

Chapter 1

‘Come on, come on, late as usual.’ Waiting in the porch, Ash Parry-Jones tapped his watch as Cleo and Will hurried up the gravelled path. ‘Better get in there and grab a seat. Place is filling up fast.’

Like it was an Elton John concert or something. Cleo paused to straighten Ash’s wonky yellow-and-grey striped tie. ‘Don’t nag. And I can’t believe you’re wearing this shirt.’

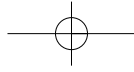
He looked offended. ‘Who are you insulting?’

‘You.’ She gave his collar an affectionate tweak. ‘Stripes and swirls don’t go.’

They found somewhere to sit in a pew on the left-hand side of the church. As the organ music played and Will studied the order of service, Cleo composed herself. Of course it was a sad occasion – it was the end of a life, after all – but as funerals went, it had to be one of the cheerier ones she’d attended.

Then again, as deaths went, Lawrence LaVenture’s had been better than most. It may even count as enviable. As Lawrence himself had been fond of remarking, the family name was derived from the French word for ‘lucky’ or ‘fortunate’, and he’d taken enormous pleasure in living up to it. And what rakish 73-year-old widower, given the choice, wouldn’t want to go as he had gone, following a sublime meal and a bottle of delicious Saint Émilion, in bed with an attractive brunette many, *many* years younger than himself?

Mind you, it had given the poor woman he’d hired for the evening a bit of a shock. One minute they’d been having a high old time together, getting up to all sorts of naughtiness. The next, she’d come



back into the bedroom carrying the bottle of cognac and two glasses Lawrence had asked her to bring upstairs and there he'd been, collapsed back against the goose-down pillows, stone dead.

Peering around the church, Cleo whispered, 'Do you think she'll turn up?'

'Who?'

'The woman who was with him when he died!' Who had actually, *technically*, killed him, when you thought about it. 'I want to know what she looks like.'

'She'll be the one in the black leather basque,' Will murmured. 'Stockings, suspenders, spike-heeled stilettos . . .'

Cleo dug him in the ribs then slipped her arm through his, grateful to him for having come along. Will had never met Lawrence LaVenture but she'd wanted him with her today and he'd obligingly taken the afternoon off work. He even knew why she'd asked him and hadn't laughed, for which she was grateful. Meeting Will Newman in a nightclub three months ago had definitely been one of the happier accidents in her life. She'd been nudged from behind in a crowded bar in Bath, her drink had splashed over his sleeve, they'd got chatting as a result . . . and what a result it had turned out to be. Will was handsome and charming, hard-working and intelligent . . . basically, he was perfect in every way. Her Mr Right had finally come along and she couldn't have been happier about it.

'Could be her.' Pointing helpfully to a roly-poly woman in her sixties, squeezing into an already full pew across the aisle, Will said, 'There's a high-class hooker if ever I saw one.'

'That's Effie Farnham from Corner Cottage.'

'There's a studded leather whip hanging out of her handbag.'

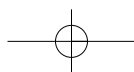
'She breeds Cairn terriers. It's a dog's lead.'

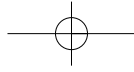
'Are you sure?'

'Trust me, Effie's not the whippy kind.'

'You never know. Under that coat she could be wearing something completely outrageous.'

OK, this definitely came under the heading of Too Much Information. Thankfully, before Cleo could start picturing Effie in a tasselled thong, distraction was provided by the arrival of Lawrence's family.





Well, such as it was. She held her breath and watched as the three of them made their way up the aisle, two ancient, creaking older sisters swathed in politically incorrect fur and supported by silver-topped ebony canes. And between them, matching his pace to theirs, Johnny LaVenture.

He was looking smarter than usual in a dark suit and with his habitually wayward black hair combed back from his forehead. For a split second he glanced to the left and their eyes met, prompting a Pavlovian jolt of resentment in her chest. She couldn't help it; old habits died hard. Then Johnny looked away, carried on past and took his place between his ancient aunts in the front pew.

Cleo bent her head. OK, don't think about him now. Just concentrate on the funeral. Lawrence might have been an off-the-wall character, fond of a drink and, well, various other lusty pastimes, but he'd been entertaining to have around. They were here to celebrate a life well lived.

After the service, everyone huddled up against the icy wind and made their way across the village green to the Hollybush Inn where food had been laid on and the drinks were free, as stipulated in Lawrence's last will and testament. For so many years a cornerstone of the pub, he knew how to guarantee a good turn-out.

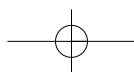
Ash, catching up with Cleo and Will, rubbed his hands together and said cheerfully, 'All went off pretty well, then. I really enjoyed that, didn't you?'

And *still* he was managing to make it sound like an Elton John concert. Cleo said, 'You're not supposed to enjoy funerals. Next you'll be giving it five stars on Amazon.'

'Actually, that's not a bad idea. We could do it on the show, get the listeners to call in with reviews of their favourite—'

'No you couldn't. That's just wrong. Oh God, look at my *heels*.' As they reached the entrance to the pub, Cleo leaned against one of the outdoor tables and used a tissue to clean away the clumps of mud and grass. 'Did you see me sinking into the ground while we were standing around the grave? I thought I was going to tip over and fall flat on my back.'

'That's why I didn't wear mine.' Ash nodded sympathetically.



'You know, you're looking good today. Scrubbed up well. Even if you don't deserve a compliment when you think of all the grief you give me.'

'It's not grief. It's constructive criticism. Which you badly need, by the way.' Having more or less cleaned her heels, Cleo lobbed the muddy tissue into the bin and adjusted her narrow cream skirt. Of course she was looking good; hadn't she put in a whole heap of extra effort making sure of it? But that was pride for you. It was also the reason she'd dragged Will along for the occasion. When you'd spent your teenage years being mercilessly teased and humiliated, you didn't want to turn up to meet your tormentor looking like a . . . a *donkey*. You felt compelled to prove to them that you weren't still a complete loser, not to mention capable these days of bagging yourself the kind of boyfriend any girl would be thrilled to, well, bag.

And here he was, standing just inside the entrance to the pub, greeting everyone as they came in and gravely receiving condolences in return. Oh well, on an occasion like this at least he wouldn't call her—

'Hello, Misa.' Dark eyes glinting with amusement, Johnny gave her hand a cross between a shake and a squeeze. He may even have been about to lean forward and plant a polite kiss on her cheek but she pulled back before that could happen.

I can't believe he just called me that.

'Hello, Johnny. I'm sorry about your dad. We'll all miss him.'

'Thanks. I guess this village is going to be a quieter place from now on.' His gaze flickered over her and the smile broadened. 'You're looking very well.'

Damn right I am. Turning to indicate Will, Cleo said, 'This is my boyfriend, Will Newman.'

'I'm so sorry for your loss,' Will said politely as they shook hands.

'Thank you. So, Misa, gone and got yourself a new man. Excellent?' Evidently pleased with his play on words, Johnny said, 'From what I hear, the old ones haven't been much cop.'

See what a nightmare he was? Cleo quelled the urge to retaliate with something cutting; it would hardly be seemly, after all. Plus, dammit, she couldn't think of anything fast enough. Instead she

turned away. When they were safely out of earshot, Will said, 'I see what you mean. Why does he call you Misa?'

All the old emotions were rushing back. Only someone whose teenage years had been similarly blighted could possibly understand how it felt to have been picked on non-stop.

'Oh, it's a hilarious nickname. I used to work hard at school, pay attention in class, ask loads of questions, answer them too. One day I was so excited about knowing the answer to a really difficult question that I stuck my hand up and yelled, "Me, sir!" Well, everyone practically wet themselves laughing. And that was it, I was stuck with it for the next three years of school. I was officially Teacher's Pet. Some of the other kids thought my name actually *was* Misa.'

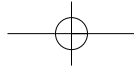
'And he's still calling you it, all these years later.' Will jerked his head in Johnny's direction.

'He was the one who came up with it in the first place.' Cleo cringed at the memory. It went without saying that she had never once put her hand up in class for the rest of her time at school, had stopped asking questions and paying attention to the answers. OK, maybe she couldn't blame everything on Johnny LaVenture, but he certainly hadn't helped. Her teenage hormones had been all over the place, she had fallen in with a wilder group of girls and her grades had slipped badly as a result. When her GCSEs had been a complete car crash, she'd felt an almost perverse sense of pride at their awfulness. *See, look at me, look at these abysmal grades! Here's the proof that I'm not a teacher's pet any more!*

'Poor baby.' Rubbing her shoulder in jokey consolation, Will said, 'Want me to beat him up for you?'

'Yes please. Except you'd better not. It's his dad's funeral, after all.' Plus, although Cleo didn't say this bit out loud, Johnny was bigger than him and had always been pretty athletic. It would be frankly embarrassing if he were to reduce Will to a slushy pulp. Still, it was generous of Will to have offered.

An hour and a couple of drinks later, the party had begun to warm up; everyone had begun to relax and Cleo's skin had stopped prickling every time she glanced over at her nemesis. Was it stupid to still feel like this? Maybe, but she couldn't help herself. It was



thirteen years since they'd been at school together. She had left at sixteen and plunged into the first of many jobs. Johnny had stayed on to take his A-levels – ha! *Now* who was the swotty teacher's pet? – before heading off to art school. After that he'd moved to New York, returning only occasionally to Channings Hill to visit his father, although Lawrence had evidently kept him updated on the subject of her less-than-dazzling successes on the boyfriend front. You'd have been more likely to spot Elvis around the village than Johnny in those days. Meanwhile, through a combination of hard work and socialising in all the right places, he had begun to make a real name for himself with his wire-constructed sculptures. When it came to the luck of the LaVentures, he'd inherited his share too. As time went by, the sculptures grew and so did Johnny's reputation, culminating in an exhibition during which every last one of the larger-than-life-size pieces had been snapped up by the billionaire owner of a chain of casinos. Overnight, Johnny became a recognised name, a celebrity in his own right with a stunning supermodel girlfriend to match. And Cleo, reading about his star-studded lifestyle in magazines, discovered a level of resentment she'd had no idea she was capable of experiencing, because it was all just so completely and utterly unfair. If a nice person experienced something wonderful, you were delighted for them and rejoiced in their success. But for all this to have happened to someone who so profoundly *didn't* deserve it . . . well, where was the fairness in that?

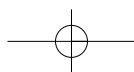
Will checked his watch and said apologetically, 'I have to go.'

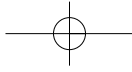
'Of course you do. Thanks for coming.' He had a work meeting in Bristol to get back to, followed by a squash tournament this evening. Cleo hugged him, kissed him quickly on the mouth and said, 'I'll see you on Friday.'

'Can't wait. Will you be all right here?'

'I'll be fine. I've got my big sister to look after me.' Abbie, fifteen years older and light years more sensible, was over by the bar chatting to some neighbours.

'Well, make sure she does. No pole dancing,' said Will. 'No chatting up handsome men.' He indicated a couple of whiskery ancient farmers huddled over their pints in the corner.





‘Good luck with the squash competition.’ Cleo gave him another kiss.

‘Thanks. I’ll be over after work on Friday.’ Wiggling his fingers at her as he moved towards the door, Will said, ‘Bye.’

‘Or I could come to you,’ Cleo offered, ‘if it’s easier.’

‘Hmm, you know what? I think I’d rather stay at your place.’ He smiled and pulled a you-know-why face; the two friends with whom he shared an untidy flat in Redland were the boisterous, heavy drinking, perpetually-up-for-a-laugh types whose presence wasn’t exactly conducive to a romantic atmosphere. Will, reluctant to subject her to their ribald remarks, had explained that it wouldn’t matter so much if she were just a casual one-off fling, but she wasn’t, she was way more important than that.

Hearing this had caused Cleo’s heart to expand with hope. Crikey, just imagine where she and Will might be in a year’s time. She watched him leave and exhaled happily. Will Newman. Cleo Newman. He really could be The One.

Then her skin started prickling again and a voice behind her said, ‘So that’s the boyfriend, is it, Misa?’

