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Making Your Mind Up

Written by Jill Mansell

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Chapter 1

‘You maaaaake me feeeeel,’ Lottie Carlyle warbled soulfully at the top of her voice, ‘like a natural womaaaaan.’

Oh yes, the great thing about singing when your ears were underwater was that it made you sound *so* much better than in real life. Not super-fantastic like Joss Stone or Barbra Streisand, obviously – the words silk purse and sow’s ear sprang to mind – but not so alarmingly bad that small children burst into tears and hid under tables whenever you opened your mouth to sing. Which had been known to happen on dry land.

Which was why she was enjoying herself so much now, in Hestacombe Lake. It was a blisteringly hot day in August, her afternoon off, and she was floating on her back in the water gazing up at a cloudless, cobalt-blue sky.

Well, nearly cloudless. When it was four o’clock in the afternoon and you were the mother of two children there was always that one small bothersome cloud hovering on the horizon:

What to cook for dinner.

Something, preferably, that didn’t take ages to make but sounded like a proper meal. Something that contained the odd vitamin. Something, furthermore, that both Nat and Ruby would deign to eat.

Ha.

Pasta, perhaps?

But Nat, who was seven, would only consent to eat pasta with olives and mint sauce, and Lottie knew there were no olives left in the fridge.

OK, maybe bacon and mushroom risotto. But Ruby would pick out the mushrooms, accusing them of being slimy like snails, and refuse to eat the bacon because bacon was – bleurgh – *pig*.

Vegetable stir-fry? Now she really was wandering into the realms of fantasy. In her nine years Ruby had never knowingly eaten a vegetable. Most babies’ first words were Mama or Dada. Ruby’s, upon being confronted with a broccoli floret, had been *yuk*.

Lottie sighed and closed her eyes. As the cool water of the lake lapped around her temples she lazily twitched away an insect that had landed on

her wrist. Cooking for such an unappreciative clientele really was the pits. Maybe if she stayed out here long enough someone would eventually call social services and a battleaxe child protection officer would turn up. Ruby and Nat would be whisked away to some echoing Dickensian children's home, forced to eat liver with pipes in and cold turnip soup. And after a couple of weeks of that, *then* they might finally appreciate what a rotten thankless task she had, endlessly having to think what to give her finicky children for dinner.

Freddie Masterson stood at the drawing room window of Hestacombe House and experienced that familiar lift to his spirits as he surveyed the view. As far as he was concerned, it was the most glorious in the whole of the Cotswolds. Across the valley the hills rose up dotted with trees, houses, sheep and cows. Below, the reed-fringed lake glittered in the afternoon sunlight. And closer to hand, his own garden was in full bloom, the freshly mown emerald lawn sloping down towards the lake, the fuchsia bushes bobbing as bumble bees swooped greedily from one fragile flower to the next. A pair of woodpeckers, energetically digging in the grass for worms, glanced over their shoulders and flew off in disgust as a human made its way down the narrow path towards them.

This could be it, then. Watching as Tyler Klein reached the summerhouse and paused to admire the view himself, Freddie knew the American was equally impressed. Their meeting had gone well; Tyler undoubtedly had a fine brain and they had got on with each other from the outset. He had the money to buy the business. And, so far, he appeared to like what he saw.

Well, how could he not?

Tyler Klein was now heading for the side gate that led out into the lane. With his dark blue suit jacket casually slung over one shoulder and his lilac shirt loosened at the neck, he moved easily, more like an athlete than a businessman. Clark Gable hair, thought Freddie, that was what Tyler Klein had, with most of it slicked back but that one dark lock falling uncontrollably into his eyes. Or Errol Flynn. His beloved wife Mary had always had a bit of a thing for Clark Gable and Errol Flynn. Ruefully, Freddie ran a hand over his own sparsely covered head. And to think the poor darling had ended up with him instead.

Glimpsing a flash of brilliant turquoise out of the corner of his eye, he thought for a split second that a kingfisher was darting across the surface of the lake. Then he smiled, because once his vision had had time to adjust he saw that it was Lottie, wearing a new turquoise bikini, rolling lazily over in the water like a sun-seeking porpoise. If he were to tell her that he'd mistaken her for a kingfisher, Lottie would say teasingly, 'Freddie, time to get your eyes tested.'

He hadn't told her that he already had.
And the rest.

The lane that ran alongside the garden of Hestacombe House was narrow and banked high on both sides with poppies, cow parsley and blackberry bushes. Turning left, Tyler Klein worked out, would lead you back up to the village of Hestacombe. Turning right took you down to the lake. As he took the right turn, Tyler heard the sound of running feet and giggling.

Rounding the first bend in the lane, he saw two small children twenty or thirty yards away, clambering over a stile. Dressed in shorts, T-shirts and baseball caps, the one in front was carrying a rolled-up yellow and white striped towel, whilst his companion clutched a haphazard bundle of clothes. Glancing up the lane and spotting Tyler, they giggled again and leapt down from the stile into the cornfield beyond. By the time he reached the stile they'd scurried out of sight, no doubt having taken some short cut back to the village following their dip in the lake.

The lane opened out into a sandy clearing that sloped down to meet a small artificial beach. Freddie Masterson had had this constructed several years ago, chiefly for the benefit of visitors to his lakeside holiday cottages, but also – as Tyler had just witnessed – to be enjoyed by the inhabitants of Hestacombe. Shielding his eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun as it bounced off the lake, Tyler saw a girl in a bright turquoise bikini floating lazily on her back in the water. There was a faint unearthly wailing sound coming from somewhere he couldn't quite place. Then the noise – was it singing? – stopped. Moments later, as Tyler watched, the girl turned onto her front and began to swim slowly back to shore.

It could almost be that scene from *Dr No*, where Sean Connery observes Ursula Andress emerging goddess-like from a tropical sea. Except he wasn't hiding in the bushes and he had all his own hair. And this girl didn't have a large knife strapped to her thigh.

She wasn't blonde either. Her long dark hair was a riot of snaky curls plastered to her shoulders, her body curvy and deeply tanned. Impressed – because an encounter like this was the last thing he'd been expecting – Tyler nodded in a friendly fashion as she paused to wring water from her dripping hair and said, 'Good swim?'

The girl surveyed him steadily, then looked around the tiny beach. Finally she said, 'Where's my stuff?'

Stuff. Taken aback, Tyler gazed around too, even though he had no idea what he was meant to be looking for. For one bizarre moment he wondered if she had arranged to meet a drug dealer here. That was what people said, wasn't it, when they met up with their dealer?

'What stuff?'

‘The usual stuff you leave out of the water when you go for a swim. Clothes. Towel. Diamond earrings.’

Tyler said, ‘Where did you put them?’

‘Right there where you’re standing. Right *there*,’ the girl repeated, pointing at his polished black shoes. She narrowed her eyes at him. ‘Is this a joke?’

‘I guess it is. But I’m not the one playing it.’ Half turning, Tyler indicated the narrow lane behind him. ‘I passed a couple of kids back there, carrying off stuff.’

She had her hands on her hips now, and was surveying him with growing disbelief. ‘And it didn’t occur to you to stop them?’

‘I thought it was their stuff.’ This was ridiculous, he’d never said the word *stuff* so many times before in his life. ‘I guess I just thought they’d been swimming down here in this lake.’

‘You thought the size twelve pink halter-necked dress and size five silver sandals belonged to them.’ The sarcasm – that particularly British form of sarcasm – was evident in her voice.

‘The sandals were wrapped up in something pink. I didn’t actually get a close look at the labels. I was thirty yards away.’

‘But you thought they’d been swimming.’ Gazing at him intently, the girl said, ‘Tell me something. Were they . . . *wet*?’

Shit. The kids hadn’t been wet. He’d make a lousy private eye. Unwilling to concede defeat, Tyler said, ‘They could have come down for a paddle. Look, did you really leave diamond earrings with your clothes?’

‘Do I look completely stupid? No, of course I didn’t. Diamonds don’t dissolve in water.’ Impatiently she shook back her hair to show him the studs glittering in her earlobes. ‘Right, what did these kids look like?’

‘Like kids. I don’t know.’ Tyler shrugged. ‘They were wearing T-shirts, I guess. And, um, shorts . . .’

The girl raised her eyebrows. ‘That’s incredible. Your powers of observation are dazzling. OK, was it a boy and a girl?’

‘Maybe.’ He’d assumed they were boys, but one had had longer hair than the other. ‘Like I said, I only saw them from a distance. They were climbing over a stile.’

‘Dark hair? Thin and wiry?’ the girl persisted. ‘Did they look like a couple of gypsies?’

‘Yes.’ Tyler was instantly on the alert; when Freddie Masterson had been singing the praises of Hestacombe he hadn’t mentioned any gypsies. ‘Are they a problem around here?’

‘Damn right they’re a problem around here. They’re my children.’ Intercepting the look of horror on his face, the girl broke into a mischievous smile. ‘Relax, they’re not really gypsies. You haven’t just mortally offended me.’

‘Well,’ said Tyler, ‘I’m glad about that.’

‘I didn’t see a thing, little sods. They must have crawled through the bushes and sneaked off with my stuff when I wasn’t looking. That’s what happens when you have kids who are hellbent on joining the SAS. But this isn’t funny.’ No longer amused, the girl said impatiently, ‘I can’t believe they’d do something so stupid. They don’t *think*, do they? Because now I’m stuck here with *no* clothes—’

‘You’re welcome to borrow my jacket.’

‘And *no* shoes.’

‘I’m not lending you my shoes,’ Tyler drawled. ‘You’d look ridiculous. Plus, that’d leave me with nothing to put on my feet.’

‘Wuss.’ Thinking hard, the girl said, ‘OK, look, can you do me a favour? Go back up to the village, past the pub, and my house is three doors down on the right. Piper’s Cottage. The doorbell’s broken so you’ll have to bang on the door. Tell Ruby and Nat to give you my clothes. Then you can bring them back down to me. How does that sound?’

Water from her hair was dripping into her clear hazel eyes, glistening on her tanned skin. She had excellent white teeth and a persuasive manner. Tyler frowned.

‘What if the kids aren’t there?’

‘Right, now I know this isn’t ideal, but you have an honest face so I’m going to have to trust you. If they aren’t there, you’ll just have to take the front door key out from under the tub of geraniums by the porch and let yourself into the house. My bedroom’s on the left at the top of the stairs. Just grab something from the wardrobe.’ Her mouth twitching the girl said, ‘And no snooping in my knicker drawer while you’re there. Just pick out a dress and some shoes then let yourself out of the house. You can be back here in ten minutes.’

‘I can’t do this.’ Tyler shook his head. ‘You don’t even know me. I’m not going to let myself into a strange house. And if your kids are there . . . well, that’s even worse.’

‘Hi.’ Seizing his hand, she enthusiastically shook it. ‘I’m Lottie Carlyle. There, now I’ve introduced myself. And my house really isn’t that strange. A bit untidy perhaps, but that’s allowed. And you are?’

‘Tyler. Tyler Klein. Still not doing it.’

‘Well, you’re a big help. I’m going to look a right wally walking through the village like this.’

‘I told you, you can borrow my jacket.’ Seeing as she was dripping wet and his suit jacket was silk-lined and seriously expensive, he felt this was a pretty generous offer. Lottie Carlyle, however, seemed unimpressed.

‘I’d still look stupid. You could lend me your shirt,’ she wheedled. ‘That’d be better.’

Tyler was here on business. He had no intention of removing his shirt. Firmly he said, 'I don't think so. It's the jacket or nothing.'

Realising when she was beaten, Lottie Carlyle took the jacket from him and put it on. 'You drive a hard bargain. There, do I look completely ridiculous?'

'Yes.'

'You're too kind.' She looked sadly down at her bare feet. 'Any chance of a piggy back?'

Tyler looked amused. 'Don't push your luck.'

'Are you saying I'm fat?'

'I'm thinking of my street cred.'

Interested, Lottie said, 'What are you doing here, anyway? In your smart city suit and shiny shoes?'

There clearly wasn't much call for city suits here in Hestacombe. As they turned to leave, Tyler glanced back at the lake, where iridescent dragonflies were darting over the surface of the water and a family of ducks had just swum into view. Casually he said, 'Just visiting.'

Gingerly picking her way along the stony, uneven lane, Lottie winced and said meaningfully, 'Ouch, my feet.'

Lottie Carlyle attracted a fair amount of attention as they made their way through Hestacombe. Something told Tyler that irrespective of what she was wearing, she always would. Passing motorists grinned in recognition and tooted their horns, villagers out in their gardens waved and made teasing comments, and Lottie in turn told them exactly what she was going to do with Ruby and Nat when she got her hands on them.

As they approached Piper's Cottage they spotted the children playing with a watering can in the front garden, taking it in turns to spin around holding the watering can at arm's length and spray each other with water.

'Viewers of a nervous disposition may wish to look away now,' said Lottie. 'This is where I go into scary mother mode.' Raising her voice, she called out, 'Hey, you two. Put that watering can *down*.'

The children looked at their mother, promptly abandoned the watering can and, giggling wildly, shot up into the branches of the apple tree overhanging the front wall.

'I know what you did.' Reaching the garden, Lottie peered up into the tree. 'And trust me, you're in *big* trouble.'

From the depths of the leafy branches, an innocent voice said, 'We were just watering the flowers. Otherwise they'd die.'

'I'm talking about my clothes. That wasn't funny, Nat. Running off with someone's clothes is no joke.'

'We didn't do it,' Nat said immediately.

Ruby chimed in, 'It wasn't us.'

Tyler looked over at Lottie Carlyle. Maybe he'd made a mistake. Catching his concerned expression, she rolled her eyes. 'Please don't believe them. They always say that. You can catch Nat with a mouthful of chocolate and he'll still swear blind he hasn't had any.'

'But it *wasn't* us,' Nat repeated.

'We didn't do it,' said Ruby, 'and that's the *truth*.'

'The more guilty they are, the more they deny it.' Lottie sensed Tyler's unease. 'Last week they were playing with a catapult in the bathroom and the bathroom mirror happened to get broken. But guess what? Neither of them did that either.'

'Mum, this time we really didn't take your clothes,' said Ruby.

'No? Well, this man here says you did. Because he saw you,' Lottie explained, 'and unlike you two, he doesn't tell lies. So you can climb down from there and go and get my clothes this minute.'

'We don't know where they are!' Ruby let out a wail of outrage.

Without a word, Lottie disappeared inside the cottage. Through the open windows they heard the banging and crashing of cupboards and wardrobes being opened and shut. Finally, triumphantly, she re-emerged carrying a scrunched-up pink dress, a pair of flat silver sandals and a yellow and white striped bath towel.

'It wasn't us,' Nat blurted out.

'Really. Funny how they happened to be in the back garden then, isn't it?' As she spoke, Lottie was shrugging off the miles-too-big suit jacket, handing it back to Tyler and wriggling into her crumpled sundress. 'Now listen, taking my clothes was bad enough. Telling lies and denying it is even worse. So you can forget about going to the balloon festival this weekend and you won't be getting any pocket money either.'

'But it was somebody else,' squealed Ruby.

'This man says it was you. And out of the three of you, funnily enough, I believe him. So get down out of that tree, get into the house and start tidying your bedrooms. I mean it,' said Lottie. 'This minute. Or I'll stop your pocket money for the next six weeks.'

First Ruby, then Nat dropped down from the branches. Dark eyes narrowed in disgust, they glared at Tyler. As Ruby stalked past him she muttered, '*You're* the big liar.'

'Ruby. Stop that.'

Nat, with bits of twig caught in his hair, looked up at Tyler and said with a scowl, 'I'm going to tell my dad on you.'

'Ooh, he's so scared.' Lottie deftly swept him past Tyler. 'Inside. Now.'

Nat and Ruby disappeared into the house. By this time feeling terrible, Tyler said, 'Listen, maybe I did make a mistake.'

‘They’re children, it’s their job to get up to mischief.’ Knowingly, Lottie said, ‘I’m guessing you don’t have any of your own.’

Tyler shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Look, they hate you for grassing them up.’ Lottie’s eyes sparkled. ‘They’re doing their best to make you feel bad. But you never have to see them again, do you, so what does it matter?’ As she spoke, someone inside the cottage burst into noisy heaving sobs. ‘That’ll be Nat, standing by the window to make completely sure we can hear him. I’m surprised he didn’t tell me an eagle flew off with my clothes then dropped them in our back garden. Anyway I’d better go. Thanks for the jacket. I hope it isn’t too damp.’ She paused, raking her fingers through her wet hair, then broke into a dazzling smile. ‘It was kind of nice to meet you.’

‘Waaaaahhhh,’ bawled Nat, evidently inconsolable.

‘Kind of nice to meet you too.’ Tyler had to raise his voice to be heard over the heartbreaking noise.

‘Hurh-hurh-hurrhh-waaAAAHHH!’

‘Well, thanks again.’ Lottie paused as a thought occurred to her. ‘Um . . . did you hear me singing earlier?’

‘That was you?’ He grinned. ‘More to the point, that was *singing*?’

Her dark eyes danced with mischief. ‘I sound a lot better underwater.’

As a fresh round of sobbing broke out inside the cottage, Tyler said, ‘I’ll take your word for it.’

Chapter 2

Changed into a lime-green vest top and white jeans, Lottie made her way out onto the broad terrace behind Hestacombe House, where Freddie was sitting at the table levering open a bottle of wine.

‘There you are. Good, good. Have a seat,’ said Freddie, thrusting a glass into her hand, ‘and get some of this down you. You’re going to need it.’

‘Why?’ Lottie had been wondering why he’d asked her to come over to the house this evening. Not normally reticent, Freddie had been out and about a lot recently without letting on what he was up to. Tonight, in his white polo shirt and pressed khaki trousers, he was looking tanned and fit, maybe even a little trimmer than usual. Don’t say he’d found himself a lady friend at last.

‘Cheers.’ Freddie clinked his glass against hers. There was definitely a secret in there, waiting to burst out.

‘Cheers. Don’t tell me.’ Delighted for her employer, Lottie held up her free hand to stop him in his tracks. ‘I think I’ve already guessed!’

‘Actually, you probably haven’t.’ But Freddie was leaning back, smiling at her as he lit a cigar. ‘But fire away. Tell me what you think.’

‘I *thiiiiink*,’ Lottie drew out the word, ‘that love could be in the air.’ Playfully, mystically, she wiggled her fingers. ‘I do believe we could be talking romance here.’

‘Lottie, I’m too old for you.’

She pulled a face at him. ‘I meant with someone your own age. Am I wrong then?’

‘Just a bit.’ Freddie was puffing away on his cigar, his signet ring glinting in the sunlight.

‘You should, you know. Find someone lovely.’ Since Mary’s death, Freddie hadn’t so much as looked at another woman, yet if the right one were to come along Lottie knew he could be happy again. It was what he deserved.

‘Well, that’s not going to happen. Are you drinking that or letting it evaporate?’

Lottie obediently took a couple of giant gulps.

‘Like it?’ Freddie surveyed her with amusement.

‘What kind of a question is that? It’s red, it’s warm, it’s not corked. Of course I like it.’

‘Good, seeing as it’s a Chateau Margaux nineteen eighty-eight.’

Lottie, who was to fine wines what Johnny Vegas was to tightrope walking, nodded knowledgeably and said, ‘Ah yes, thought so.’

His eyes sparkling, Freddie said, ‘Two fifty a bottle.’

‘Hey, excellent. Is that one of those half-price offers in the supermarket?’

‘Two hundred and fifty pounds a bottle, you philistine.’

‘Jesus, are you joking?’ Spluttering and almost spilling the rest of the wine on her jeans, Lottie clunked the glass onto the table. Seeing that he wasn’t joking she wailed, ‘What are you doing, giving me stuff like that to drink? That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard!’

‘Why?’

‘Because you *know* I’m a philistine, so it’s just a complete *waste*.’

‘You said you liked it,’ Freddie pointed out.

‘But I didn’t *appreciate* it, did I? I just guzzled it down like Tizer, because you told me to! Well, you can finish my glass.’ Lottie pushed it across the table towards him. ‘Because I’m not touching another drop.’

‘Sweetheart, I bought this wine ten years ago,’ said Freddie. ‘It’s been in the cellar all this time, waiting for a special occasion.’

Lottie rolled her eyes in despair. ‘It’s certainly a special occasion now. The day your assistant spattered Chateau Margaux-whatever-it-is all over your terrace. You’d have been better leaving it in the cellar for another ten years.’

‘Yes, well. Maybe I don’t want to. Anyway, you haven’t asked me yet why this is a special occasion.’

‘Go on then, tell me.’

Freddie sat back and blew a perfect, practised smoke ring. ‘I’m selling the business.’

Startled, Lottie said, ‘Is this another joke?’

‘No.’ He shook his head.

‘But why?’

‘I’m sixty-four. People retire at my age, don’t they? It’s time to hand over and do the kind of things I want to do. Plus, the right buyer happened to come along. Don’t worry, your job’s safe.’ His eyes twinkling, Freddie said, ‘In fact, I think the two of you might get on extremely well.’

Since this was Hestacombe and not some bustling city metropolis, it didn’t take a genius to work it out.

‘The American guy,’ said Lottie, exhaling slowly. ‘The one in the suit.’

‘The very same.’ Nodding, Freddie said slyly, ‘Don’t try and pretend you can’t remember his name.’

‘Tyler Klein.’ Freddie was right; when strangers were that good-looking, their names simply didn’t slip your mind. ‘We met down at the lake this afternoon.’

‘He did happen to mention it.’ Entertained, Freddie took another puff of his cigar. ‘Interesting encounter, by the sound of things.’

‘You could say that. So what’s going to happen, exactly? Is he buying everything? Are you moving away? Oh Freddie, I can’t imagine this place without you.’

Lottie meant it. Freddie and Mary Masterson had moved to Hestacombe House twenty-two years ago. Freddie had caught her stealing apples from his orchard when she was nine years old, the same age Ruby was now. He was part of the village and they would all miss him if he was no longer around.

Plus, he was a great boss.

‘I’m not selling this house. Just the business.’

Relieved, Lottie said, ‘Oh well, that’s not so bad then. So you’ll still be here. It won’t really be that different after all.’

Hestacombe Holiday Cottages had been built up by Freddie and Mary into a successful concern over the years; eight original properties, painstakingly renovated, were either dotted around the lakeside or, for greater seclusion, tucked away in the woods. Guests, many of them devoted regulars, rented the ravishingly pretty homes for anything between a couple of nights and a month at a time, safe in the knowledge that their every whim would be catered for while they enjoyed their break away from it all in the heart of the Cotswolds.

‘Here, drink your drink.’ Freddie pushed the glass back across the table towards her. ‘Tyler Klein’s a good man. Everything’ll be fine.’ With a twinkle in his eye he added, ‘You’ll be in safe hands.’

Now there was a mental image to conjure with.

This time, taking a girlie sip, Lottie did her utmost to appreciate the expensiveness of the Chateau Margaux. It was nice, of course it was, but she’d still never have known. ‘So where will he be living?’

‘Fox Cottage. We only have to rejig a few bookings. As long as the guests are moved into something better they won’t mind.’

Fox Cottage, their most recent acquisition, had spent the last three months being extensively redesigned. By some miracle the work had been completed ahead of schedule. It was one of their smaller properties, the first floor now knocked through to make just one huge bedroom with floor-to-ceiling windows affording a stupendous view over the lake.

‘Not very big.’ Innocently Lottie said, ‘Won’t his wife find it a bit cramped?’

Freddie grinned. 'I think what you're trying to ask is, is he married?'

So much for being subtle. Kicking off her sandals and tucking her feet under her on the padded chair, she said, 'And?'

'He's single.'

Excellent, Lottie thought happily. Although having met Nat and Ruby she'd probably already succeeded in putting him off her for life.

But something else was still puzzling her. 'Where did you find him, then? You didn't even tell me you were thinking of selling the business.'

'Fate.' Freddie shrugged and refilled their glasses. 'Remember Marcia and Walter?'

Of course. Marcia and Walter Klein, from New York. For the past five years the Kleins had been coming to Hestacombe every Easter without fail, using one of the cottages as a base while they explored, with typically American enthusiasm, Stratford-upon-Avon, Bath, Cheltenham – all the usual tourist traps.

'They're his parents.' Lottie realised that the son Marcia had been boasting about all these years was in fact Tyler. 'But he's some kind of hotshot Wall Street banker type, isn't he? Whyever would he want to give that up and move over here? That's like Michael Schumacher giving up Formula One to drive a milk float.'

'Tyler wants a change. I'm sure he'll tell you his reasons for doing it. Anyway, Marcia rang a couple of weeks ago to arrange their booking for next Easter and we got chatting about retirement,' said Freddie. 'I happened to mention that I was thinking of selling up. Two days later she rang back and said she'd mentioned it to her son, who was interested. He'd had a good look at the website. Of course he'd already heard about us from Marcia and Walter – bless 'em, they were praising us to the skies. So then Tyler rang me. I told him what I was asking for the business and put him in touch with my accountant so he could go through the figures. Last night he flew into Heathrow and came to see the place for himself. And two hours ago he made me a fair offer.'

Just like that.

'Which you accepted,' said Lottie.

'Which I accepted.'

'Are you sure this is the right thing to do?' Was it her imagination, or was Freddie not quite as happy with the situation as he was pretending to be?

'Absolutely sure.' Freddie nodded.

Oh well then. He was entitled to a bit of fun. 'In that case, congratulations. Here's to a long and happy retirement.' Raising her glass and clinking it against his, Lottie said encouragingly, 'You'll have a fantastic time. Think of all the brilliant things you'll be able to do.' Teasingly, because Freddie

loathed the game with a passion, she added, 'Who knows, you might even take up golf.'

This time Freddie's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. 'There's something else.'

'Oh God. Not Morris dancing.'

'Actually, it's worse than Morris dancing.' His fingers tightening around the stem of his glass, Freddie said simply, 'I have a brain tumour.'

Chapter 3

Lottie looked at him. This couldn't possibly be a joke. But it had to be. How was Freddie able to just sit there and say something like that? She felt her heart begin to thud loudly, like a drum. How could it be *true*?

'Oh Freddie.'

'I know, bit of a conversation-stopper. Sorry about that.' Evidently relieved to have it out in the open, Freddie added, 'Although I must say, I never thought I'd see you at a loss for words.'

Lottie gathered her wits. 'Well, it's a *shock*. But the doctors can do so much now, it'll be fine, they just whip them out these days, don't they? You wait, you'll be as good as new in no time.'

It was what she wanted to believe, but even as the words were tumbling out, Lottie knew the situation was far worse than that. This wasn't like cradling a child with a grazed knee, sticking a Disney plaster on and reassuring them that it would stop hurting in a minute.

This wasn't something she could kiss better.

'Right, I'm telling you this but I'd appreciate it if you don't pass it on to anyone else,' said Freddie. 'The tumour is inoperable so the surgeons can't whip it out. Chemo and radiotherapy won't cure me, but they might buy me a little more time. Well, funnily enough I wasn't tempted by that so I said thanks but no thanks.'

'But—'

'I'd also appreciate it if you didn't interrupt,' Freddie said calmly. 'Now that I've started I'd quite like to finish. So anyway, I decided pretty much straightaway that if I don't have long to live, I'd rather live it on my own terms. We both know what Mary went through.' He looked at Lottie. 'Two years of surgery, endless nightmare treatments. All that pain. She spent months feeling like death and what good did it do? At the end of it all, she died anyway. So I'm going to give that a miss. According to my consultant, I have maybe a year. Well, that's fine. I'll make the most of it, see how things go. He warned me that the last few months might not be pretty, so I told him that in that case I'd probably give them a miss too.'

It was all too much to take in. Lottie, her hands trembling, reached for

her glass and knocked it onto its side. Five minutes ago she would have thrown herself across the table and licked up the spilled wine rather than waste it. Now she simply poured herself some more, right up to the brim.

‘Am I allowed to ask questions yet?’

Freddie nodded graciously. ‘Fire away.’

‘How long have you known?’

‘A fortnight.’ His smile was crooked. ‘Of course it was a shock at first. But it’s surprising how fast you get used to it.’

‘I didn’t even know you were ill. Why didn’t you say something before?’

‘That’s just it, I don’t *feel* ill.’ Freddie spread his hands. ‘Headaches, that was all it was. I thought I probably needed new reading glasses, so I saw my optician . . . and when she looked into my eyes with that light instrument of hers, she was able to see that I had a problem. Next thing I knew, I was being referred to a neurologist, having scans and all manner of tests. Then, boom, that was it. Diagnosis. Lottie, if you’re crying I’ll throw my drink over you. Stop it at once.’

Hastily Lottie blinked the tears back into her eyes, sniffed loudly and ordered herself to get a grip. Freddie was confiding in her because he thought he could trust her not to dissolve in a heap. She wasn’t the crying type.

‘Right. Done.’ She sniffed again, took a gulp of wine and said defensively, ‘Sorry, but it’s just not fair. You don’t deserve this.’

‘I know, I’m marvellous.’ Stubbing out his cigar, Freddie said, ‘Practically a saint.’

‘Especially not after what happened to Mary.’ Lottie’s throat tightened; she couldn’t bear it.

‘Sweetheart, don’t get angry on my behalf. Mary isn’t here any more.’ Reaching across the table, Freddie took her hand between both of his and gave it an encouraging squeeze. ‘Don’t you see? That makes it *easier*. Finding out about this thing in my head isn’t the most terrible thing that’s ever happened to me. Not even close. Losing Mary and having to carry on without her beats this tumour of mine hands down.’

Now Lottie really was in danger of bursting into tears. ‘That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard in my life.’

‘Romantic.’ Freddie repeated the word and chuckled. ‘Know what’s ironic? That’s how her nickname for me came about. Mary always said I was about as romantic as a string vest. Oh, she knew how much she meant to me, but it was easier for us to tease each other. All that lovey-dovey hearts and flowers stuff was never our thing.’

Lottie remembered. The two of them had always been gloriously happy together, theirs had truly been a marriage to aspire to. Their verbal sparring had been endlessly inventive, as entertaining as any TV double act.

She couldn't imagine how desperately Freddie must have missed his beloved wife.

So that was why Mary had always called him 'String'.

The unfairness of what was happening hit Lottie all over again. 'Oh Freddie. Why does this have to happen to you?'

'Or there's the other way of looking at it, telling yourself you're lucky it didn't happen forty years ago,' said Freddie. 'Now that would have pissed me off. But I've made it to sixty-four and that's not so bad.' Counting off on his fingers, he went on, 'When I was seven, I fell out of a tree and broke my arm. I *could* have landed on my head and died. When I was sixteen I was knocked off my pushbike by a lorry and cracked a few ribs. But I could have been killed then too. And there's the time Mary and I were on holiday in Geneva. We got so plastered with a group of friends on our last night that we missed our flight home. And what happened? The plane crashed.'

He was getting carried away now. Lottie had heard this story before.

'It didn't crash,' she corrected Freddie. 'One of the wheels came off and it tipped over on the runway. Nobody was killed.'

'But we could have been. People were injured.'

'Bumps and bruises.' Lottie wasn't to be swayed; there was a principle at stake. 'Bumps and bruises don't count.'

'Depends how bad they are.' Freddie eyed her with amusement. 'Are we bickering?'

'No.' Ashamed of herself, Lottie instantly backed down. Bickering with a dying man; how could she stoop so low?

Evidently reading her mind, Freddie said, 'Yes we are, and don't you dare start giving in. If you won't bicker with me any more I'll find someone else who will. I only told you what's going on because I thought I could rely on you to handle it. I don't want the kid-glove treatment, OK?'

'You don't want any treatment at all,' Lottie retaliated heatedly. 'The thing is, maybe radiotherapy and chemo *would* work.'

'You're allowed to bicker,' Freddie said firmly, 'but you definitely aren't allowed to nag. Or I shall have to sack you.'

'You're selling the business.'

'Ah, but I could sack you now. Sweetheart, I'm a grown-up. I've made my decision. If I've got six good months left on this earth, then I want to make the most of them, do what I want to do. In fact, that's where you come in.' He was more relaxed now, casually swatting away a hovering wasp as he spoke. 'There's something I'm going to need a hand with, Lottie. And I'd like you to help me out.'

For an appalling moment Lottie thought he meant help with doing away with himself when the time came. Jolted, she said, 'In what way?'