The Cornish Hideaway

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The Cornish Hideaway

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To the Bibberts family with all my love – my parents John and Diana, Chris, Kristina, Amelia and last, but certainly not least, Luna xx

Chapter One

Freya closed her eyes and sank back against the stark college walls, head in hands. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she wished she could rewind the clock fifteen minutes. *Don't cry*, she urged herself. *Whatever you do, don't cry.* There had to be some sort of mistake. But when she opened her eyes, a four-letter word was still staring back at her in bold black ink, and not the one she'd been expecting.

At the bottom of her Master of Arts results slip was the word 'FAIL'.

Freya didn't understand. How could she have failed? For the past four months, she'd sacrificed everything in her life to focus on her final project. She'd quit the three jobs she'd been working in an assortment of bars and cafés, rarely seen her friends, plus she and her boyfriend Matt had become ships that passed in the night. She had believed the sacrifice would be worth it but now she had no money, no job and no degree. She didn't know what stung most: wasting her money on the tuition fees, or having some faceless examiner think she was lacking in artistic merit. She winced at the thought.

Freya paced up and down the corridor, not knowing what

to do next. From inside the studio, she could hear the popping of Prosecco corks and jubilant exchanges between her peers. Should she try to sneak out from a different exit, or should she fake it? She tried to muster up a bright smile but her lips wouldn't stop wobbling. It was no use. There was no way she could pretend it was all fine, not when her stomach was churning with disbelief and her brain was struggling to process her result. You're in shock, she told herself as she attempted a deep breath.

The office door swung open, and Freya glanced up to see Audrey Harper, her final project supervisor, coming towards her, arms open.

'Freya, darling! I did all I could to try and get you a pass, honestly I did,' she cooed sympathetically as she bundled Freya into a hug. 'But the examiners were a tough bunch to please this year.' She lowered her voice and shared, 'Actually, no one got what they deserved, despite all the celebrating.' She indicated towards the studio as a cheer sounded.

Freya wiped her eyes. 'But no one else failed, did they?'

Audrey looked sheepish and considered her answer for a lot longer than necessary. 'No. Oh, Freya, don't look so glum, I fought tooth and nail for a better mark, honestly, but there was no budging them. You can appeal the decision, you know? I could try and track down some more sympathetic external examiners?'

'What's the point?' Freya shrugged, accepting the tissue Audrey handed her and dabbing at her eyes. 'This has all been a huge mistake. It wasn't my best work. If only—'

'Stop! Don't beat yourself up. You tried so much harder than anyone else. The examiners didn't really understand the concept, but we can work on that – tidying it all up, fixing it so that it passes and you can resubmit next year. If you wish,' she added. 'No pressure.'

Freya's stomach dropped. She didn't think she could ever face picking up a pencil again, let alone resubmitting her failed final project. She was artistically burned out. 'Thanks, but I haven't got the money for a retake. I've put everything I had into this . . . for what?' Freya started to sob and tried to catch the tears with the now-soggy tissue. She dreaded having to break the news to her friends and family, having to face their sympathetic looks and the inevitable suspicions that she just didn't have any talent. Surely her first-class undergraduate degree hadn't lied?

Audrey bundled her into another hug. 'There, there, get it out. Art is a cruel business because it comes from the heart of us. Please, don't take it personally. This is not about you or your talent, Freya. You are a good artist – your eye for detail is astounding. You have quite a bit more talent than most other people on your course. Natural talent too, not just talent bought with Daddy's money.'

Freya had to smile at that. 'But in this case talent doesn't mean anything, does it?' Audrey opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Freya sighed bitterly. 'I should've done fine art, not contemporary art.'

'Maybe, but hindsight is a wonderful thing.' Audrey stepped back. 'Here's what I suggest you do. Touch up your

make-up, make the most of all that free fizz and go on holiday – take a break, read a book, go cycling, I don't know, just do something different. But don't try to make art. It'll come back when you least expect it. And I'm here anytime you want to chat. I know this has been a huge shock for you and it's probably not sunk in yet. If you want to come back and resubmit, or appeal the decision, let me know and I'll see what magic I can work.' She waggled her bejewelled fingers in a witchy way and dropped her voice. 'You deserve success, Freya. You're one of the best pupils I've had in a long time, and all your hard work will pay off, I'm sure.'

Freya filed away Audrey's words for contemplation later. 'Thanks, I don't feel any of that, but thank you. You've been such a support.'

Audrey smiled and winked. 'Now, go off and enjoy yourself. And keep in touch! Toodle-pip.'

Freya sighed as she watched her bustle back into the office. Being Audrey's favourite was not going to help pay the rent. She checked her phone – nothing from Matt, which irked her. He knew it was results day. Although she wasn't relishing telling him she'd failed. She wondered if she could pretend she'd passed, but when she ducked into the toilets, her smudged mascara told a different story. Freya stood back and studied herself, all dressed up like a winner: the white dress covered with rainbow stars, which she'd found in a vintage shop; her long dark hair waved and curled as if she was going to a premiere; expertly applied make-up all faded.

She did her best to patch it up, reapplied her lipstick and

headed back into the studio, head held as high as she could manage. Her peers had gone, leaving a half-drunk bottle of fizz next to a note telling her which pub they'd be in. Freya picked up the bottle and took a swig – the bubbles went up her nose, making her sneeze – and then crumpled up the note and tossed it in the bin. One silver lining of finishing her master's was never having to see her smug, overindulged, entitled colleagues ever again.

Freya left the college building and headed out onto the busy Central London streets, into the crowds of commuters surging aggressively around her. She swigged again from the bottle of fizz and wandered slowly, aimlessly, naturally weaving through the tourists taking selfies. She allowed her eyes to stray up over the tall, imposing buildings, but that only made her feel even smaller than she already did.

When she reached the pub her colleagues were in, she paused and tried to compose herself into a picture of success. But she could barely muster a smile. *Stuff it*, she thought, *I'm not going. I really don't care and neither do they.* She fished her phone out of her bag and took a selfie, posing with the bottle of champagne and pulling a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. *Ugh.* She thrust the phone away, ignoring all the message notifications. How could she post on social media that she was a verified failure?

Her feet took her towards Trafalgar Square, a path Freya had regularly wandered when she needed a break from the claustrophobic creativity of the studio. Nelson's Column stretched into the evening sky, and the open space gave Freya

some peace. Everyone was small against this backdrop. On her breaks, she had loved to meander around the National or the Portrait galleries, daydreaming about her own future successes hanging on similar hallowed walls. As she perched on the steps now, those dreams dissipated. Freya was embarrassed that she'd ever thought herself anything like Turner, Constable or Van Gogh. Head in hands, she sat there for a few minutes, allowing London to flow around her.

Her phone beeped, and she checked it; still not Matt. Something unpleasant settled in her stomach. He couldn't have forgotten it was results day; she'd written it on their shared kitchen calendar in pink sparkly ink.

Freya lifted the bottle and realized the fizz was finished. Enjoying the decadent way it blurred her edges, she hoisted herself up, stuck the empty bottle in a bin and went in search of more. Nothing fancy – Tesco would do. As evening started to close in, Freya knew she would have to head home. Briefly, she wondered if Matt would even notice if she didn't turn up. Probably not.

She hopped onto the tube towards Angel where she would swap it for the bus that would take her to the flat she shared with Matt. Her stomach rumbled, and she realized she'd not eaten all day, so before jumping on the bus, Freya nipped into a kebab shop and bought some chips. It seemed faintly ridiculous to be eating a greasy end-of-the-night snack at barely seven o'clock, but she greedily polished them off before heading home.

Home was a little ground-floor flat near Newington

Green into which Freya and Matt had moved soon after graduating from university. Freya recalled that hopeful day: their scant possessions, the smug feeling of being proper grown-ups, the Chinese takeaway they'd eaten among the debris of half-constructed IKEA furniture. The memory still brought a smile to Freya's face. However, there hadn't been much to smile about recently. The flat had become a battleground for their opposing personalities – Matt's neat lines born of years of graphic design, and Freya's boho creativity, or 'mess' as Matt had started to not-so-affectionately call it. Matt was keenly saving for a soulless city flat, and Freya's guilt that she couldn't provide more towards their living costs, other than paying a few bills and buying food, nibbled away at her.

Freya lingered outside the door for a few moments and tried to formulate the words she'd been failing to think of since leaving the college. *Maybe he's not in?* she thought hopefully. After all, the past few weeks had been full of business meetings and late nights. He was after a promotion, but that was as much as Freya remembered.

In the past, Matt had always been the one to make things better, had always been her biggest fan, and she clutched at this in the desperate hope that he would tell her it would all be fine. Like he had so many times before.

Freya turned her key in the door and pushed it open. Gently closing it behind her, she paused and listened. From the living room came the electric sounds of guns being fired and a flicker of blue light. So, Matt was home,

playing computer games. Freya took a deep breath to still her sudden flash of anger and counted to ten before pushing open the door.

'Hey,' she said, trying for nonchalant, but Matt didn't even glance up, just grabbed his bottle of beer for another swig. She stared at him, still in his work clothes minus the tie and jacket, not one strand of his neatly cropped blonde hair out of place, a half-eaten Chinese on the coffee table in front of him. Freya stared in disbelief as the man she'd spent seven years of her life with continued to kill cartoon zombies without even a glance in her direction. Not giving it a second thought, she marched over to the TV and pulled out the plug.

Matt leapt up with a wail. 'Hey! I was playing that! It's taken me weeks to reach that level.' The controller dangled helplessly from his hand as he looked from the TV to Freya and back again.

Anger rose inside her. 'Do you know what day it is?'

'Tuesday?' Matt shrugged, then, seeing her clouded face, asked, 'What?'

'Results day,' she supplied. 'My master's results day. Only the most important day of the year.'

Matt at least had the decency to look slightly guilty as he sunk back onto the sofa. 'Oh. That. How did it go?'

Freya perched on the edge of the armchair. She probably could've got away with not telling him. Could have pretended everything was fine. The urge to lie was strong. She could already feel his judgement seeping into the room. Freya placed the bottle of fizz on the floor, knowing she wasn't

going to get any sympathy. 'It was awful,' she began, 'a really tough year apparently. They marked everyone down.' She risked a glance at Matt, who was staring at her, impatient for her to get on with it. Freya ripped the plaster off. 'I failed, Matt. They failed me.' She choked on sobs; saying it out loud made it horribly real.

Freya watched Matt's reaction. Instead of leaping off the sofa to comfort her, he rubbed his face and swore under his breath.

'Jesus Christ, Freya, what a waste. You've literally spent thousands on that stupid degree.'

Stunned, Freya stared at him in disbelief. 'I know. You don't need to make me feel any worse,' she snapped. 'Audrey said I can resubmit or appeal the decision.'

Matt shook his head. 'I can't do this anymore, Freya. I'm sorry, we need to talk.'

Those dreaded words settled on her like lead. They never preceded anything pleasant. Freya remained silent and watched Matt's face churn as he tried to find the right words.

'Freya, before I start, I want you to understand how hard this is for me. I've come close to saying all this several times, but I always bit my tongue.' Matt glanced down at his feet before looking back at her, face twisted with guilt. 'Freya, I think it's time you grew up and stopped hoping you'll win the Turner prize, or whatever it is you're after. I know art is important to you, but you're trying to make a life out of a silly hobby. We're twenty-seven now – adults, not children. Yes, it was cute when we met at university, but honestly, I

thought by now you'd have grown up and got some sense of responsibility. Instead, you're wafting around like you're on some higher mission, throwing paint around, or bending coat hangers or whatever it is you do. I just don't care about it. You need to stop all this pissing about and get a proper job.'

Freya opened her mouth to protest, to try to defend herself, but then she thought again about those four black letters on her results slip. Maybe he had a point.

'You've never sold anything,' he continued. 'Dreams aren't going to pay the rent, are they? And I'm sick and tired of working all these hours to support you. When you're not painting you're working in some seedy pub or coffee shop and you think that's okay! You think that's contributing! Buying food or paying the water bill isn't enough, Freya. I can't carry us both anymore, especially not now. I'm being lined up for promotion. What are you going to do? I am working my arse off to become a partner in the firm and I need someone who is supportive, who I can take along to corporate events, who has the same drive as me. I'm sorry, Freya – it was great when we were students, but you just don't fit anymore.' He signalled to her floaty dress.

Stunned into silence, Freya stared at him. Matt's words spun as her brain tried to process them. She opened her mouth to tell him she'd do better, that she'd go on that teacher training course her parents kept dropping hints about, but she stopped and looked at him – really looked at him. Sitting across from her was not the sweet boy she'd met in the student union bar, who'd carried her home after

one too many tropical VKs. This was not the man who'd slid cartoons under her dorm room door in a bid to woo her. Or who had taken her up the Eiffel Tower and drunk champagne they couldn't afford on her twenty-first birthday. The man sitting across from her was a Matt-shaped stranger. It was like Freya was seeing him properly for the first time in years. There was no denying it: since Freya had started her master's a year and a half ago, they had grown apart.

'I'm sorry, Matt. I had no idea you felt like that. Why didn't you say something before? We could've tried, I don't know, to fix things?' Freya sniffed, determined not to cry. 'I thought you were okay with this arrangement until I got my MA.'

Matt glanced down at his clasped hands. 'But you haven't got it, have you?' He sat back and sighed. 'I thought I was okay with it too, but recently I've realized I'm not.'

'How long have you felt like this?'

'Since Christmas. There was all that pressure for us to get engaged – all those little hints – and it just made me realize it was the last thing I wanted.' He pulled a face.

'Oh, Matt, it was hardly that bad,' she shot back venomously.

'I couldn't understand how no one else could see it wasn't working. Did you have no idea?'

Freya shook her head slowly and admitted, 'I guess I was too wrapped up in other things. You talk about what you've done, what you've given – I've given you seven years of my life too, you know. This isn't all about you.'

They lapsed into a final, spent silence. Neither of them needed to voice that this was clearly the end. Matt stood up and stretched. 'I'll get some of my things and go and stay at Sudhir's for a couple of nights, give you a couple of days to move out.'

'But where am I meant to go?'

Matt shrugged. 'I don't know. Start taking some responsibility. Stand on your own two feet. I'll get my stuff.'

Freya slumped back into the chair, exhausted. What the hell was she going to do now? She glanced around the living room until her eyes fell on the bottle of Prosecco next to her bag. Well, there was nothing else for it. She popped the cork and took a long swig. Oblivion would work for now.