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# **Please Don't Stop the Music**

Written by Jane Lovering

Published by Choc Lit

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# *Please Don't Stop the Music*

Jane Lovering



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## Chapter One

You know you're in for a bad day when the Devil eats your last HobNob.

All right, it was Saskia, not Old Nick, and any hoofed tendencies were well-disguised in sling-back Manolos, but from there on the resemblance was remarkable, down to the slightly reddish-tinged eyes and the air of immoral superiority.

'Bad news I'm afraid, Jemima. Well, bad for *you*, obviously, not for me!' She tinkled a laugh that I wanted to hit with a brick. 'I've decided to start sourcing elsewhere.'

Her tight little lips mouthed another few crumbs, nibbling slowly around the biscuit's edge until I wanted to scream, 'Just *eat it!*' but I didn't dare. 'Sorry, what?'

'Your jewellery is very – well, it's quite lovely of course, very *intricate*, but it is rather expensive you know.' It takes weeks to build each piece. That's why Saskia started stocking them in her shop – because they were exclusive. 'I've been talking to one or two people in the States who make very similar pieces, and they can supply me at roughly half what you charge.'

*Half?* What are they using, I wanted to ask, plastic and polyfilla? I'd already got my overheads down as low as I could by renting a room in Rosie's little house and sharing workshop space in Jason's barn. 'I could, maybe, give you discount ... use less expensive materials ...' I tried, but Saskia was already standing up.

'Anyway, I've decided to give the shop a more cosmopolitan look, buy things in from all over the world. That's what this darling little rural corner could do with, right? A touch of World Culture? All right, better trot now,

busy, busy!’ She dropped the remains of the biscuit casually onto the edge of the table, paused for a moment as if waiting for the butler to sweep it off, and then with a quick shrug, was gone through the door in a waft of Arpège tinged with brimstone.

‘Coast clear?’ Rosie snuck half a shoulder round the bottom of the narrow stairway. ‘Thought I’d stay out of the way until she’d gone, she doesn’t need any more ammunition in the great Unpleasantness War. Sssh, lovey, Cruella’s gone now.’

This was addressed to her baby son, Harry, who lay in her arms like a damp rucksack, gouching slightly.

‘She ... she’s just dropped me.’

‘Dropped you?’ I tried not to look as Rosie pulled down the front of her pyjama top and fastened Harry to a boob as though buttoning him on. ‘From how high? Ow! Yes, go on, Jem, I’m listening, breast-feeding doesn’t leach away your brain you know.’

‘Yes, I know, it’s just ... distracting, you sitting there with your chest hanging out and Harry grabbing you, farting and squelching.’

‘Sounds like a really good party,’ Rosie said wistfully. ‘Remind me again, Jem, what parties are?’

‘Excuse me, I’m just about to become penniless thanks to the Diamante Demon and you’re smiling indulgently at me whilst having a head full of fluffy mummy-moments! You might want to throw me out into the snow when I can’t pay my bills. And – and this is the clincher – she ate the last HobNob.’

Rosie sighed. ‘She really is evil, isn’t she?’

Rosie supplied the shop with her handmade greetings cards so she was well up on the Awfulness of Saskia. She, however, had long since branched out and now also

supplied most of the card shops in this part of North Yorkshire. We'd first met at Saskia's one afternoon when I was delivering a series of belt buckles, each a bejewelled representation of the Seven Deadly Sins, and discovered that we both loathed Saskia with a passion bordering on unhealthy fixation. Which came in handy six months ago when Rosie's pregnancy meant that she'd had to ease up on the work front and the short-term lease on my flat in York had begun to seem restrictive. It was a near-perfect situation, except that the result of the pregnancy now had to sleep in a carry-cot jammed in beside Rosie's wardrobe; when he needed to move into a proper bed we were probably going to have to fence-in the bath.

'You'll find another outlet.' Rosie tucked herself away and hoiked Harry up to her shoulder where he belched like a lager-lout. 'You're twenty-eight. Blonde and gorgeous. You make the most exquisite jewellery I've ever seen, and you're thin, you bitch. Honestly, people will be eating their own knees to have a chance to buy your stuff. Anyway, Saskia never marketed you properly, you should have worldwide recognition for your designs, not a cramped corner of a jumped-up knick-knack shop!' She pondered for a moment, flicking her chicane of black curls out of her eyes. 'And I can't throw you out into the snow. It's not winter.'

'I was being figurative. Honestly, Rosie, what am I going to do for money? What am I saying, it can't get much worse, I already share workspace with a guy who reads *Shunters' Weekly*, and not in an ironic way.' Jason is an artiste (his 'e') who lives in a beautiful flat in the roof-space of the barn, like a materially successful pigeon, and he builds things out of scrap locomotives. Thicker than a bed sandwich, his chief saving grace is looking like a

mixture of Johnny Depp and Jack Davenport. ‘And we both know she only stocked my things in Le Petit Lapin because I’d got friendly with Jason and he put in a word for me. Saskia fancies him so much she’d buy Liverpool FC if he asked her to. I mean, yeah, everyone loved my stuff but they didn’t like the prices.’

‘Le Petit Lapin.’ Rosie sniggered, ignoring my tirade. ‘Honest to God, Jem, I can’t hear that name without thinking that it sounds like a strip club. I’m surprised the York Board of Trade didn’t make her change it.’

‘With a husband as rich as Alex is she could call it “Rub Me With Your Willy” if she wanted to.’ I stared at the walls. ‘I really thought I was making a go of it,’ I said quietly.

Rosie touched my arm. ‘You *are* making a go of it,’ she said gently. ‘People love your pieces, you only need to read your e-mails to know that. Don’t let Saskia get you down, other shops will take you on, don’t worry. Anyway, what’s she so uptight about money for?’

Saskia’s husband Alex ‘did something’ in property. They lived in the same village as us in a much, much larger house. Saskia regarded living twelve miles outside York as the class equivalent to just-off-Knightsbridge, while Rosie and I privately agreed that she put the ‘colic’ into bucolic and couldn’t wait until she was driven back to town by the pitchfork-wielding locals. Sadly improbable, with the money that she and Alex threw at village institutions, but we still found ourselves backing away slowly whenever she complained about the 5 a.m. cockerel chorus, or the smell of cows.

‘Maybe her marriage is on the rocks?’

Rosie snorted. ‘Yeah, right! She’d take Alex to the cleaners! Anyway, what did she pay you for the last lot?’

Two grand? Two thousand pounds is the kind of loose change she'd give to a beggar in the street, if she ever gave anything to beggars apart from a sneer and a kick in the ankle.'

'She doesn't actually *kick* them does she?'

'Well, no,' Rosie looked down at Harry's sleeping head and dropped a soft kiss on it. 'But she looks as though she would if no-one was watching. Anyway, my point is ... oh sod it, Jem, what *is* my point? I thought my memory would improve after Harry was born. D'you know I'm beginning to think it wasn't the placenta that came out after him, it was my brain?'

'Well thanks for *that* image. Your point, I think, was that Saskia isn't exactly short of a few quid.'

'Yes. Yes, that was it. And she ate our last HobNob? Hang on a minute, nursing mother here, aren't I entitled to *any* privileges? Look, I'm going to put Harry in his cot for a sleep and get on and do some cards. I've got a few orders to fill before next week so I'd better make a start now while it's quiet.'

'Are you sure you wouldn't rather go to bed for a bit?' Harry, bless his little babygro, wasn't exactly the calm, relaxed baby Rosie had somehow been led to believe she'd have, despite all the whale-song CDs and the hours of pregnancy-yoga, during which she'd looked more and more like an egg on a stick. Since his arrival she'd acquired shadows under her eyes and a pale, stretched look as though she was co-existing in several universes at once.

'Nah, I'd better get on. I'll catch a snooze later.'

'Have you thought any more about ... maybe ...' It sounded incoherent but Rosie knew what I meant.

'I can bring Harry up on my *own* perfectly well, just as long as Saskia doesn't decide she wants to turn him into a

baby-skin coat or sausages or something.'

Harry's father was something Rosie never talked about. She'd not had a boyfriend for at least a year, or, obviously she *had*, for the duration of copulation if nothing else, but she refused to say anything about him. *My* money was on Jason, but then my money was on Jason for everything from funding terrorism to dropping litter. Despite this, I harboured a kind of hope that he was the father. He was well-off, good-looking and wouldn't necessarily mean Harry was doomed to being several nails short of a shelf unit; Rosie was quite bright enough to make up that particular deficiency.

'Well, if you're sure ... I'd better get back to the marketing drawing board. Again. "Cosmopolitan" huh! I dread to think what she's going to turn that lovely little shop into! Should have seen it coming, I guess, she's always wanted to be El Supremo of York City Centre.'

'Wouldn't she have to be black?'

I stared at Rosie for a moment then my synapses managed to switch to new-mother mode of thinking. 'That's the Supremes, dear. Look, I'm going into York, trolling round the jewellery shops for another outlet. Do you need anything?'

'New body? One where all the bits that are meant to go in, go in and don't flap around in the breeze?'

'I'll buy you some big pants.'

Rosie looked down at herself. 'Can you get them neck-to-ankle?'

'You're not that bad. Anyway, you had a ten-pound baby less than two months ago, it'll take time for it all to go back to where it was.'

'Yeah.' Rosie sounded tired and I suddenly had a brilliant idea.



‘How about if I take Harry with me?’

She came over all protective, wrapping her body over Harry’s slumbering form. ‘Why?’

‘Distraction. I mean, last time I went round with my stuff, everyone was so dismissive. If I’ve got a pram and a baby, people might at least feel sorry for me.’

‘So you want my baby just so you can have a crack at the pity vote? Jemima, that is very immoral.’

‘You could get on with your cards. *And* probably fit in a snooze.’

I watched her eyelids droop as though even the promise of sleep was enough. ‘All right. There’s a couple of bottles of expressed milk in the fridge, in case he wakes up.’

‘But you just stuffed him.’

Rosie gave me a Look, which expressed the gulf between mothers and non-mothers. ‘Just in Case. That’s my motto.’

‘I thought your motto was Biscuits, Bustiers and Orlando Bloom?’

‘Yeah.’ She sighed. ‘Then I had a baby.’

## *Chapter Two*

York has numerous streets and alleyways which fold in upon themselves to fill a small area with an almost limitless number of retail opportunities, like a kind of fractal purchasing reality. However, I soon discovered (a) that most of the shops, despite looking exclusive and designer from the outside, actually stocked depressing shades of the same eco-friendly woodwork and mass-produced earrings and (b) that you can't push a pram over cobbles. Cobblestones might be picturesque but they take a toll on childhood constitutions, and Harry looked a bit wan as his head rolled around on the mattress for the third or fourth time. He was beginning to grouse tetchily. I peered down at his matinée-jacketed form. He was wearing a pale crocheted effort over a green babygro that Rosie liked because she thought it made him look cute; I actually thought it made him look like a string bag of sprouts but, hey, he's not my baby.

'One more, Harry. Promise. Then we can go home.'

I lied, of course, because he was eight weeks old and couldn't hold it against me. Much good it did me. I might just as well have quit after the 'one more', no-one was keen and most of the shops were so narrow that I had to push in and back out, risking taking most of the stock with me. Leaning over the pram, spreading my portfolio over Harry's head, didn't really give the opportunities for selling either. The answer was always, 'Sorry, they're beautiful, but a bit expensive,' until eventually I had tried every jewellery stockist in the central York area.

Harry had begun to complain seriously now. I shushed

him by pushing the pram energetically to and fro, making his rabbit mobile oscillate dangerously, while I perched on the edge of the fountains outside the art gallery and wondered what to do. I mean this was *York!* City of horse-drawn carriage rides and medieval stone work. If I couldn't sell hand-crafted belt buckles here then I might as well go back to France. Where I hadn't exactly taken the Continent by storm either, but at least my failures had had an edge of Gallic glamour. Or Italy; I could go to Italy again, where I'd discovered the population possessed a whole range of elegantly dismissive shrugs when faced with a belt buckle in the shape of the Venetian Bridge of Sighs. If the jewellery didn't start selling I could write a book, 'How to tell you're being given the brush-off in ten European languages' – hang on a minute. Wasn't that another little alleyway there, between those two sandwich shops?

Sure enough, the sun was shining down a passage I hadn't noticed previously where the walls of the two shops didn't quite touch. Dragging the grumpy Harry, although there was barely room for the pram to pass without scoring a line in the brickwork, I emerged into a small cobbled yard behind the shopping street. It contained two kiosk-sized constructions, one of which was closed and boarded but the other had a window display of technicolour music posters and T shirts with various tour dates emblazoned across. It also contained, coiled in one corner like a sleeping snake, a big leather belt. Belts need buckles, don't they?

I jostled the door open with my shoulder and backed the pram in, realising as I did so that there wasn't room for both Harry and me to fit inside the shop at the same time. In a spirit of compromise (and also because if I'd left him outside Rosie would have found out somehow and killed me), I left the front half of the pram hanging over the step.

It lacked a certain dignity for a sales call but I reckoned I'd shot my bolt on the dignity thing, what with the fluffy bunny hanging toy and the Thomas the Tank Engine changing bag.

As the door opened a broken bell let out a buzzing sound which I could feel in my teeth. Beyond the immediate doorway the shop widened, giving room for the racks of music, the guitars hanging on the walls and the stand displaying posters of the latest bands. Between the Fenders the walls were coated with neon flyers for gigs by a DJ called Zafe. At the back of the shop there was a counter with a cash register, but no-one standing behind it. It was dark and there was a smell of polish and old paper, the kind of librarianish smell that asks you to be quiet and not eat anything which might stain.

'Hello?'

My voice made Harry step up the whingeing a notch. I hoped he wasn't hungry or wet. I had to admit to a slight squeamishness about both ends of Harry and their products.

'Anyone in?'

Harry upped the ante on the grouching stakes and he'd gone a bit pink, too. Maybe he was too hot? Did babies get too hot? I knew they had to be protected against getting chilled, but Rosie hadn't mentioned the heat. Cautiously I reached over and tweaked the blanket further down his little green body. 'Are you all right?' As I drew the blanket lower a tell-tale yeasty smell floated out of the pram and I could see the stains spreading all the way up the back and sides of his sleepsuit. 'Oh, Harry ...'

Harry, very male all of a sudden, looked rather proud of himself. Great. Food I could do, nappies I could do. A complete change of clothes and pram sheet – nope, bit lacking in the total clean laundry department.

‘Can I help you?’

The voice came from the dark recess at the back of the shop. Male. Great.

‘I ... no, sorry, it’s just, he’s got a bit ...’

‘Hold on.’ There were footsteps, a slammed door and a pause, during which Harry kicked his legs like a trainee can-can dancer and gave me a full view of just how bad things were. Not to be too graphic, it was even in his *hair*. Then there was someone in front of me in the doorway, prevented from coming in by Harry and his malodorous transport. ‘Hi. That’s better, now I can see you. Did you come for the guitar?’

‘Guitar?’

‘That’ll be a no then. Look, why don’t you shove the pram outside, bring the baby in with you and we’ll find out what I can do for you, yes?’ The pram was being tugged from the outside and I had no choice but to follow it into the yard and confront the man who was pulling it.

To call his appearance weird was to leave myself short of adjectives to describe his clothes, but a few moments with a thesaurus opened to ‘urgh’ would rectify that. He was tall and skinny and wearing a shirt made for a much larger man, or at least one with shoulders. His dark hair straggled at various unkempt lengths outlining how thin his face was, and he had on multicoloured trousers which clung so tightly to his legs that I hoped they were lycra. Otherwise he was doomed to a day standing up. Around his desperately bony hips was wound an enormous belt which probably doubled his bodyweight and ended in a silver buckle with a death’s head motif. Overall he looked like a man who’d been dressed from the rag-bag and then run over by a lawn mower.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the belt buckle. Eventually

the man coughed to attract my attention. 'I don't usually like to stop women staring at my groin, but ... you're a bit intense, I'm starting to worry.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. I'd have shoved a pair of socks down if I'd known, to give you something to look at. Now, shall we go inside? This young chap looks as though he could do with some attention.' The man leaned forward as though to lift Harry out of the pram, but I leaped across to forestall him.

'No!'

The man jumped back, hands held up. He had a curiously concentrated expression as though my face was the most important thing he'd seen all day. 'Hey, it's all right, I'm not going to molest him or anything.'

'No, it's just that he's absolutely filthy.'

'Filthy? Why, what's he been doing, working on a building site?' He shook flopping locks from big brown eyes and stared down at Harry. 'You're a very forward little guy, aren't you?'

'I meant, like, pooey,' I said, but he didn't seem to be listening, staring at the baby again with that concentrated look. The lines on his face and the slight tightness of his mouth which was just visible amid some fairly serious stubble, indicated that this was his customary expression. Then his nose began to twitch.

'Ah. So that's what's causing the complaining. Well, I've got a kitchenette out the back there, if a bowl of warm water and a towel is any use to you.'

I did my best. Honest. I could *feel* Rosie's presence in that little room as though I was psychic. However, I think I ended up doing pretty well for someone who's never really been at the sharp end of parenting, and eventually carried Harry back into the shop, wrapped in every clean tea towel

I'd been able to find. My unlikely saviour was lounging against the till.

'Good God! He looks like a junior Roman Emperor!'

'I'll get them washed and back to you.'

The scruffy, tight-trousered man eyed up the little shrouded figure and gave a small shudder. 'Don't worry about it. I'm not sure I could ever wipe a mug rim again without thinking about, well, you know. Keep them.'

'He is wearing a clean nappy.' I'd replaced the pram sheet with an extra-large towel bearing the legend 'Glasgow, City of Culture' which, doubled over, completely covered the mattress.

'Even so. Now, what can I do for you?'

I gave him the full sales pitch, a guided tour of my portfolio and then brought out the *pièce de résistance*, beautifully apt. It was a belt buckle formed of interwoven musical instruments with the central pin in the shape of a microphone. He handled it carefully, running his fingers over the surface without taking his eyes off my face, as I told him about the history of the piece and how I'd made it. I described the heating and twisting of the wire, the careful placement of the crystals, the way each piece felt as though it had a soul and called itself into being, with me acting only as the instrument of creation. He did have nice hands, I had to admit, with very long and slender fingers. But his eyes – there was something hidden deep inside them.

'Ben,' he said suddenly, as I paused for breath.

'What?'

'My name. It's Benedict. Benedict Arthur Zacchary Davies. I thought you asked.'

'The middle fall out of the baby name book, did it?' This was a bit rude of me. All very well giving him the sales pitch but I hadn't even told him my name, so how could he

order stuff? Duh. Come on Jemima, stop being such an amateur. ‘Jemima Hutton.’ Rather late in the day I held out a hand to shake, which involved a bit of Harry-juggling.

‘Hutton? Like the place on the moors?’

‘Er, yeah. I guess.’ Change the subject Jemima. ‘So, would you be interested?’

His eyes were tracing the contours of my face. ‘Interested?’

‘In my stuff.’

‘Oh. Right. Your stuff.’

But now I was wondering about him. About the weird way he seemed to keep watching me. He was odd. Implacable. There was something about Ben Davies that felt like he was layers deep, that there was more to him than the superficially strange. ‘My stuff. Yes.’

His hands played with the buckle, flipping it between his fingers like a magician doing a disappearing coin trick. His body language was confusing, at odds with his responses, as though he was saying one thing but thinking another and letting a little of that internal struggle seep out into the way he moved. At the moment his eyes were still firmly on my face but he seemed to be wishing me gone. ‘I’m not sure.’

I *had* to get him to change his mind. If Saskia thought someone else was interested in me she might decide to keep me exclusive after all. Besides, I was bordering on the seriously broke. Even this weird guy with his tiny business tucked away down a back alley was better than nothing.

‘How about if I come back? Say tomorrow? I could bring some of my smaller, less expensive stuff? Look, I’ll leave you that buckle, on trust. To help you think it over?’ Every marketing book said that you should be definite, give them no get-out, and I’d blown it, I could tell from his face.

‘I haven’t got the customers. People who come here



already know me, they want the guitars, the gear, not jewellery.'

Frantically I stared around the shop. I had to find us some common point, some mutual interest, something, *anything*. My eye settled on a bright yellow star-shaped guitar hanging at the back of the shop, almost inside the kitchenette which had saved my (and Harry's) skin. 'Nice piece of equipment. My ... cousin is into guitars. Do you play?'

He swallowed and put the buckle down on the counter. Rubbed his hands over his face. 'No,' he said indistinctly. 'Not any more.'

'You gave up? Why?' He didn't answer and when I looked at him he was staring at the floor. A muscle trembled in his cheek and his fingers were flexing, twitching, almost as though he was playing out a tune on the strings of a long-gone instrument. I felt suddenly ashamed; there was something naked on his face, something he couldn't conceal behind warped body-language and flippancy. A longing and a desperation.

On my shoulder, Harry stopped bumping his head against me and began to whinge. I fussed him into a new position and when I looked up, the man – Ben – was watching me again. 'Look, tell you what. I'll keep this,' and his hand closed over my sample buckle. 'If I sell it I'll order some pieces from you. If I can't, then no go.'

Hope flared through me. It wasn't exactly an unqualified yes, but then he hadn't dismissed me either. 'Thank you. Ben.'

A sudden smile lifted his face into the handsome category. 'Don't mention it. Jemima.' He flicked at the business card I'd given him. 'I'll e-mail you if there's any news.'

‘Or phone. My mobile number’s on the card.’

‘You’d better get that young man home. He looks like he’s working up to another eruption.’ Ben nodded towards Harry, who did indeed have a very thoughtful expression. ‘I’ve got no tea towels left to come to your rescue.’

As I tucked Harry back into the pram I glanced in through the shop doorway and saw Ben take the blazing star guitar down off the wall. He struck a chord then played a riff, teasing his fingers up and down the frets like a man reacquainting himself with an old lover. He looked so poised, so natural, holding the guitar loosely with the body resting against his thighs, I couldn’t believe that he’d given up playing. Yet, as I began hauling the pram backwards out of the yard, it almost looked as if Ben, with his head bent over the strings, was crying.

\* \* \*

## **21st April**

Weather fine. Sold – two guitar strings, one poster (Iggie Pop, reduced to £2.00). Breakfast – three Weetabix.

Is this the kind of thing you want me to write, doctor? Is this giving you the insight you thought it would?

Drank a bottle of wine. For lunch. Back in the day it would have been a couple of grammes of snow and carry on playing, with the world all feather light in my head and feeling like I owned the universe. Now I feel like I’m dragging each day by the neck. So, what do you want me to say? What am I supposed to write? You want the truth, you want to know how I am? I’m scared, that’s how I am,

scared and depressed. What's the point in any of this any more?

So, today was – a day. Wednesday? Maybe. Who cares? Who fucking cares? Nothing out of the ordinary, just hours passing here inside this box. Oh no, one thing, a girl came in with her baby, wanting me to buy some jewellery, stuff that she makes. Felt kinda sorry for her, she looked a bit out of her depth, bit unpractised, still she'll get the hang. Come to terms with it, like we all have to do. Wade through the crap until you realise that there's only more crap on the other side. She was – cute, skinny. Bit scared-looking. Something about the eyes ... Told her my name but she didn't get it, so I guess ... hey, there have to be a few, you know? Yeah, I know what you're thinking, but no.

I don't need anyone.