Four Play

Fiona Walker

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Lady Isabel Belling, known to all in Oddlode as Hell's Bells, looked eagerly around the Manor Farm drawing-room, drinking in its masculinity – sporting prints, leather furniture, sombre minimalism. It had Ely Gates's mark all over it.

He appeared at the door with a tray of coffee things.

'No Felicity today?' She watched him cast around for a spot to land the tray, and stood up to take it from him. 'Here, let me.'

'Thank you. Felicity is taking the boy back to boarding school.'

'I see.'

Ely always referred to his children Godspell and Enoch as 'the girl' and 'the boy'.

'And is Godspell at home?'

'I believe she's with the Wyck boy.'

'Are they *still* courting?'

'Regrettably, yes.'

'How unfortunate for you.' She settled the tray on an overstuffed banquette.

'It will end before long, no doubt. It's just a rebellion after . . .'

'Quite.'

Hell's Bells poured coffee into two delicate bone china cups with barely a rattle of the pot. Her nerves were steady, despite the subject close at hand. Last year her son, Jasper, had entered into a short, unhappy engagement to Godspell Gates. The parents had been delighted until it abruptly ended with Jasper and Godspell both choosing alternative partners. In Jasper's case, all had worked out rather well, with an attractive if headstrong daughter-in-law who was well on her way to producing a Belling heir. In Godspell's case, the liaison with uncouth local hooligan Saul Wyck was less than ideal.

'The only thing that they have in common is their music,' Ely muttered.

Hell's Bells was uncertain whether music was the correct term for

the dreadful din that Godspell's band made, but she said nothing as she passed the coffee across and smiled a rare Belling smile. Ely rewarded her by return, making her heart skip a little.

It was impossible not to be at least slightly skittish around Ely Gates. Once the unrivalled loins of the village, he still retained handsome features and broad shoulders even though his blond hair had turned to steel and his rangy body had started to stoop. Self-made, forthright, impossibly rich and very clever, he filled a room with his charisma.

She crossed her ankles neatly in front of her as though she were a deb and cocked her head winningly. 'To business. The hunt ball.'

'You really think it should go ahead this year?'

'But of course! Just because hunting is temporarily illegal, hosting a ball is not. And the hunt is still at the centre of this community. We must celebrate its survival.'

'Indeed.' Ely was more ambivalent on the subject, but now was not the time to point that out.

'I refuse to let a bunch of lefties ruin any good party.'

Ely, whose capitalist success shrouded a socialist heart, cleared his throat. 'And how may I help?'

'St John and I can't accommodate it at home this year because of the building work. The roof is due to be renovated in March, ruling us out.'

'I really don't think that I have the space—'

'Not *here*, Ely. Far too poky. No ballroom for a start.'

Ely narrowed his eyes as she made his beautifully proportioned Queen Anne farmhouse sound like a shepherd's croft.

'Then where exactly?'

'Eastlode Park.'

Ely's eye brows shot up at the mention of one of the most expensive country estate hotels in England, a hotel just a mile out of Oddlode, a hotel of which he was a major shareholder.

'Isn't it a little grand?'

'Not at all. I want this ball to be *very* grand.'

'But it's just the hunt.'

Hell's Bells gave him a look that could have struck lesser men dead. 'And Eastlode Park is just an hotel.'

'One of the best in the country, the most élite, fashionable, the most expensive . . .'

'You must be able to get us a good deal,' she pressed him, pulling out all the Belling charm guns with a smile that was part coercion, part despotism and curiously arousing. 'The usual rates are prohibitively expensive. We wouldn't need exclusive use, of course – just the ballroom, formal dinner, waiting staff, perhaps a block of discounted rooms for those who have to travel from London or wherever. I am relying upon you, Ely. The Vale of the Wolds is relying upon you. You are our saviour.'

Put like that, Ely felt his backbone straighten and his shoulders square as he promised to see what he could do. Lady Belling could always bend him to her will, appealing to his innate snobbishness, godliness and just a little bit to his unfaithful loins. Short, squat and bullish she may be, but she had amazing silver eyes, hard-hunting thighs and tremendous class.

Equally smitten, Hell's Bells regarded him through her short but lusciously thick eyelashes. 'There's another point on which I'd like to pick your clever mind, Ely.'

'Oh yes?'

'We desperately need youth for the Wolds hunt. New blood. We need to appeal to a younger generation. Last year's ball was full of dreadful old crusties like you and me.'

'Hmm.' Ely pulled at his cuffs.

'I have asked Spurs and Ellen to help come up with some ideas – after all, they're young – but you are the best businessman in Oddlode. I'm sure your mind is more finely tuned to such things.'

'I would say so.' He returned her patronising smile.

'We need to sell ourselves to the younger generation. Make the VW *sexy*.' Hell's Bells emphasised the modern catchword with a little waggle of her fist. 'They still ride out with us, after all – we get plenty of young eventers and point-to-pointers in the field. We need to get them in their glad rags, adding to the glamour and the coffers. The hunt won't survive long enough for the ban to be lifted unless we get these young'uns to really join in on every level. We want them in their bally warpaint.'

'A unique selling point to attract them to the ball?'

'Exactly! Can I leave it with you?'

'By all means.'

'Jolly good,' she beamed. 'I'll tell Ellen that you're on the case.

She'll be thrilled. Not really fair lumbering her with it all when she's heavily pregnant, and dear Jasper is so busy these days.'

Ely gave her another dry smile, doubting that Ellen would feel relieved to have his help. She had, after all, stolen Ely's selected son-in-law from under his nose. They were hardly on speaking terms.

'When is the baby due?'

'Beginning of March. St John is terribly excited – we all are.'

'Surely you can't risk the hunt ball clashing with the birth?'

'We're holding it early this year.' Hell's Bells checked her diary. 'The last Friday in February was the date agreed although, God knows, we'll have to get proper invitations out pronto. Ah! Here we are – the twenty-ninth. I say!'

'It's a leap year.'

'Yes. And that means it's a Look Before You Leap ball. What fun!'

Ely ran a perfectly manicured thumb along his neat white beard and creased his clever blue eyes. 'I have an idea . . .'

I

Magnus Olensen-Willis was not a rock star name. But Magnus had never wanted to be a rock star. He wanted to be a professional musician; a moderately successful singer-songwriter, perhaps. Well respected, certainly – renowned, even. Famous – no way. Or at least that's what he told his family.

His friends the Three Disgraces knew differently. They'd hung around enough at Magnus's band practices and gigs to realise that the dopey blond's dreams lay well beyond the realms of Oddlode's goth-metal ensemble, Roadkill. Fronted by the wailing, white-faced Godspell Gates, the band made a dreadful sound even to the Disgraces' undiscerning ears. Magnus's exquisite guitar playing was lost amid the thrashing din of Saul Wyck's drumming and the string-chewing antics of bassist Ket, just as Magnus's soul-searching lyrics were obscured by larynx-garrotting screams. He had been at sea for months.

Tonight he had finally been washed ashore. Three hours of spats and deafening amp feedback had finally led the man accustomed to under-selling himself to offer an end of season giveaway. 'Either we play it my way or we stop playing.'

At which, Roadkill had stopped playing and disbanded.

'Shit, I should call Saul and apologise,' he told the Disgraces as they adopted their customary positions on the sofas by the New Inn fire, pints of Budvar in hand. 'We're booked to play the Trout in Huntscote on Friday. I don't want to let them down.'

'They're letting *you* down!' wailed Carry, the youngest of the Three Disgraces. 'Tonight was just a joke. You were right to quit.'

Earlier, she and her two elder sisters, Sperry and Fe, had loyally wound their way along the hundred yards of narrow, black-iced lane to watch Roadkill's 'new material' rehearsal. Forsaking their father's warm pub for the freezing, half-finished studios that Magnus and his stepfather were creating out of a burned-out

old agricultural warehouse, they had dutifully listened to yet another musical assassination.

'They've just been using you,' Fe insisted, looking up as she rolled a cigarette.

Carry nodded. 'They wanted to get their hands on your equipment and your material and trash it, Mags.'

He shrugged. 'They have their own ideas. But it's not my band. I've got no right to interfere. I'll apologise tomorrow.'

So laid-back that he watched the world over his own feet, Magnus was an infuriating if adorable friend. Loyal, easy-going, sympathetic, funny and incredibly talented. And, occasionally, a total mug.

'They're holding you back.' Sperry didn't look up from texting.

'They don't even *like* you,' Fe reminded him. 'They said so.'

'They said they didn't like my "look".' He ran his hand self-consciously through his blond mop and cast an eye down to his chunky green sweater. 'And perhaps they're right – I look bloody preppy these days. My mother bought me this for Christmas and I have to wear it all of January to keep her sweet.'

'Preppy? C'mon!' Fe snorted. 'You're gorgeous. All the girls fall for you. You're Chris Martin, Brad Pitt and Jude Law all rolled into one. Even our mum says you're like a young Robert Redford – whoever he is.'

'And that's not preppy?'

She tilted her head thoughtfully. 'Well, you could lose the jumper.'

'Thanks.'

'You *were* cooler when we met you.' Again, Sperry didn't look up from texting.

'I've been countrified.'

'You'll be countrified with a different spelling if you get back together with Godspell and Saul. Dye your hair skunk and we'll disown you.'

'Tempting. I might get a bit of action without you three cramping my style.'

'Not with skunk hair, you won't. Anyway, I thought you said you were enjoying being single?'

Having never been without at least one girlfriend until the Three Disgraces came along, Magnus was rather baffled now to find

himself with three ravishing chaperones who refused to let another woman near him. They fascinated him, with their confidence and bravado. They also confounded him. The friendship wasn't yet losing its novelty value, but he couldn't figure it out.

Magnus had arrived with his family from urban Essex the previous summer, immediately causing a stir amongst the younger female population of the Lodes Valley. Tall and blue-eyed, he drove a vintage Porsche, talked to anybody, laughed a lot and flirted even more. Rumours quickly spread that he was a musician who'd been in a successful band. The Three Disgraces had wasted no time in befriending him for his own protection.

Savvy, streetwise and cocky, the three girls were the unofficial, unholy Trinity of Lodes Valley youth, holding court in their father's Upper Springlode pub. They talked too fast, were the fastest texters around, rode their mopeds too fast along the lanes, fasted a lot to stay thin as rakes but they were resolutely not *fast* – just a little speedy. And Magnus was their new racing mascot. They'd immediately seen something special in him. They adored him. There had been no escape. Had it not been for a lifelong, unwritten pact that they never went after the same man, they would have fought tooth and nail over him. Instead, the Sixsmith sisters fought his corner and kept him willing captive to their charm, protecting him from less worthy female adversaries. Sharp good looks and song lyrics that cut into one's soul lent a quixotic, heroic angle to the dopey, gullible mug who was too honest for his own good. A free-spirited wolf lay beneath that waggy-tailed golden retriever exterior. Magnus had a sex appeal that made him the ultimate fashion accessory. And the Three Disgraces were slaves to fashion as well as friendship.

Magnus had tried to dispel their initial misconceptions as soon as they lured him into their fold. True, he'd always been in bands, but none of them had made it big time. At university, his band had been getting some impressive gigs, but that had all fallen apart when a motorbike accident put Magnus in hospital for six weeks and then forced him to postpone university for a year. Back in Essex, he'd formed a new band, Slackers, with two old school-friends. They had just started to get a real following when the entire family uprooted to the Cotswolds.

'I'm really just a failed engineering student with a limp who lives

with his parents and plays guitar. In fact, I'm the kiss of death to bands,' he'd told them.

To their shame, it was the girls who had introduced him to Roadkill, never guessing at his latent talent. They'd just wanted to see him play on stage.

But Roadkill had tried to mould him into a skunk-haired weirdo.

'We think you should go it alone,' Carry told him now.

'And you'll be my Robert Palmer girls, I suppose?' he laughed.

'Who?'

'Forget it – stuff my stepfather likes.' He watched their blank expressions with amusement. With their identikit dark slanting eyes and glossy pouts they would make the perfect Palmeresque backing trio, if only they could be relied upon not to carry on texting throughout a musical number.

'So are you going to do it?' Carry urged.

'Nope. I've always been in bands. I like people around me. I only do it for fun.'

'I play netball for fun,' Fe shrugged. 'Doesn't mean I'd play for a shit team.'

'You *do* play for a shit team,' Carry pointed out.

'Do not!'

Watching them start a squawking match, Magnus knocked back his pint and tried not to think about his half-hearted attempt to quit the band. His edgy, soul-searching songs had been massacred beyond recognition. He knew Roadkill stank as much as its namesake did glued to melting tarmac in midsummer, but he had a rather suicidal addiction to it. He appreciated Godspell, Saul and Ket's carefree attitude and black humour, and the fact they didn't take him seriously. Ever since his accident, he'd struggled for direction. He didn't want to go back to university and his stepfather had thankfully sided with him on that. Graham, who had never gone to university and had made a mint in haulage, saw his stepson doing the same in music production – becoming a sound engineer and taking it from there, through graft and dedication, not a fast-track education. It suited Magnus because it meant he could lazily stay at home and set up his dream studio, gig with Roadkill and knock around with the Three Disgraces.

They had stopped scrapping now and were all looking at him sceptically. Individually, they were pretty, but not knock-out.

Collectively, with their smoky cat eyes, high cheeks and long, gleaming manes, they were electrifying. They had a strange power over him that he thoroughly enjoyed.

Magnus grinned. 'I won't get the skunk hair, okay?'

The cool, smooth faces kept on staring. It freaked him out when they did that.

'And I'll lose the jumper.'

The girls smiled with overpowering effect.

'Give.' Carry held out her hands.

'Yes, give.' Fe put her hands alongside, followed by Sperry.

Sighing, he pulled the sweater over his head and laid it on the outstretched hands.

Without warning, they launched it into the fire and let out shrieks of delight.

'My mother gave me that!' he wailed, watching it woof up in flames.

'Acrylic.'

'Cheap.'

'Probably panic shopping.'

The girls exchanged winks. Somehow, they would turn Magnus into a rock star. The name would have to change, of course, but they wouldn't break that to him just yet. Let him get over the jumper first.

Dilly Gently was a disastrous name to be lumbered with. The love-child of eighties New Romantic turned teenage seductress Ophelia Gently – or Pheely – she supposed she was lucky not to be called 'Softly'.

Now nineteen, she had just about developed the maturity to cope with the funny looks and sniggers she got when introducing herself. Most often she used her full name Daffodil, but it was such a mouthful and she loathed being nicknamed Daffy.

At thirty-five, her mother had not improved much on the name taste front. Baby Basil, born just two weeks earlier on New Year's Eve, was so named because Pheely had been in her larder at the time and had stared fixedly at the Schwartz basil pot throughout her labour. Poor Basil would have been named Schwartz had it not been for the thick mop of blond tresses he had appeared with.

'Why are both my children blonde? I have such lovely rich-

coloured hair. Dark is so much more dramatic.' She fingered her teak tresses petulantly at the mirror. 'I thought the dark gene was dominant over blonde?'

'If it comes out of a bottle, genetics doesn't work that way,' Dilly told her, pulling on her coat. 'I think you'll find blonde and *mouse* are equally dominant. If you want Basil to take after you, I can always pick you up some dye from Boots.' She wrapped a scarf tightly around her neck.

Pheely nobly ignored the sarcasm. 'Are you going out?'

'Just Maddington.' It was what the locals called Market Addington, the closest thing to a metropolis that the Lodes Valley had to offer.

'Oh, goodie! I'll write you down a list.'

'I've got to run for the bus.' Dilly was already at the door, tripping over Hamlet the Great Dane who thought he was going to be taken for a walk.

'I'll text it to you then. Anke's coming round for a coffee and a chat in a minute. In fact, can you take your brother?'

'You *are* kidding?'

'I'll pay you.'

'In that case, I'll take you seriously.'

'Thank you, darling! Darling Dilly Gently.'

'Don't call me that. Just give me the money.'

All the Cottrell offspring had been given Christian names that began with P since time immemorial, and Peregrine 'Piggy' Cottrell's crop had been no exception. The youngest of his children, however, had rebelled.

When they turned eleven, the twins had agreed that Phillip and Penelope were ghastly 'old' names to be lumbered with. Thus, Phillip had adopted the nickname given him by his elder brothers – 'Flipper' – which, as far as he knew, was something to do with an old kids' TV series that he had never seen. In turn, he had nicknamed his twin sister Penelope 'Nelly', after the elephant. This wasn't because Nell had ever been elephantine, but because she was always running away from home – packing her trunk and trying to leave the family circus.

Now twenty-three, the duo had hung onto those childhood nicknames. With their looks, the twins could have called themselves

Sodom and Gomorrah and got away with it. Long-limbed, lean and as graceful as thoroughbred racehorses, they had inherited their mother's jet-black hair and the Cottrell grey-green eyes which were fringed with the longest, blackest lashes in the county. It was universally agreed that the Cottrell twins were the best looking family members, but also the most arrogant. And, for a family renowned for being stand-offish, that made them very arrogant indeed.

Flipper answered to no other name amongst his confidantes. Most of his clients used it, too, although, as a newly qualified equine vet, it caused occasional bafflement. He never explained it, simply introducing himself with a charming self-assurance that made his strange name appear alluring rather than ludicrous.

Nell had dropped the 'y', but she was still resolutely Nell without a pit-stop to Penelope permissible. If any of her family called her by her full name, she walked out of the room. And, while she no longer tried to run away from the circus, she dreamed constantly of escape.

Today was no exception. She was bored, as always. January was such a dull month – the long, cold posting between Christmas and skiing. All the lovely parties were over, the gifts unwrapped and the mulled wine guzzled. There was nothing to look forward to and nothing to do.

Her parents thought that the cure to her ennui would be to get a job, but Nell was resisting the idea. They had been droning on about it again over breakfast, so she'd escaped to walk Milo, her chihuahua. Given his small stature and proximity to the frost-hardened ground, walking to the end of the drive was about all Milo could take, so he was now tucked up in her big leather bag watching the world go by from under her armpit.

Not that there was a lot of world to watch going by in Fox Oddfield. Action was limited to old Mrs Pickering (known as 'Pickitup') rooting through the hedgerows for hazelnuts and discarded litter, dressed in her usual multiple layers. She looked as though she had randomly stage-dived onto a jumble-sale trestle. Nell recognised one of her father's ancient flat caps and a pair of her mother's ghastly checked golfing slacks.

Giving her a wide berth, Nell trudged through the small hill hamlet and onto the bridle-way that ran alongside the pheasant

shoot. Her father had once prided himself on running the best shoot in the Cotswolds, but the woods, coppices and drives had recently been sold, along with a great swathe of family land. The year before that, the London house had been leased out. Times were hard for the Cottrell family. The auctioneering and surveying business started by Nell's great grandfather was struggling to keep afloat.

She missed the Chelsea house. Had it still been available, she would be there now, raiding the January sales and seeing her friends. She'd been furious with her father for letting strangers take it on. It was her bolt-hole.

'We got up to all sorts, didn't we, Milo?' She tickled the nose beneath her armpit. Milo – named after a favourite ex-boyfriend – let out a cold-nosed snort.

Plucking her mobile from her pocket, Nell idly called her brother.

'What do you want?' He was characteristically brusque.

'I'm bored. What are you up to? Got time for coffee?'

'I'm giving a plasma drip to a premature foal. Please don't ring my mobile when I'm on call.'

'C'mon, Flips. When are you free? Daddy's being vile to me again. Says I've got to get a job.'

'You *do* have to get a job – whoa, whoa sweetheart. You're fine. Stand still.'

'He'll get me some ghastly admin job at the estate agency.'

'You know the rules. It's that or find a rich husband,' Flipper reminded her. 'I've gotta go. Why not beg a coffee from Trudy? Or Spurs' pretty wife – you like her. Pour your heart out to one of them, darling one.'

'But only you understand me, Flips.'

'Unfortunately so. Call me later. *Much* later.'

Sighing, Nell stashed her phone away and kicked a frozen divot up in the air.

Flipper had become increasingly distanced lately. Her twin, her beloved best friend of a brother, had a life beyond hers even though they now shared the same big flat in the attic of their parents' house, had the same friends and shared every secret. His job was shutting her out.

At first, Nell had joined her brother in his ambition to become a vet. They had always been fiercely competitive as well as frighteningly close, and they had progressed through the lower

rungs of academia neck and neck – twelve A-grade GCSEs, two brace of A-grade A-levels each. Then Flipper had won a place at Bristol as a vet student, and Nelly hadn't. Her interview had gone well, she was equally qualified. The rejection was as hurtful as it was baffling.

Instead of taking up her place at second-choice Liverpool, she had changed her mind about veterinary medicine and announced her intention of taking a foundation course in art, basing herself in the London house with its custodian, great-aunt Grania. There, she had partied mercilessly. The foundation course – which she had scraped through because she was clever and talented despite her chronic laziness – was followed by a journalism course and then an acting course and finally a fashion design course, all funded by her long-suffering parents. Only the leasing of the house had called a halt to Nell's endless search for the perfect niche career. Now she was trapped in the Cotswolds, uncertain what to do.

In London, she had come and gone as she wished, sharing the house with great-aunt Grania who was as deaf as a post and usually three parts cut, enabling her to turn a blind eye to Nell's antics. With a generous trust fund, Nell had lived life to the full.

Now she and great-aunt G were back in the Cottrell bosom, living in separate quarters in her parents' draughty country pile and exchanging looks of mutual pity if they ever passed in a stairwell. The fun years were over. At twenty-three, Nell knew that this was far too soon. She *so* craved fun.

At least coming home had coincided with Flipper's return to the fold to take up a post at Foxrush Equine Clinic. Curiously, being apart hadn't affected their closeness – just as it hadn't when sent to separate single-sex boarding-schools. Throughout his training in Bristol and her dilettante diplomas in London, Flipper and Nell had spoken several times a day and stayed with one another often. Now that they were under the same roof once more, Flipper's dedication to his career left Nell feeling left out. It was the first time she felt that she didn't understand him entirely. She had no such passion. His volatile on-off love-life she could understand – it had always been as stormy and chaotic as her own. His dedication to his vocation was a mystery.

None of the Cottrells was passionate about work. About horses, yes – plus country pursuits, fine food and wine, friends and, most of

all, family. Work was a necessary evil. It was one of the reasons the family company was flailing.

Nell was not alone in her lack of direction. It was an inherited trait. Her elder brothers Piers and Phinneas (known as Finn) were barely even part-timers at the auction house as they pursued their preferred pastimes of horse dealing and house restoration respectively. Elder sister, Phoney, was a full-time mother. Her father was practically retired, and doting mother Dibs had never worked in her life.

They all lived together in various wings, cottages and farms at Fox Oddfield Abbey, a decrepit Cotswold stone pile set in a beautiful but ever-dwindling estate. When Piggy had snapped it up in the early nineties 'for a song', he had been full of bold, entrepreneurial ideas. A conference centre, luxury holiday destination, apartments or even a theme park. Of course, nothing had come of it. The family always got in the way. Just like the house they had lived in before – the Manse in Oddlode – it was used and abused like a tatty old pair of gumboots. Now it was falling apart.

She turned to look at it briefly, walking backwards. A huge, ornate slab of eighteenth-century Cotswold stone neo-classicism squatted regally upon the long-gone site of the original twelfth-century Cistercian Abbey. She knew it to be a beautiful house – even Pevsner had raved about its Palladian lines and Corinthian portico. Framed by poplar avenues and lime walks, the Abbey certainly loomed large above little Fox Oddfield, but it did absolutely nothing for Nell and it had never really felt like home.

Piggy liked to live in houses with religious connotations. It assuaged his Catholic guilt.

Nell found the place creepy. It was only having Flipper around that stopped her freaking out up in the attics late at night. In midwinter it was freezing, damp, draughty and deeply inhospitable. She was convinced that her parents had deliberately let most of the house and its farms and cottages go to pot in order to lure the extended family back into the heart of the house. At this time of year, the only warmth in the whole of the Abbey could be drawn from the huge kitchen range and the ever-roaring fire in the main hall.

And this morning, lured into the kitchen at the prospect of thawing out her feet, Nell had been caught between her parents

in a skilled pincer movement as they demanded she find gainful employment.

She watched as a fat pheasant squawked its way airborne. Perhaps Flipper was right. Perhaps it was time to find a rich husband. It would certainly beat working for a living.