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Wild and Free

Written by Wendy Holden

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WILD & FREE

Wendy Holden



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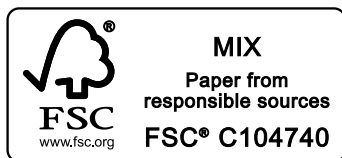
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CHAPTER 1

HM Prison Folgate January

The massive prison door slammed behind Jude. Its mighty metallic clang filled his ears and boomed in his head.

His first thought was that he was out.

His second, that it was bloody freezing.

And so, what now?

That was the third.

A car was parked nearby. Jude's first deliberate act of freedom was to bend and look in its wing mirror. He had not seen a proper reflection for years; mirrors were banned inside, for obvious reasons. You got those metal ones nailed to the bog walls, but they were scratched and usually vandalised; the reflection was distorted.

The wing mirror, between wipes with his sleeve as it steamed up with his breath, confirmed that he was as devilishly handsome as ever. A weak winter sun bounced off his bright blond hair, a tad too long. His skin and teeth looked fine, lousy prison diet notwithstanding. They had always been excellent; the former firm and glowing, the latter strong and white. Genes, he would

tell people. Having a Seventies supermodel as a mum. It wasn't true, but it sounded good. In his line of work, a bit of glamour didn't hurt.

If anything, Jude decided, chokey had made him better-looking. Bitter experience had firmed his jaw, hardened his mouth, given a new, flinty depth to the long, tawny eyes. He straightened to his full willowy six foot two and pushed his fraying wristbands deep in the pockets of the scabby black anorak.

He'd always been a natty dresser, but the style he'd affected on the outside had no place in prison. Snowy Jermyn Street cuffs to show the expensively plain gold links and the discreet glint of an even more expensive watch. Savile Row suits, single-breasted, held by one button; closely fitting round the shoulders. He'd always had taste, bought the best he could afford. Good stuff didn't date.

God only knew where all that was now. In storage somewhere, possibly, along with his silk boxer shorts and cashmere overcoats. Or maybe they'd all been nicked by the cops who had ransacked his rented flat at the time of his arrest.

Inside, it had just been prison overalls. He would not have wanted to stand out anyway; that was obviously something you did at your peril. He'd kept his head down and kept in with the right people, both screws and lags. Jude had always been a diplomat. In another life, with another background, he might have ended up as Her Majesty's Ambassador. Not lounging at Her Majesty's Pleasure. But you could only play the cards you were dealt and sometimes, as had happened, you lost the game.

When he'd lost his and been jailed it was summer. Six and a half years ago. Now the city was in the very depths of winter and as warm welcomes went, it lacked something.

Jude glanced up to the high, cold blue sky stretching above

the bare black branches of the trees. He produced a packet of cigarettes, slipped one out and tapped it on the box. He narrowed his eyes as he lit it. Exuding plumes of smoke and warm breath, he walked off.

‘Coo-ee! Jude!’

A woman’s voice. He twisted round.

A beautiful blonde girl was waving from a car on the other side of the road. Curvy, sexy, expensive and with a beautiful body, And that, Jude thought, was just the gleaming scarlet Ferrari with the famous yellow badge on the door. He identified it instantly as a 1955 750 Monza and felt his heart turn over.

Classic cars were Jude’s passion. Even inside, he’d followed the market; you were allowed magazines, if not books, not that he wanted those anyway. This beautiful low-slung baby, with her swooping lines and her big black tyres with the cross-hatched silver spokes, called to him. With every nerve of his being, he answered.

The girl was getting out with the knees-together ease of the debutante she certainly wasn’t. For all that her voice and poise were pure Kensington, she hailed, Jude knew, from Neasden.

‘Nice schmutter,’ she said ironically.

‘Wasn’t expecting you,’ Jude replied dryly. ‘Would have put on my white tie and tails if I’d known.’

‘Well, that’d be more your style.’ She probed the anorak’s grubby cuff with a polished fingernail. ‘Man at C&A, is it?’

‘All the rage inside. Height of fashion, believe me.’

‘I must say, I’ve always loved a stonewashed jean.’ She examined the clinging pair Jude had on. As well as being too tight, they were far too short; the crotch stopped only a few inches above his knees.

‘Great, aren’t they?’ Jude agreed. ‘Especially with the white trainers.’

‘White-ish,’ she said, wrinkling her nose.

‘And I’ve got on a lovely nylon polo shirt in a really fabulous petrol blue.’ He unzipped the anorak and showed her.

‘Woah!’ She shaded her eyes, as if from the dazzle. ‘You’re working a serious look there.’

‘HMP Folgate Charity Clothes Store chic,’ Jude told her. ‘When you’re leaving you get to choose an outfit. You should have seen what I left.’

She giggled.

‘You look good, though,’ Jude told her, dropping the irony. Frankie was a stylish bird, always had been. Today she wore a simple-yet-expensive, close-fitting white shirt and no bra that he could see; also a very short tweed skirt. Emphasising long and coltish legs were a pair of tight-fitting, low-heeled knee-boots. She had high cheekbones and full lips and her shoulder blade-length hair lifted in the breeze. Jude felt a wave of desire. It had been a very long time.

But there was, he knew, no point looking to Frankie. She was his best friend’s girl and therefore untouchable. Jude may be a thief, but there was honour involved; besides, Rich was not a man to cross. People who crossed him wound up under crosses themselves. Six feet under.

But if Frankie had noticed, she gave no sign. He was relieved when she indicated the Ferrari’s passenger door. ‘Come on. Get in.’

After the cold street the car was deliciously warm. It smelt cedary and expensive and the low-slung seat fitted him like a glove. To be in something like this after those white crim vans with the row of black squares along the top! At his trial there had been banging on the sides, hysterical shouting and cameras. Some groping old DJ was being tried in a neighbouring court for historic abuse; the crowd thought Jude’s van contained him.

Running down the ramp amid a hail of violent invective, Jude had been glad to be a mere armed robber on a murder rap.

He adjusted his seat to an exaggeratedly relaxed angle. The engine purred richly into life and the car glided down the road. He watched as, in the red-framed side mirror, the prison receded.

‘Thanks for the reception committee,’ he remarked conversationally to Frankie.

‘You’re welcome.’ Frankie smiled at him again from the wheel. There was, he felt, a cryptic edge to the curve of those full lips. He did not ask where they were going; he did not much care. He supposed it was to Rich’s Surrey mansion.

It was, frankly, high time Rich stepped in to help. Jude had heard nothing from his mentor and gang leader the entire time he’d been inside. Not even a postcard, let alone a file inside a cake. Rich, always a jammy git, had avoided arrest. He’d been in the right place at the right time as opposed to the wrong place at the wrong time like Jude.

Rich’s silence was for a reason, Jude guessed. The obvious one was that communication with the prison was risky. Rich was doubtless under suspicion still, and presumably this was why Frankie had been sent to pick him up. But under the banter about the clothes had been relief. Rich’s other possible reason for not being in touch, Jude knew, was that he had forgotten all about him.

It would be good to see the bastard, Jude thought. And to see his cars especially. Rich’s pride and joy, the fruits of all his labours as he liked to call it, was the colossal uber-garage under the Surrey mansion. It had a heated marble floor, a surround-sound system, spotlights and viewing platforms offering vistas of, among other stunners, Rich’s 1973 Porsche 911 and pre-war Bentley. You could see them from the huge sitting room too;

glass panels in the floor afforded an extra view of the glories below.

‘Got any plans?’ Frankie asked.

Jude shrugged. ‘Considering a few options.’ Admitting he was desperate, homeless and without prospects might, he knew, considerably reduce what market value he had.

They were driving through South London now, along one of those long streets typical of the area. Shops along the bottom, crummy flats along the top; the shops a mixture of betting emporia, convenience stores, dry cleaners, cafés, off-licences with grilles over the windows. There were newsagents with lottery signs outside and the odd ethnic food store with old men in white robes picking dubiously through boxes of suggestive-looking vegetables.

‘I might have something for you,’ Lorna said, smiling at him.

Jude did not reply. He did not want to sound too keen. He registered the ‘I’ and slotted it with the fact she was at the wheel of Rich’s most beloved car, the pride of his collection. If he let Frankie drive it, things had obviously got serious during the last few years.

Jude guessed that, since he last saw her, Frankie had risen in Rich’s affections and within the organisation. She had become the Bonnie to Rich’s Clyde. The only female member of the famous Diamond Geezers.

This moniker had been bestowed on Rich’s gang by a press keen to emphasise and cartoonise their East London roots. Coverage tended to concentrate on the daring aspect of their work – an audacious series of raids netting hauls of at least \$100 million a time – rather than the part that involved shooting people or leaving them maimed.

The Diamond Geezers’ stamping ground – or, more precisely, their shooting, threatening and stealing ground – had been the

foyers of the great hotels of the world. Twenty metres in, to be specific, where the glass cases of necklaces and fine watches were. Preferably at two in the morning, with sledgehammers and getaway motorbikes revving outside.

It unnerved Jude, the way Frankie drove while looking at him, not the road. Not for his sake, but for the car's. Only thirty-three Monzas had ever been made and this one, Jude knew, was worth something north of five million.

They were coming up to a pedestrian crossing with a crowd of schoolkids jostling each other off the kerb. They spotted the Ferrari and started shouting. Frankie lowered the window.

'How do you get one of these then, lady?' A small black boy with longing eyes, his face pinched with cold, was bouncing a football by her driver door.

'Be good, work hard and get a good job,' Frankie called, laughing, over her shoulder as the car zoomed away.

'Just like Rich, eh?' Jude remarked dryly.

As Frankie did not answer Jude remembered that Rich wasn't someone you joked about. He'd better watch his step.

He stared through the windscreen as the long road of shops gave way to a huge roundabout. It had come up in the world since he'd been inside. The centre of it had been a clump of benighted flats but these seemed to have been razed to the ground and replaced with smarter ones. There were balconies equipped, not with dismembered bicycles, washing and general rubbish, but trendy outdoor furniture. At ground level there was that reliable bellwether of extraneous cash, a flower shop.

Jude felt a tug of apprehension. He had heard London property was going through the roof. He was going to need a lot of money to live in the manner to which he had become accustomed before he had had to accustom himself to HMP Folgate.

The Ferrari was crossing Lambeth Bridge. Jude looked out at the sparkling wintry water and the graceful stone tiara of the Palace of Westminster ranged along its side. That tall glass thing way down the river, that was the Shard, right?

‘Look, Jude,’ Frankie said suddenly. Her bantering tone had gone; she sounded serious. ‘Do you want a job or not?’

Jude continued to stare ahead, as if he had not heard. There was no way he was taking instructions from Frankie. Not without seeing Rich first.

From the wheel, she continued to urge him. ‘Come on, Jude. It’s a great job. One of the best we’ve done.’

Jude’s well-formed lip curled sceptically. The bar was set pretty high for that. Take the famous Handbags and Gladrags raid on Monaco, when he, Rich and the other Geezers had arrived in blond wigs, Hermes scarves and crocodile totes in which .357 Magnums were concealed. They had departed with \$150 million in assorted jewels, including the celebrated Vicomtesse de Chabron necklace with its centrepiece 150 carat diamond.

They were driving through Westminster now, packed with tourists despite the chill. Hundreds of mobile-phone cameras flashed at the Ferrari. Lots of people, Jude reflected, were recording the fact that his first act on release was to jump into a conspicuous car. Bought with conspicuously ill-gotten gains.

She was changing lanes by Westminster Abbey now. Jude, for all his consternation, could not resist a glance at it. He’d watched the royal wedding; along with many of Her Majesty’s other guests at Folgate. The sight of all those sparklers had made his fingers itch.

‘Let me talk to Rich about it,’ he said.

It had struck him that Frankie was following an odd route if she intended to go to Surrey, heading west rather than south. She was driving up the red-topped tarmac of the Mall now. Up

ahead, atop the grey spread of Buckingham Palace, the Royal Standard fluttered in the freezing breeze. Her Majesty, at whose pleasure he had been languishing, was at home. Should he pop in and thank her?

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible,’ Frankie said.

‘What isn’t?’ Jude’s tone was tight with suspicion.

‘You can’t talk to Rich.’

‘Why not?’ So this was it. A schism. He’d known something was up. Had Rich and Frankie split and were now setting up rival gangs? Was this why she had met him, to swoop in first and claim his loyalty?

But he was not on her side. Never would be. Rich may have left him high and dry in prison, but they went back a long way. All the way to the children’s home.

Frankie did not look at Jude as she skirted the Victoria Memorial. More tourists, snapping the Palace, captured them as they zoomed past. ‘Because he’s dead, Jude,’ she said in a low voice.

For a moment, Jude was too surprised to react. Time stopped and a singing silence filled his head. As always when experiencing extreme emotion, Jude shrank into himself, was still, betrayed by no flicker of a muscle what he felt.

Dead? Rich was dead? Not such a jammy git then, after all. Jesus.

‘What happened?’ he muttered, when he was able to speak, by which time they were way beyond Victoria station and going round Hyde Park Corner.

Frankie reached out over the gearstick and took Jude’s hand. A great stone was spitting light on her middle finger. He had always wondered what had happened to the Vicomtesse de Chabron diamond.

‘What happened? They happened.’ She felt in the door pocket and passed over a copy of the Evening Standard.

Five Star Heist, read the headline. Sledgehammer-wielding robbers stage smash-and-grab at prestigious Park Lane hotel, screamed the subhead.

‘On our turf!’ Jude exclaimed, stung into violent expression at last. ‘Who are these jerks?’

‘The head man’s an ex-Balkan general, with all that implies.’

‘He needs to be taught a lesson,’ Jude said grimly.

‘That’s what Rich thought,’ Frankie sighed, ‘and look what happened to him.’

‘What did happen to him?’ Jude asked, then wished he hadn’t, as Frankie described how Rich had been met outside the Royal Automobile Club by iron-bar-wielding thugs in motorcycle helmets. The remains had had to be identified by dental records.

‘It was planned,’ Frankie told him. ‘The Balkan wanted Rich out of the way.’

‘And you want me to take him on now?’ Jude slid her a look.

‘It’s not a hotel job,’ Frankie said quickly. ‘Rich realised before he died that he couldn’t compete with these psychos. He knew he had to find another market. Think outside the jewel box, as it were.’

Jude surveyed her doubtfully. His every nerve end was telling him to bail out. But this car, as Frankie had possibly realised, was hellish hard to bail out of.

‘He had a plan,’ she continued urgently. ‘But only you can make it work, Jude.’

As she talked she piloted the Ferrari down a cobbled Knightsbridge mews street and pulled into a narrow space defined by black-painted chains. The Ferrari’s red door was right by the house entrance; a sage-painted door with a gleaming gold knocker. Her place, Jude assumed.

The low purr of the engine now ceased. Frankie went sat still for a moment, as if making up her mind about something. Then she turned to him and traced his cheek with her finger.

The thought roared through Jude's mind that now Rich was dead, Frankie might not be unavailable after all. It was an ill wind that blew nobody any good.

'What is it?' he heard himself muttering. 'This plan?'

He was aware he was playing into her hands but her hands were on his groin now. The nerve ends screaming at him to bail out were drowned out by the clamour of another, equally urgent need. This became deafening as Frankie leant over and pressed her parted lips to his.

'Festivals,' Frankie said, pulling away with tantalising gentleness.

'Festivals?' Aflame with lust, Jude strained to control his rioting senses. Hippies and burger vans ran through his mind. Glastonbury and mud.

Frankie flopped back against the driving seat and slowly undid the top two buttons of her shirt. 'Festivals,' she pronounced, 'are a gold mine.'

Jude was struggling now. On the one hand he ached to possess Frankie. On the other hand, what the hell did she mean? Festivals were all warm beer in plastic glasses, horrible Portaloos and skint teenagers. He'd done a bit of festival business in the past. On the narcotics side. But the takings had hardly justified the effort or the risk.

Frankie undid the remaining buttons of her shirt and opened it just enough for him to glimpse, rather than see. 'The point is, in the last few years while you've been inside, festivals have changed out of all recognition.'

Jude felt that the point was something else entirely. One agonisingly constricted by his tight trousers.

'You get these posh ones now,' Frankie went on, placing her hands behind her head so the shirt opened a little more. 'Boutique festivals, they're called. Very select. They're held at stately homes. Rich kids go to them. Famous people. Super-models. And the thing is, their guard's right down. They reckon they're roughing it, they're full of love and peace. They shove their diamond rings in their tent pockets. Rich pickings,' she added, leaning over towards him with a smile.

He didn't dare look. If he did, he would lose himself. Promise her anything, anything. He stared violently out of the window trying to control himself. He felt he still didn't buy it.

'I haven't convinced you,' Frankie sighed.

He shook his head.

'So what's the problem?' Her long-nailed fingers were walking towards his trousers again. He folded his hands primly over his pelvis and decided to be straight with her.

'Why do you want me to organise it?'

Frankie's eyes sparkled. 'Because you're smart, you sound posh and you're good-looking. Perfect boutique festival material.'

Jude inclined his head. 'Flattery will get you everywhere.'

'I do hope so. But you still don't look too sure.'

'Who would I be working with?'

'That,' Frankie said, 'would be up to you.'

This, Jude decided, was the deal-breaker. 'I've been out of the scene for a while,' he objected. 'I wouldn't know who to trust.'

'Pity,' Frankie said. She rippled her elegant fingers on the steering wheel of the car. 'This would be your fee, if you do the job.'

Jude felt as if his head might explode. He stared at Frankie with the wide eyes of a dazzled child. 'This car?' he croaked, looking wildly around the interior.

‘Rich once said you were the only other person on the planet who loved it like he did.’

True. He and Rich shared a contempt for ‘expert’ collectors who didn’t even know how to open their car hoods. ‘Which festival?’ he asked. He was in, no question. He’d was off to buy a tent and a bloody CND T-shirt before you could say portable toilet.

‘That’s up to you as well.’ Her smile flashed. ‘Look,’ she said, ‘let’s go inside and, um, discuss it further.’

Never had Jude moved so fast.