying herself with a deep breath. *There’s nothing to be afraid of.* “I have an appointment with Mr. Bradley at one. My name is Frankie—I mean, Frances. Frances MacSweeney.”

The woman frowned, suspicious. Frankie guessed that she didn’t look

quite enough like whatever she thought a “Frances” should for her liking.

“Ah yes, here you are,” she said more to herself as she appeared to scroll through the computer screen. “If you could take a seat in that first office, over there on the right. Mr. Bradley will be with you shortly.”

She nodded her head toward the opposing wall of offices. Frankie scooted off to do as she was told. A receptionist who was seated behind a small desk inside looked up from her computer and smiled politely. The door to the office behind her was closed.

The air in the cubicle was dense with the smell of old wood, similar to what one might expect if sitting among the pews of a church. Frankie took that as a good omen, deciding a prayer or two in her head whilst she waited wouldn’t hurt. It was cooler than usual for this time of year, hence the tweed, yet despite the gentle whir of the giant fans suspended above from the vaulted ceiling she still felt as though she were sweating like a common whore in said church.

Apparently I have the ability to go from pious to prostitute in the blink of an eye, she thought in wry amusement. Who knew?

“Ms MacSweeney?” *Oh crap.*

Frankie discreetly mopped her forehead and stood up with what she hoped was her best ‘you want to give me shitloads of money, don’t you?’ smile. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw his assistant freeze at the sound of his voice. That was never a good sign.

“Oh hello. Mr. Bradley, is it?” The man who shook her outstretched hand was typical of what one might picture a loan manager to be. Short, slightly overweight, balding. But he seemed pleasant enough as he closed the door behind her and bustled past her to take a seat behind his own desk, shuffling papers as he went.

“So you are looking to open up a...chocolate shop, is that right? And it’s to be called ‘MacSweet?’” He smiled at her in polite encouragement, tenting his palms under his chin as Frankie launched into the spiel she had been practising for what had felt like forever.

She told him about her main product line: traditional English chocolates and sweets with a twist to drag them into the 21st century. She described her accomplishments and background, making sure to remember to include some of the awards she had won. Finally, she outlined her marketing plan: she was planning to partner with some of the other independently-owned shops in The Lanes to cross-promote each other's businesses. Some of her ideas included regular contests that would entice new customers; for her existing clientele, she had already designed a loyalty scheme to be built around the number of purchases they would make.

Bradley seemed to nod in the appropriate places and appear interested enough, but Frankie was certain that he must sit through the very same conversation countless times on any given day. Although the types of business may vary and the ideas might radically differ from one another, there was one central point at which they would all invariably arrive.

“And what do you have by way of collateral?”

“I have thirty thousand pounds, with another seven hundred in personal savings.”

This was where Bradley's polite interest was replaced by some no-nonsense number crunching. He frowned at the papers before him; Frankie guessed that they must have been her financial statements. Not really her biggest strength, if she were to be honest.

“The location that you're interested in, the one that's for let now is in The Lanes, is it not? That's considered prime commercial property – the rents there can be quite high. Not to mention that competition for a space like that is usually incredibly fierce, even in this economic climate. People have found themselves caught up in massive bidding wars, only to end up in way over their head.”

He looked at her over the top of his glasses; it was the second time that had happened to Frankie that day. And the second time that she was made to feel like a child, only not a naughty one. More like a child who was about to be told no.

The phone's intercom buzzed loudly, breaking the tension in the room. The unexpectedness of it made Frankie nearly jump out of her seat;

even Bradley looked affected. Red-faced and blustering, he pressed the reply button and barked that he wasn't to be disturbed. Frankie heard his assistant say how very sorry she was but that something had come up that required his immediate attention, and he was needed outside. Muttering his apologies as he left the office, he told Frankie that he would be back and then they would pick things up where they had left off.

I'd hate to be that poor assistant, Frankie thought. Although her timing could not have been better. It was going to take everything she had inside of her not to cry in front of Bradley when he would inevitably break the news that the bank would not be able to take such a huge financial risk on her little venture in such a volatile economic climate. She was almost thankful for that extra bit of time to prepare herself.

Frankie could see his shadow through the frosted glass window. After Bradley had stormed out, he didn't get very far, and appeared to be speaking with some force to the poor woman who was only doing her job. But his demeanour seemed to change rather dramatically as a third and much taller silhouette came into view. Bradley went from practically shaking with rage to cowering in fear, if Frankie was reading his body language correctly. As she continued to watch this silent drama unfold, she felt her own heart skip a beat. But it wasn't from fear.

This shadow seemed somehow familiar to her. If she didn't know better, she would swear it looked exactly like the mysterious Grey Top Hat man from Louise's party. Without the top hat.

Frankie was ashamed to admit to herself that she had not forgotten about him. She had also been unable to keep from dreaming about him, either. Dreams of dancing, along with other far less innocuous things, were a nightly occurrence since that first night she'd seen him across the garden. *Dreaming didn't qualify as cheating, did it*, she would often find herself wondering. If held to the theory that dreams were just snippets of unconscious desires trying to bring awareness in the conscious self, she realised that didn't really make it sound that much better.

But at least the stranger had not morphed into Jared the way he had done in that first dream. *Surely that would be worse*, she thought, *to have such dreams about a person you know versus a figure you spotted at a distance but have never*

even met? Although in her dreams Frankie had never caught sight of Grey Top Hat's face, she felt as if she knew him. That she has *always* known him. But that day in the bank would mark the first time she had thought of him in the cold light of day.

Interesting, she mused, *that just when I'm about to lose one dream I would replace it with the thoughts of another.*

She shook her head as if to right herself, telling herself that she was just being a romantic asshole, and this was serious business.

Frankie continued to watch, mesmerised, as the tall shadow appeared to be saying something of obvious importance, if one could go by the fervent nodding of Bradley's head. The figure leaned over the desk for a brief moment, then shook Bradley's hand. She wasn't certain, but it appeared as though Bradley made a little bow as he left. The taller shadow faded slowly from sight until she was left with the shorter, rounder one of Bradley, who was on his way into the cubicle to continue with the meeting. *Or to stomp all over my dreams*, Frankie thought miserably.

The sound of the door opening dashed the momentary thrill she'd gotten from her imagined glimpse of an even more imaginary lover. And reality walked in.

"Terribly sorry for that interruption, Ms. MacSweeney. Now, where were we?"

Bradley had gone from red to decidedly ashen in the face, mopping his moisture-tinged brow with an old-fashioned-looking handkerchief. Frankie noticed that it had letters embroidered on it: H.R.F.

"Ah, yes," he clapped his hands together as he was about to sit down at his desk. "I was about to say that we can approve you for a line of credit of two hundred fifty thousand pounds to start with, with a review of that amount in about one year's time."

Well I guess I could always take Lou up on her offer, Frankie thought until the words that Bradley had actually spoken, not the ones she was expecting to hear, had sunk in. *Wait, what the fuck?*

“P-p-pardon me?” She managed to whisper. “Did you say...umm. Wait. Did you just say that you are going to give me *two hundred and fifty thousand pounds?*”

Frankie felt warm and cold all at once, her nerve endings tingling like pins and needles. She feared that she might have been going into shock. Bradley looked flustered, his face flushing deep crimson once more before he began to bluster again.

This man is like his own weather station, Frankie almost laughed out loud her own ridiculousness. And at the entire situation. She wasn't quite sure if it was real or something she'd dreamed up.

“Well, uh, you see...umm...your particular business is somewhat historic in nature, bringing back the sort of handmade tradition that the nation had left behind during the Industrial Revolution. And because of that, you qualify for a...a special type of loan scheme. Now, I'm going to need you to sign a few forms, then I can take you out front and we can get everything set up for you.”

Why does it sound like he's pulling this out of his ass? Frankie couldn't help herself from thinking. It just seemed too good to be true. Loans based on historical value? Did that mean that there was going to be a sudden surge in traditional tannery, which involved the soaking of hides in lime, then a fragrant water and dogshit blend? Would that qualify as bringing back handmade tradition? *Or are some traditions just more marketable and... ahem...more palatable than others?* Is it based on a sliding scale?

So many questions chased each other through Frankie's mind as she followed Bradley from his office and into the main banking hall.

Ridiculously she felt as though all eyes were on her, that she was about to be greeted by great fanfare and much applause as she followed Bradley through the bank. Of course, no one else could have possibly known what had just transpired in that tiny cubicle. No one else could have suspected that Frankie had just, so far as she was concerned, won the fucking lottery. Her mind wandered back to that tall and familiar-looking shadow, wondering if her sudden reversal of fortune had anything to do with his rather timely appearance. Because, before that, she was almost

certain the situation was on track to a very different and far less pleasant outcome. There was no time to consider the theory further, however, as more papers were thrust into Frankie's face that were in need of a signature.

She was practically vibrating with excitement as she took possession of a new debit card bearing not only her own name but the official name of her new business, MacSweet. It had just gone from nothing more than a pipe dream to something of a reality. But the celebratory drinks would have to wait.

It was time to call Louise and go back to that estate agent. She had herself some prime retail space in The Lanes to secure.

FOUR

September 17th

Seven days had passed since Defleur had left on his so-called ‘urgent business’, leaving James with the distinct impression that his client had no plan for returning anytime soon. He was also beginning to believe that being left with so much time on his hands was not doing much good for his mental health. It was making him think too much. And the more time he had to think, the more James was convinced that he would never be seen or heard from again.

The noticeable lack of contact from Frankie was just the beginning. Louise’s party or not, it was not at all like her to go for such a long time without so much as a ‘how r u’ text. James tried to reason that perhaps she was being polite, knowing that this was the first big opportunity James had been given and she didn’t want to distract him from his work or risk making him look unprofessional by receiving messages from his girlfriend when he should have been working.

But then James realised that, regardless of how true his theory may or may not have been, it was just completely unlike her to think that way. It was part of what had initially attracted him to her: her unwavering ability to be blunt to the point of rudeness. She wasn’t trying to deliberately set people off. It just always sort of happened that way.

To him, Frankie had always been this tall, fearless redhead who said and did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted to. People either

accepted it or avoided her. Either way, she really couldn't give a toss. For him, having spent much of his life in the shadow of his older brother and his endless string of achievements, it was an awfully appealing quality. He had always secretly hoped that some of her brazenness would rub off on him by proxy.

His next clue was the email he had sent to his brother. Not the first one where he confessed having doubts about the job before he had even gotten to Switzerland, admitting that he knew the only reason he had been asked was because he was the great Matthew Harris's kid brother. Matt had responded quite quickly to that one, especially given the time difference between London and Sydney and the myriad of building projects he had on the go, to basically tell James to put on his big boy trousers and man up. That this was an opportunity that could make or break his future career with the firm and he would do well not to panic like a little girl and get on with it.

No, it was the *second* email James had sent that, thus far, had gone without so much as an acknowledgement. *Maybe he's just busy*, James had reasoned once again, and hasn't had the chance to reply. Or maybe the tone of it was such that Matt had decided it didn't really warrant a response. That email had gone something like this:

Hi Matt – me again, if you get this email PLEASE just fucking respond. Even if it's just to say yeah got it. Been emailing everyone I can think of from Frankie to work even our parents and got nothing back. Not a peep. Is that not odd? Frankie I kind of expect it. It's Lou's birthday weekend bender. Chances are she's too hung over to type. But work? Mum and Dad?? What the hell does Mum have to do all day...she's retired for fuck's sake!!

I know I sent that email before and you said I was just freaking myself out but there's more to it. Something else is going on here. Just look at the facts. First one being the bloke I came here to work for just up and leaving. Said he'd only be gone a couple days. That was four days ago. So I'm begging you, just send a reply even if it's just one word like Tossler so that I will know my emails are getting out and I'm not going completely mad.

James had sent the email three days earlier after finishing all the work he was able to without Defleur present. Financial statements and forecastings

were done, contracts had been drawn up and cross-referenced, the offer paperwork was complete and ready to go. All he was waiting on was an authorising signature.

Guillaume had told him the fax machine was broken so he wouldn't be able to send anything through to him, but James didn't trust the creepy manservant as far as he could throw him. And he discovered, albeit a little late, that couriers in the Alps were non-existent regardless of how much money you happened to be dealing with. Perhaps the danger pay involved, what with the threat of avalanches, outweighed any chance of profitability. None of that changed the situation: James was stuck there until he could either get his documents out to be signed somehow or Defleur finally deigned to return.

He wondered which would come first, while knowing that the first one wasn't really an option.

He was well aware of how daft it would sound to the casual observer: him complaining about being 'stuck' in the Alps at a billion dollar mountain retreat. His colleagues, not to mention his brother, would be positively purple with envy. The whole place felt very much like what you might see in American beer adverts on television. But James had his reasons for feeling uneasy. And if ever there were a time when something was too good to be true, then this would definitely be it.

The layout of the house wasn't helping. To James, it felt very much like a hedge maze made out of concrete and glass. He literally didn't know if he were coming or going most of the time since all of the hallways and doors looked the same. He spent most of his time in his room simply because he didn't know how to get anywhere else. He had managed somehow to get back to the library a couple of times, but was never able to find that room with the sports equipment since the day he'd gone skiing with Defleur.

Shame, James thought, I'd give my left nut to watch a game of footie on that fucking huge TV.

He had no clue where the kitchen was, yet somehow food just magically appeared in his room, usually right before he woke up or while he

was in the washroom. Never once did he see who was bringing it. Whenever he did make his way downstairs, the butler would always offer to fetch him something. But he was too scared shitless to eat it.

The butler. For James, Guillaume was like something out of some late night film entitled *The Butler Did It Then Ate My Liver with Some Shallots and A Lovely Merlot*. He gave off a serious serial killer-esque vibe. But then, James was mindful to the fact that it could have been the feeling of isolation combined with the man's unnaturally pale skin and ice blue eyes that were so light and clear they practically glittered like diamonds that made him feel that way. But still, James would frequently catch him watching him whenever he thought that he wasn't paying attention, which was more than a little discomfoting. Face to face, Guillaume was all formal hospitality and deference, but once his back was turned those icy eyes would narrow and James could feel him monitoring his every movement. As if he were studying him. Maybe it was his butler training but to James it felt like whenever he left his room, Guillaume would be lurking there. Watching and waiting.

It was enough for James to make sure his door was locked up tight every night.

But it wasn't just the creepy butler. There were moments when James got the impression that he wasn't the only guest of the Comte. Even though he continued to try to convince himself that what had happened in the hallway outside his room that first morning was a figment of his imagination, he just couldn't shake the feeling.

James stood up from his desk and stretched before moving over to the windows. He didn't want to venture far from his room lest he run into his new friend Guillaume, but it looked like such a beautiful day out that he was reluctant to spend it trapped indoors. He glanced at the heavy double mahogany doors that he had gotten into the habit of keeping locked regardless of the time of day.

"There's got to be another way," he muttered to himself, not feeling quite brave enough to enter into that endless cold white hallway, butler or no butler.

He started toward the window and drew open the curtains even further. That was when he noticed that what he'd believed to be floor-to-ceiling windowpanes were actually a set of French doors that led to a small steel terrace bound by panes of glass and steel railings. James tried the door and was almost shocked to discover that they opened immediately, flooding his room with crisp fresh air. He had expected them to be locked; not just locked, but bolted in such a way that he would require a special key to open them.

He began to giggle aloud at his own foolishness. *Why would they be locked?* It wasn't as if there were any way to access the doors from the ground. The wing where his room was located was directly above the river that led into the valley with the mountain that held the ski run.

James stepped onto the balcony, taking extra care not to look down through the steel grates beneath his feet. He didn't need feel the need to remind himself how far he was above the water. He took a deep breath. After a week of breathing in the stale recycled air of the fortress he was staying in, its freshness had an almost narcotic effect. He felt dizzy, euphoric, then slightly panicky. To his relief, there was a small bistro table and chair tucked away on the other side of the doorway. He could feel himself begin to sway and quickly made himself sit before he could fall.

He let his head tip back so his face could bask in full view of the sunshine. Closing his eyes, he soaked in the moment of fresh air and freedom.

James wasn't sure how long he had been outside before he had begun to get that distinct and ever-increasing impression of being watched. It was the same prickly sensation you might get on the surface of your skin just before you look up to find someone staring you down. But that would be impossible since the only things he could see around him were mountains, snow-capped and silent. At least, that was what he continued to tell himself. However, the feeling remained.

After about an hour, James could stand it no longer.

He stood up from his chair and began to examine his surroundings more closely. He could see no one hiding in the deep craggy rock that lay

directly across from his terrace, nor was there any indication that anyone was concealed in the peaceful silence of the valley below. Even the river seemed to flow without sound. As James slowly scanned the other blocks that made up the house, he saw a small movement in one of the windows at the opposite end.

It was a fair distance away so he couldn't be sure; for all he knew it could very well have been a trick of the sunlight on the glass. Upon further inspection, he was positive that he could see the outline of a very long, very shapely female leg, clad in what appeared to be a sheer white stocking and matching lacy suspender belt. And then it was gone.

James stood, blinking slowly, not really sure of anything anymore.

It wasn't like he had been flipping through *Playboy* or *Maxim* or any other lad's magazine, so there was no reason for that sort of image to pop into mind. Except, of course, that he was a bloke. But still, there was no context. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even seen lingerie like that, either in print or real life. Frankie was never into that sort of thing. Even the thought of it was enough to make him laugh out loud. The sound of the shrill bark bouncing back at him from the rock face made him jump.

He hurried back in to the relative safety of his room, firmly closing the balcony doors and making sure they were locked before leaning with his back against them to catch his breath. He'd been standing like that for an indeterminate amount of time when a soft knock at the door gave him another start. It was Guillaume, asking him if he had any preferences for dinner and if he would be taking it in his room or the formal dining room downstairs.

He decided that, for a change, his mental wellbeing might do well with a little company so he said that he would dine downstairs. Guillaume's silence seemed to indicate that he was as surprised by the answer as James was himself.

The meal was a simple one – some meat in a cream sauce served over some potatoes and green beans. Guillaume sat across from him at the massive oak table, eyeing him with what felt like suspicion. *But of course*, he thought, *I could be completely misreading the situation*. Perhaps the old butler was

merely curious as to what had prompted James to eat dinner outside of his room. Or maybe that was just the look on his face.

James decided to test his newfound theory and mustered up the courage normally found after a few pints and reserved for pulling girls.

“So Guillaume,” he asked, trying to sound as casual as he could as he all but yelled to the other end of the room, “is there anyone else staying here at the moment?”

He almost enjoyed watching the butler’s pasty complexion pale even further. The old man was at a loss for words. James gave himself a mental pat on the back.

“*Non*, monsieur Harris,” Guillaume finally replied calmly. “Why would you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” James was surprised by how much he was enjoying this. “I just thought I heard someone in the hallway near my room. And today I thought I saw someone in the window of one of the other wings.”

“Is that so?” He thought he had heard a slight crack in the old man’s voice. “I was cleaning windows earlier. Perhaps it was me you saw.”

James found it difficult to contain his laughter, so he let slip a chuckle before he replied.

“Well, mate, unless you’re in the habit of cleaning house in ladies underwear, then I highly doubt it was you.”

He took great satisfaction in watching as the butler pale once more before his cheeks flushed to a deep, dark crimson.

Guillaume muttered something about going to the kitchen to see to dessert, and stalked out of the room muttering under his breath in French. James regretted not being better at the language in school; he would have loved to know what was said. His satisfaction was short-lived as the full implications of the butler’s reaction dawned on him: he was definitely hiding something.

The best-case scenario was that he knew something that James didn’t.

He didn't want to think about possible worst cases, which ranged from simple lies to something far more sinister at play. James shuddered, suddenly aware of the emptiness of the room and the way the silence seemed to echo against the bare white walls. James had found that he had lost what was left of his appetite and wasn't in the mood to stick around for dessert.

He hurried back to his room without so much as a glance to see which direction Guillaume had gone or even if he was on his way back. As he approached the hall where his room was, having found it that time round with minimal difficulty, he thought he heard footsteps padding softly on the runner carpet behind him. He whirled, expecting to see the butler sneaking to that nightly post James had imagined him taking up each night, but there was no one in sight. Only the bare expanse of white walls punctuated with the dark wood of the doors. The ceiling's recessed pot lighting didn't cast much glow, leaving in its wake lots of shadow and an infinite number of hiding places. Not to mention the opportunity for one's imagination to run away with him.

Quickening his pace, James made it to the bedroom door. Gaspings, his head snapped up as he thought he heard another sound, something more than a footstep, although he couldn't quite determine what it was exactly. Again, he was met with empty silence. He shook his head.

"Get a grip, mate," he muttered to himself.

Safely inside his room, with the door securely locked behind him, was the only place in the house where James felt like he could almost relax. But relaxation was something that refused to come easily that particular evening. He found himself pacing the floor restlessly, checking his laptop for emails he instinctively knew would not be there. His Blackberry had died a few days earlier and, as was typical for him, he had forgotten both his wall charger and the cable to connect to his computer. Not that it mattered, since he had not gotten any service bars since his arrival. He had noticed in the past few days of not having his mobile, though, how desperately attached he was to it. It was like losing a limb.

His laptop continued to refuse to make a connection with the Internet, so James was finally forced to entertain himself the old-fashioned

way: by picking up a book to read. It had been so long since he'd actually read anything that wasn't on a screen, he couldn't recall the last time. He found himself incapable of concentrating on the words, given his jumpiness at every little sound the house made around him. He became frustrated and decided to make it an early night.

As he made his way to the bathroom, a familiar sound from just outside the bedroom door stopped him in his tracks. It was a sound he was positive he had heard before. A giggle... that *female* giggle.

James froze before bolting toward the sound in a rare fit of courage, wrenching open the door. Nothing. Not a sound, save for his own heart pounding in his ears. Not a soul to be seen.

He closed the door and cursed its lack of deadbolt. Not a rational thought, but one to be expected under the circumstances. It would have lent an extra layer of safety and security. Enough to completely put his mind at ease? Not likely. After a few minutes of straining to hear through the heavy wood of the door, he went on about his business with both ears alert for any more hallway sounds. He tried reading once more to try to take his mind off things, and realised how much time he had on his hands once television had been taken out of the equation. Too bad he was too keyed up to focus on, let alone enjoy, whatever it was he was reading. He finally gave up, turning the light out and turning over on his side to face the door.

He slipped reluctantly into a dreamless sleep for a few hours before waking at around three o'clock in the morning for no apparent reason. No reason, that was, until he happened to glance toward the bottom of his bed.

At the foot of its four-poster frame stood two of the most beautiful women James had ever set eyes on, Frankie included. This was the kind of beauty you didn't see every day; it only seemed to exist in Hollywood films. One was ice blonde, her eyes so light they appeared almost translucent in what little moonlight that streamed into the room through the curtains. The other woman was much darker; her skin was the colour of coffee, with long wavy dark hair that flowed over her shoulders. They were wearing matching lingerie in different colours: midnight blue for the blonde, ivory white for the brunette.

James squeezed his eyes shut and gave his head a shake, convinced that he must have been dreaming or that the rich meat dish he'd had at dinner wasn't agreeing with him.

But they were still there when his eyes opened again.

He contemplated giving himself a good slap in the face but was lucid enough to recognise that, were he not dreaming, a move like that would most certainly get their attention. That was something that James wasn't sure would be a good or bad thing. Thus far, neither one seemed aware that he had woken up and seen them or if they did, they didn't care. They were too busy arguing with each other.

"He told us we couldn't," said the darker one.

"But it's been so long since we have had something so young, so full of life," the blonde purred. "Look how peacefully he sleeps. He would think it was nothing but a wonderful dream."

"We were told no." The dark-haired one was firm on this. "We only came to look."

"You're no fun. Where's your sense of adventure?" The blonde had moved closer to the head of the bed, forcing James to keep his eyes closed and pretend to sleep. He concentrated on keeping his breath even, something that became increasingly difficult when he felt the mattress sink beside him.

"This is not a game. He will be ours soon enough. Just be patient," the brunette replied.

James could feel the pressure on the mattress shift as if she were pulling the other woman back. Away from him. He heard the blonde let out a growl of frustration despite allowing herself to be pulled from the bed.

And then there was nothing. Only silence.

He waited for what seemed like an eternity before daring to open his eyes again. He was half-expecting them to be practically on top of him, that the silence was only a ruse. Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes,

exhaling sharply as he forced himself to sit up quickly. With any luck, he thought maybe he could knock one or both of them unconscious – perhaps even himself in the process – if they were hovering as close as he was afraid they might be. But the women were gone.

James scanned the room to be sure, even going so far as to switch on his lamp and get out of bed, hands shaking as he looked behind the closet doors and in the bathroom. But there was no sign of them at all. They had somehow slipped out of the room as swiftly and as silently as they'd managed to get in. He sat back down on the bed without turning out the light, trying to slow his breathing to a normal pace and will his heart to stop trying to beat a path from his chest.

There would be no sleep for him the rest of the night, of that much he was sure.

As for who these women were, how they had managed to get into his room through a locked door then out just as quickly without so much as a sound, or what they could possibly have meant by 'he will be ours soon enough', James was at a loss. Was it only a dream, perhaps inspired by that leg he had thought he'd seen earlier in the day? And should he be terrified by it or was it all right to be a little turned on? *I mean, it was a little hot until the cannibal talk*, he thought.

The only thing James knew for certain was that he was stuck in the Swiss Alps with a sociopathic servant and two gorgeous females who may or may not wish to make a meal out of him. *Young and succulent*: how else was he supposed to take that? If it was his subconscious that had come up with that little scenario, he feared he would need to see a shrink when he finally got back to London. *If I make it back at all*.

"All right, just stop," James told himself out loud. The sound of his own voice breaking the dead quiet of the dark bedroom made him jump. He tried again to tell himself that it was only a dream; the change in altitude was messing with his mind and heightening his already existing paranoia. But each time, he believed himself less and less because he *knew* that it wasn't a dream. He knew there was something going on that was beyond his comprehension.

Part of him felt that it may all be in vain, all of his self-reassurances. There was a very good chance that neither Frankie or his brother would ever see his emails, much less have a chance to respond. But there was a small part that remained inside him that had hope.

Hope that maybe someone might respond to his email.

Hope that there could be a perfectly rational explanation as to why two women were arguing over him in his bedroom in their underwear.

Hope that he would make it out of this place in one piece with his sanity intact.

FIVE

September 19th

Hi James - it's me, Frankie.

If the name sounds vaguely familiar to you, it should: I'm your fucking fiancée. The one you've left behind to rot as you party it up in Switzerland with your new fancypants client. At least that's what I've come to believe since I haven't heard so much as a peep from you since you left on your little trip. You know – the one you should have been back from ages ago? I mean it's fucking Thursday already! No emails, no voicemail, no texts...nothing. I've tried texting – no response. I can't even count how many times I've called your mobile just to get the same message repeated over and over that the customer I am trying to reach is out of range. WTF? I thought our plan was good for all of Europe? I was about to toss my mobile across the room it made me so angry.

I can only assume that you're just incredibly busy or that they haven't invented wireless technology in the Alps or that this deal is taking a hell of a lot longer than you thought it would. However none of that helps me in the least when I have such massively huge news to tell you. MacSweet is a go. Signed the lease today.

Now if that's not enough to get you to write back I don't know what is. So I guess I'll just wait to hear from you whenever you decide you've got the time then eh? Let's just hope that for your sake it's not too long. You know how I feel about waiting.

xoxo Frankie

It took Frankie every ounce of self-control she could muster not to slam the laptop shut after clicking send on the latest email to her wayward fiancé. She could have kept on and on with the typing, there was so much to say, but she figured she would just save herself the time and hand cramping. She had gotten the impression that he wasn't terribly concerned with checking his personal email, and even though she had copied his work address on the one she just sent, she'd be surprised if it garnered a reply.

That had always been one of her pet peeves about James: his complete lack of ability to focus on more than one thing at any given time. But it was something she had often chalked up to her own impossibly high standards when it came to men. James really was a decent bloke, the first one who hadn't run screaming after witnessing her rollercoaster-style mood swings, so she figured she owed it both to him and herself to overlook a few things every now and again. However, a willingness to overlook something and forgetting about it entirely were two very different things, so as her way of coping she had a mental file she used as a way of channelling her irritation, disappointment or abject rage whenever James did something that would normally put her over the edge.

More often than not, it was what he *didn't* do. That happened to be the bigger of the issues.

Frankie's file was nearly bursting at the seams with the number of times James had forgotten they were having dinner and stayed at the pub with his mates without bothering to turn his mobile ringer on. Or plans they had made to head down to Brighton to spend a weekend with Louise and whatever flavour of the month she had on the go, when Frankie was left waiting at the train station for him. He'd lost his mobile to so many pub toilets in London's East End she had lost count. And then there was the time that he had not only forgotten her birthday, but the surprise party he was supposed to have been co-hosting with Louise. That was the final straw for Frankie; maybe she didn't much care for celebrating her birthday in the same grand manner her best friend enjoyed, but she felt that if her boyfriend couldn't care enough to remember it then that was a bit of a red flag. She was going to end it with him.

As it turned out, his excuse was a valid one: he had become so caught up in choosing an engagement ring for her that he completely forgot about

everything else. He had proposed the same night Frankie had planned on breaking up with him. She had been so flabbergasted by the situation, the very public display in the middle of her favourite restaurant near Brighton's famous pier, that she said yes almost involuntarily.

And it was because he had been so attentive and conscientious since they had become engaged, firmly positioning himself as the man who would never break her heart, that made this sudden and complete absence of contact troubling. Frankie was concerned that it meant that James might be slipping back into old habits. That he'd discovered that he wasn't able to make the effort to change as he'd promised, and had just been on his best behaviour until he couldn't hide it any longer.

Obb bello, good old trust issues, Frankie thought.

She had been wondering how long it would take before that particular beast reared its ugly head. However tempting it was to dwell and wallow, she had neither the time nor the energy to think about James and why he suddenly decided to disappear. Or about Louise and her new best friends, those chocolate bars that had appeared from God knows where and in apparent unending supply. Frankie rarely saw her anymore without a half-eaten bar in her hand or an empty wrapper she was about to toss.

No, she needed to keep her eye on the prize: that perfect little piece of corner property in the Lanes that had just so happened to come onto the market at exactly the time that she needed it to. Although Frankie was never really one who believed in Divine Providence, she had to admit that this whole situation was falling rather smoothly into place. But of course, as always, her sensible Scottish upbringing and a healthy dose of paranoia made her question when it would all go pear-shaped and what exactly was going to go wrong. As her mother always told her, better to be prepared for the worst than to hope for the best.

That way you'll never be disappointed when things don't work out, dear. Frankie's mother was a charmer.

"Right," Frankie said out loud, taking a deep breath. "That's about enough of that."

She knew herself well enough to know that when she started thinking

about those little pearls of wisdom her mother had passed onto her in childhood, it was time to pop a pill or busy herself doing something else. And it just so happened that she'd forgotten her pills at Louise's.

She took another look around the empty space she had just signed a five-year lease on, something in itself that would have normally caused her to hyperventilate. But, although it was the most important step Frankie had taken in her life thus far, she felt a strange sense of calm. She didn't even question how quickly the transaction had gone through, accepting Mr. Bradley's vague and bizarrely sweat-laden explanation that it was down to a very motivated landlord. The shop was gorgeous enough on its own, with its beams and gables and leaded glass. The works. She had wasted no time once the keys were in hand, deciding to get straight into prepping for the painting she was planning on doing just as soon as she could get started. She knew that she could have just as easily hired someone in to do it for her, but she wanted to give it a go herself first. Frankie had always been someone who preferred to do things on her own, but when it came to something this important she knew that she wouldn't be satisfied leaving her vision in someone else's hands.

"Guess I really am a bit of a control freak," she mused out loud.

The sound of her voice echoing back at her reminded her that she needed to get moving. October wasn't that far away, and there was lots of work to be done if she was going to be open in time.

Frankie took stock of her internal checklist, noting some of the things she'd already been able to get in such a small amount of time. She'd found a gorgeous set of gilded glass cabinets in one of the many antique shops in the neighbourhood; the walls already had lots of built-in shelving, a feature she was so fond of if only because it meant she wouldn't need much else for display. Louise had spotted an antique gilded cash register in that same shop on their way out, so she bought that as well. Both items were being professionally cleaned and would be delivered later in the week. She had already contacted a graphic designer – the boyfriend of someone she had gone to culinary school with – who was working on signage and promotional items for her with the mid-October opening date.

It's amazing how much you can get done when you don't have to worry about how

you're going to pay for it all, she thought again for the umpteenth time.

But her list wasn't even closed to being complete. There were still so many things yet to do: source out suppliers for packaging and other sundry items, fine-tune a few of her recipes and of course, make all of the product. *Which is why*, Frankie told herself firmly, *I need to pull my head out of my ass and get to work*. Otherwise, opening day would come along and she would have nothing on the shelves to sell. And that would be a disaster.

The sound of her mobile brought her back into the present. She looked down to see who was calling, fully expecting it would be Louise or possibly even James finally deigning to respond to one of her many messages, but it was a number she didn't recognise. And she wasn't in the habit of picking up calls from numbers she was unfamiliar with, a behaviour trait she supposed she would need to adjust rather quickly once the shop was up and running.

"Because you can't very well ignore people when they call the shop," she said out loud as she hit the answer button.

"Hello?"

"Oh hello there, am I speaking with Frances?" chirped a male voice at the other end. Obviously someone she didn't know, what with the use of her birth name.

"Yes, but it's Frankie, actually. I don't really go by Frances," she responded warily. Probably someone trying to sell her something.

"Oh, my apologies. I was going by the letting application I have in front of me."

Oh shit, Frankie moaned to herself. What with all of the chaos the past week had brought, she had completely forgotten about the application that her and James had submitted to an estate agency for a flat a few weeks earlier.

"I'm just ringing to tell you," the estate agent was saying, "that we do have a flat available at the end of this month. It's a lovely two bedroom in a converted Victorian row house, with a view of the sea from the master

bedroom. I was trying to contact James Harris as it says here that he would be the principle on the lease but I haven't had any luck getting through..."

That makes two of us, mate, she thought ruefully before realizing that the agent had asked her a question.

"I'm sorry – what was that?"

"Would you like to book a viewing to see the flat?" came the question again. And a very good question it was.

"Actually, it isn't really a good time for me to think about a move like that. But I appreciate the thought and please do keep us in mind for the future," she replied without hesitation, effectively cutting what may have been left of the conversation short.

Now why would I have gone and said that, Frankie wondered.

Granted, she was angry with James at the moment. But, as she toyed with the small diamond on the ring finger of her left hand, she found herself thinking that there was maybe more to it. Admittedly, she was a little freaked out by all this newfound responsibility she'd been given, never mind the huge amount of money that had come along with it. Living with Louise, despite whatever was happening with her and those chocolates, had given her more stability than she'd had in quite some time. Since she had last lived in Brighton, in fact.

Truth be told, she was somewhat relieved that James hadn't been around that week as she was rushing around, taking care of things for the shop. Otherwise she would have felt an obligation to take care of him, to make sure that he felt welcome and included. Brighton wasn't his home; he was an Essex boy, born and raised. The only reason he was moving there was for her. And although they'd spoken about it at length and he had always insisted that he was happy to relocate with her, deep down Frankie wasn't entirely convinced. Even this recent absence almost seemed like a test of sorts. For her or James, Frankie wasn't sure.

The only thing she felt for certain, as she sat alone in her empty shop thinking too much, was anger.

She hated not knowing what was going on. For the first time since they had become engaged, Frankie was beginning to wonder if there would be a future for her and James after all. But she had stop wallowing and get back to what she was supposed to be doing in the first place: painting.

How did that old saying go? Be careful what you wish for; you might get it. Frankie was busy mixing yet more primer for the walls, wondering for the tenth time that day if she'd made a mistake in electing to do all the painting and design for the shop on her own. There were so many other things she could be doing with that time.

But no, she thought, this is exactly where I'm supposed to be right now.

She had scored high marks in the conceptual design classes she'd taken at culinary school. Maybe those had more to do with creating interesting-looking treats than anything else, but then she had earned a perfect score for a project where she had designed the layout and colour scheme for a storefront. She was just going to have to trust that actually meant something. But she was confident she'd be able to execute the floorplan she'd had floating round her mind for so long she figured she'd be able to do it in her sleep.

The colours she had chosen were simple. Pink was second only to purple when it came to Frankie's list of favourites, and would go far better with chocolate brown trim of the baseboards and mouldings making it the more logical choice. In the end, it was a soft blush pink that perfectly punctuated with the rich chocolate brown border and darkly stained hardwood flooring. Since she knew next to nothing about refinishing wood she'd had to swallow her pride and hire someone in to do it, but even the perfectionist in her had to admit that the bloke had done a hell of a job. He was quick to come in and get things done, even left some extra dropcloths to protect the floors from the painting she was still insisting on doing herself, despite his offer to do it for her for a pittance. There was really no question over his quality or price; he had come highly recommended to her by Louise's father.

And from Louise herself, but for a completely unrelated reason.

“Ooh, oh yes...I remember him,” Louise had recalled rather lasciviously in between bites of her Cocoa Cream. Apparently she was so far gone on the stuff that she’d taken to eating whilst they were on the phone.

“He was quite a goer in the sack, that’s for sure. He’ll polish your floors but good, if you know what I mean.” Unfortunately Frankie had known exactly what she meant as the unwelcome image leapt into her mind.

“Yes, *thanks* SO much, Lou,” she had replied before ending the call as quickly as she could with a shudder.

She wasn’t sure which was the worst of it: the idea of Louise cavorting with the floor man, or the sound of the incessant open-mouthed chewing sound that had echoed directly into Frankie’s ear as Louise inhaled her chocolate bars one after the other at the other end of the line.

She sighed at the memory, and then shook her head in an attempt to rid her mind of it entirely. Frankie was accustomed to thoughts drifting away from her – it was something she’d lived with all her life – but these days she couldn’t help but notice it had become more difficult to control than ever. She knew it was means of escapism. In this case, it was her mind’s way of escaping the enormity of the situation.

Her very own shop, at last. If only it were that simple.

Lately her mind had gotten into the bad habit of meandering back to that tall shadow she’d seen through the frosted glass at the bank, and then from there inevitably to the stranger from Louise’s party. Dreaming about him wasn’t enough anymore. While part of her realised that this constant fantasizing about a stranger she’d barely caught sight of in the dead of night weeks ago wasn’t exactly healthy, it clearly was enough to create quite an impression and a symptom of a much deeper issue. But it was an issue she wasn’t prepared to tackle head-on at the moment, so it would just have to continue to fester.

Frankie frowned. She was losing daylight quite quickly, and the primer wasn’t going to apply itself. The walls of the shop had been painted a very odd shade of terracotta, dark and flat, so it was proving more stubborn to cover than she’d anticipated. It was going to take another coat or two of primer not to bleed through and mess with her perfect light pink.

“Third times the charm,” she muttered out loud through gritted teeth as she heaved the bucket back into what would become the main shopfloor.

She had already decided to make one wall a design feature, painted entirely in that delicious deep chocolate selected solely because it made her mouth water just looking at it. It would most likely serve as a backdrop to the antique cash register. *At least that will save me some primer*, she thought as she reached the middle of the room with the bucket. She just needed to decide which wall that was going to be. Since Louise had declined to come meet her – she must have wanted to be alone with her Cocoa Creams – so she was going to have to make that particular choice on her own. Something she supposed she would have to get used to.

The Lanes were usually a hive of bustle and activity but not at half seven on a Tuesday evening, Frankie noted as she stood inside, peeping through a small tear in the papered glass at the streets in front of her shop. There were a handful of people milling about on the cobblestones outside a pub, perhaps sneaking a fag before going back to their pints, but overall it was fairly desolate. She guessed that summer’s high season was winding down, offering a bit of respite until the Christmas rush took hold, which would likely change everything.

As she stood quietly inside, she felt her breath catch again at the idea that all of this was *hers*, just as it had done since the first time she’d unlocked the lead-paned door and opened it to hear the charming bell peal overhead. *And charming was the perfect word for it*, she thought.

The interior layout of the shop was fairly unassuming. The front room had an angled ceiling supported by exposed beams, and built-in dark wooden shelving that ran along the two walls parallel to the front door. To the left of the entrance was an enormous leaded glass window that overlooked the street, with flower boxes on the outside and a generous banquette inside that Frankie had already decided would be perfect for the elaborate displays she was planning. Its tiny pot lights didn’t give off so much heat as to melt the chocolate, and were just bright enough to attract the attention of the passersby who would be her potential customers. Directly opposite the front door, a small corridor led from the main shop into a small kitchen and office area in back, anchored by an expanse of wall that she had just decided in that moment to paint in the dark chocolate

shade. She walked over and confirmed that it would give her the best vantage point to keep an eye on everything.

And as she stood there, she could suddenly see it all laid out before her: the shop finished and glorious and teeming with eager customers. The shelves had become home to a selection of boxed chocolates, wrapped with brightly coloured paper and being pondered over by well-intentioned husbands and boyfriends who had stopped in on their way home. Frankie imagined herself behind the antique register, chatting and laughing as she rang purchases through. Customers stood patiently waiting for service, peering into the enormous glass cabinets beside the register that housed the individual truffles, chocolate bark, and other bonbons that sat waiting to be personally selected and packaged. Uh-oh, it looks like that silver platter Frankie had planned on using as a taster tray on the dark cherry table in the middle of the shop is in need of a refill again: it's looking pretty empty.

And that would be another fine example of why I haven't been able to get any bloody work done, Frankie sighed again. Too much fucking day-dreaming.

She reluctantly pulled herself free from her fantasy and pushed up her shirtsleeves to start making it a reality when she remembered that she'd left her roller and painters tray in the kitchen sink. As she rinsed them until the water ran clean, she heard the brass bell above the door ring out. It echoed loudly in the empty space. The unexpectedness of it froze her in place.

Oh shit. Had she somehow forgotten to lock the door behind her?

She could hear the sound of hard-soled shoes walking across her newly refinished wooden floors. Heart pounding, she called out something that sounded that sounded like 'be right there' and tried to dust herself off enough to at least look presentable.

It was probably some local resident or perhaps a fellow shopkeeper who saw the lights she had just switched on and had gotten curious, she decided as she tried to calm herself down. She quickly grabbed her tray with the rollers so that the person would get the hint that she was very busy and wouldn't have much time to chat, before reminding herself that she needed to be polite. This could be a potential customer, and she would have to be nice. She checked that her mobile was still tucked into her back pocket as a

precaution, no doubt getting dust all over her bottom in the process.

Great. Way to make a first impression, she rolled her eyes at herself before she ventured out, taking a final deep breath and plastering a smile on her face with as much sincerity as she could muster.

Her unexpected caller was standing waiting just inside the door. Frankie could feel her heart begin to pound again as she took in the stranger's height. He was so tall that he towered in front of the door, and may have even had to duck down to gain entrance. Then she noticed his beautiful trench coat. Dove grey, and so meticulously tailored that it could only have come bespoke from Savile Row. He stepped forward to greet her, and she felt a lump form in her throat.

"Ms. MacSweeney?" His voice melted over her like honey. *No, not honey, exactly*; it was smoother than that. More like a fine Belgian milk chocolate at perfect temper. But his voice was nothing compared to the face. It was indescribably perfect, so perfect that Frankie was beginning to feel lightheaded just looking at him. It was a symphony of cheekbones, full lips, and long eyelashes. The features that men so often take for granted, and most women would kill to have.

Her throat had suddenly become very dry as she tried to swallow, heart still thudding away like a hammer in her ribcage.

"Umm y-yes. And who are you?" Not the most polite way to start a conversation, but it came out less as a demand and more a mystified whisper. She was amazed that she'd had the ability to speak at all.

The stranger smiled warmly, his eyes crinkling attractively in the corners, and Frankie was relieved that she hadn't offended him. Something she seemed to do with so many people.

"I apologize for the intrusion, but I was just passing by and noticed that the light was on. And since I was already planning to drop by tomorrow to introduce myself anyway, I thought that maybe I would try my luck tonight. My name is Henry Roberts." He extended his hand.

Frankie was barely able to concentrate on the words as they left his beautifully shaped lips. She'd heard him speak, but his voice seemed to slide

right over her. She watched, mesmerised, as a lock of hair the colour of lemon buttercream slipped onto his forehead.

“Frankie MacSweeney,” she replied as she managed to pull herself together and moved forward, fighting not to sweep that lock of hair back as she did, to shake his hand. It was strong but smooth, and it made her knees weak.

“You must be with the bank?” She reasoned before mentally giving herself a smack. Given that he’d known her name and just finished telling her he was planning to come in to introduce himself, wouldn’t that be the only reason he’d know who she was? *Nice one.*

He chuckled, almost nervously she thought, although again she wasn’t really paying attention. She was far too occupied trying to hold herself together. *Christ, what’s wrong with me,* she thought. *I don’t usually go to pieces over an attractive man.* But rarely had she encountered a man such as this. *Okay, scratch that. Try never.*

“Yes, you could say that,” he replied. “I’ve been appointed as your mentor under the loan scheme Mr. Bradley had set you up with. I’m surprised he didn’t mention it to you.”

It was entirely possible that he had mentioned it, but she had been on such a high over getting the loan in the first place that she had stopped listening after hearing the amount. *At this rate, I’m going to make the best businesswoman ever.*

“I’m not sure if he did, but I guess he thought I could use all the help I can get,” Frankie joked lamely.

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit,” he said softly as he looked intently into her eyes. His were a soft blue-grey, almost the same colour as the sea after a storm. The kind of eyes a girl could get lost in, she noted, making them just as dangerous.

Frankie was suddenly very aware that he still had hold of her hand. He seemed to notice at the same time she did, and he pulled it away quickly as he continued.

“It looks to me like you have the makings of a very profitable business here.” He had begun to walk around the room looking around him with interest. Inspecting the space on the bank’s behalf, Frankie assumed.

“The wall colour not to your liking, I gather?” He nodded at the bucket of primer that Frankie had almost forgotten was laying at her feet. She laughed, giving it a nudge with her foot.

“Yeah, it was less than appealing. Kind of a cross between puke and baby shit,” she replied off-handedly before realizing what it was that she had said. Then she froze, wide-eyed.

It had come out of her mouth before she could stop it, even think about it. *Bugger, bugger, bugger*, she thought desperately, *why do I have to be so...me sometimes?* She felt herself begin to blush a dull shade of burgundy before risking a peek just to see how appalled he was by it. By her.

To Frankie’s relief although Henry’s eyes had widened to the size of milk saucers, he began to laugh. Not an uncomfortable titter, but a genuine, shoulder-shaking chortle.

“That was a...ahhh... remarkably *vivid* description.”

He wiped at his eyes, still smiling at her. There was no sign of disgust or even disapproval. She felt her knees weaken again slightly and her mind go blank, unable to draw up some witty remark that would save her from herself. For once, this time not mercifully, words failed her.

“Would you like some help?” he asked.

She looked up at him, startled. He was serious.

“Um, I’m not sure priming walls would be quite what the bank had in mind when they appointed you as a mentor.” But Henry appeared undeterred, giving her a smirk that made Frankie’s stomach flip as he removed his overcoat.

Mother of God, that’s a well-fitted Thomas Pink shirt he’s wearing.

“Well now, we just won’t tell them then, will we,” he replied as he began rolling up his French cuffs.

Frankie wondered how it was humanly possible to make a white button down shirt tucked into plain grey trousers look so pornographic. And why he was affecting her in such a way.

She came to the logical conclusion that she was in need of a good shag. *Of course, that must be it.* James had just been gone too long without contact – no flirty texts, no naughty emails, nothing – and his absence had left her with the hormone levels of a horny teenager. And then, to make matters worse, there he was bending over in front of her to pick up the roller. All Frankie could do was silently repeat *must... not...squeeze... his ass* over and over until she was sane again.

It was turning into one fucking long night. At the rate things were going, she realised, the only thing that would be accomplished that evening was the female equivalent of blue balls.

But somehow, through a combination of deep breathing and sheer force of will, she pulled herself out of the frenzy of lust she had worked herself into and grabbed a paintbrush. She had a job to do, after all.

And, she reminded herself, I'll be fucked if I let some bank-appointed mentor-type come in and distract me with his perfect V of a back and the masterful way he's gripping his roller.

Although that may not have been the best choice of words.

Or maybe they're exactly the right words right about now.

Oh fuck, just STOP.

Just don't look at him.

Pay no attention to the blond godlike creature painting next to you. Make some small talk if you must, but for Christ sake DO NOT look at him again.

On and on went the running commentary in Frankie's mind until Henry broke the silence.

“So, what sort of colour were you planning to paint over this shade of baby shit?”

Just respond, don't laugh – don't even look at him. Frankie could tell that he was smiling without even having to glance in his direction. She could hear it in his voice.

“A pale pink. Something light but at the same time has a little bit of warmth to it. If that makes any sense at all,” she managed to reply in a neutral tone.

“Perfect sense. And what about trim? Will you be leaving it white?”

“Nope...that's going to be chocolate brown—”

“Of course,” Henry and Frankie finished in unison.

She finally gave in and risked a glance over at Henry, and together they burst into laughter. To her surprise, she found that being in his presence was getting easier. More comfortable. The tidal wave of pure lust she'd experienced earlier was quickly subsiding. However, it was being replaced with a flood of some other emotion that though Frankie couldn't precisely pinpoint what it was, she knew it could prove far more dangerous.

Best not to think about that now, she thought. Best just to ignore it until it went away.

“So are you from Brighton then?” Frankie had never been very good at small talk. Henry seemed to pause before responding, as if considering his words carefully.

“My family is, yes. But I've lived here and there. All over, really. I've only just come back recently. I suppose to become more acquainted with my roots.”

Henry smiled to himself, as if the thought pleased him a great deal. *Oh crap,* Frankie scolded herself. She had forgotten that she wasn't supposed to be looking at him. And she definitely couldn't handle it when he smiled. She was doing well, but not that well.

“What about you? I can tell from your accent that you're not from around here...”

Frankie giggled for what felt like the thousandth time that evening.

And she had never been the sort of girl one would refer to as a giggler. It was a trait she loathed, actually.

“And here I thought I’d managed to rid myself of the telltale Scottish brogue, I haven’t lived there for so long. Since I was a wee girl. You’d think it would be gone by now.”

“Ahh, but that’s where you’re wrong. Some things never go away.” Henry had stopped painting to turn and face her, his eyes thoughtful but serious as he continued with his train of thought. “Perhaps they might fade a little, but there are some things that are so inherent to who you are as a person that they will never go away. Not entirely.”

Frankie had stopped painting as well, mirroring his movement. They stood looking at one another in silence for what felt to her like an eternity, letting the words hang between them, before Henry spoke first.

“Well now, that was a little too deep for polite conversation, wasn’t it?” He laughed uneasily. Frankie began to laugh as well. Or rather, giggle.

“Hmmm, now that you mention it, maybe just a little,” Frankie was relieved she was able to at last serve up some of her infamous caustic charm, that although Henry made her giggle he hadn’t rendered her completely useless.

He made a face in response, then moved as though he was planning to toss the excess paint in the roller tray in her direction.

“No!” She cried out theatrically, faking her best look of horror, “think of the hardwood floors!” They laughed together again, harder this time.

Laughter was quickly becoming something of a theme for the evening. It seemed to come so easily and often. The conversation continued with much more ease as they painted. Or, more accurately, Frankie talked while Henry listened with great interest.

She told him about her childhood in the Scottish highlands, how they’d first moved to Southend-On-Sea for a few years before heading on to Brighton, a place that she had always considered home above any of the other places she’d lived. Especially London.

“I wonder why that is,” he mused out loud.

They had finished with the priming, three coats in total to get rid of that horrid brown shade completely, and had begun cleaning off the rollers and tray in the kitchen’s sink. *For a drop-dead gorgeous bank-appointed mentor with excellent taste in clothes*, Frankie mused, *this bloke isn’t afraid of a little hard work.*

“I’m not sure. It’s not something I can really explain in words, you know?” She stopped washing and turned to face him, frowning as she struggled to find the right words to express how she felt about the city. Of course, Frankie wasn’t one to let that stop her.

“Brighton just feels like home for some reason. It always felt... I don’t know, wrong in London. Like I was pretending to be something I’m not. But as soon as I got back here, there was this huge sigh of relief. Almost like, ‘pew... at last.’”

“I can relate to that,” Henry nodded in agreement, leaving Frankie relieved that she was at least making sense and not prattling on like a twat. “I’ve lived all over Europe and travelled most the world, but as soon as I arrived here - to Brighton – it was as if a weight I wasn’t aware I was carrying had been lifted from my shoulders. A sigh of relief would be an excellent way to describe it.”

Henry smiled again. The most beautiful, genuine smile, Frankie couldn’t help but notice. It made her feel as though they were the only two people left in the world. Until she remembered that they weren’t.

“Shit! What time is it?” She had taken her phone out of her pocket for safekeeping once they’d started painting, but promptly forgot all about it. To say that Henry was a distraction would have been an understatement. She grabbed it from the countertop. 3:30am, it read, as well as a few missed calls from Louise. They had been painting and talking and laughing for the past eight hours, but it had felt like no time at all.

“I didn’t realise it was so late.” Henry had glanced over Frankie’s shoulder and hurried to rinse the sink free of primer residue. He washed and dried his hands hastily as she put the bucket and tray with the rollers in the storage closet, then they made their way out to front of the shop.

“May I walk you to your car?” *Such a gentleman. Fuck.*

“It’s just parked down the street. I’m sure I’ll be fine. There’s no one about.” *Honestly, you should be more concerned with your own safety, all alone here with me in the dark.*

“I gather that came out as more of a question, but it’s not really up for debate.” His voice was firm, sending a shiver down Frankie’s spine as he was shrugged into his coat and looked at her expectantly. “I insist on seeing you safely to your vehicle.”

“Oh fine, if you’re insisting,” she tried to reply jokingly, even rolling her eyes. Giggling again like a schoolgirl, she followed him out the door.

“Where is your coat?” There was genuine alarm in his tone.

Frankie shrugged as she was locking up.

“Must have forgotten it. Too pre-occupied. Besides, it’s really not that cold,” she replied as she attempted to nonchalantly rub at her arms, clad only in a thin long-sleeved t-shirt, for warmth.

Henry gave her a stern look of disapproval before removing his trench and draping it over her shoulders, moving so quickly that it left no room for her to argue. On Frankie’s reed-thin frame, the trench looked more like a cape. She sighed a little, and figured that she must have been really tired and thinking way too much about the shop because Henry’s coat smelled like chocolate. Earthy and sweet, maybe a little bit smoky. And utterly intoxicating.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“My pleasure,” he replied just as softly, his hands resting on her shoulders just a half-second longer than they may have needed to.

They walked to the car in silence.

“Thank you again for all of your help tonight. And it was lovely to meet you a day early,” she said as they stopped in front of her borrowed Mercedes.

“Again, it was my pleasure, Ms. MacSweeney. I’m glad that I noticed that your light was on.” *Oh, my light’s on, all right. No.*

“Call me Frankie. That Ms. business just sounds so odd to me.”

He laughed. Frankie was hoping that it was because she was incredibly witty. And not being completely ridiculous.

“And you must, in turn, call me Henry. I was thinking: will the primer be dry by tomorrow? Because I’d really like to come back and finish what we’ve started here tonight. If that would be all right with you, of course.”

He was looking at Frankie with such earnest, as if his next breath hinged upon her answer. *As if it would be possible for me to say anything but yes.*

“Of course,” she said finally, and he seemed to relax. “I was hoping to be back in for around ten, but don’t quote me on that. It’s pretty late.” *Who am I kidding?* Like she would be able to get to sleep after tonight, regardless of how shattered she was.

“Shall we say around noon, then? Would that be fair?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you then.” Rather reluctantly, Frankie removed Henry’s beautiful coat from her shoulders and stole one last look at him. He was smiling at her again. *Why must he do that?*

“Thank you, kind sir, for the use of your coat,” she tried to sound light and teasing, but his smile had taken some of the wind out of her.

“And as I said before, it’s my pleasure. Good night, Frankie.”

She felt a thrill course through her veins as he said her name, although it was strange because it sounded so formal. She even thought she had detected a hint of a bow in his posture. But then, the potent combination of lust and lack of sleep could have just made her delusional.

“Good night Henry,” she replied as she swiftly got into her car, sitting with her hands on the steering wheel for a few moments as she tried to steady her nerves enough for the drive home. She was acutely aware that Henry was watching from the opposite curb, ever the gentleman, determined to see her off safely. She glanced through the window in his

direction; he gave her a little wave and a nod. Frankie managed a weak smile in return as she started the engine.

Pulling away from the curb, she was surprised to discover that driving in the opposite direction of where Henry was far from easy. It was as if the further away she got, the more anxious she started to feel. By the time she'd made it back to Louise's house, she was in need of a warm bath and cup of tea to calm herself. She kept telling herself that it was just the cold chill, the seaside air that can seep into your bones and freeze you from the inside out. But again, she wasn't fooling anyone, let alone herself. Whatever this was that she was feeling was ridiculous. Not to mention dangerous, for at least two reasons.

First, she happened to be very happily engaged. Well, she was until a few days ago, at least. And second, Henry had been sent by the bank to help Frankie with *her business*. The same bank that had just given her a rather large sum of money to open the business she'd been dreaming of since forever. To throw all of that away, or even to risk it over some silly horny crush, would be utter madness. One thing she knew all too well: you just don't shit where you eat. Frankie inhaled deeply to steady herself. She just needed to take a minute to remember where all of this angst and apprehension was coming from. She was diving headfirst into new and alien territory; it would be perfectly natural, almost expected for things to feel off-kilter. Her fiancé has evidently disappeared from the face of the earth. Louise was acting like a complete freak. And to top it all off, she'd been handed a fortune by the bank who also happened to throw in the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her life to serve as her mentor.

Maybe it's a trap. Did they do that just to fuck with me? Does the money come with some sort of morality clause? It was that final thought that told her it was clearly time for sleep. When the conspiracy theories started, that was often the only remedy. And by the time Frankie would wake up in the morning, everything would have gone back to as normal as it could be. Of course, no amount of sleep would make Henry any less beautiful. In fact, she was almost positive that seeing him in the late morning sunlight was going to cause some considerable pain.

No, this wouldn't be an easy night. *But come tomorrow*, Frankie told herself determinedly as her head hit the pillow, *everything will be just fine*.

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