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Seeing Stars

Christina Jones

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Chapter One

Dark Side of the Moon

Wincing at herself in Chrysalis Cottage's bedroom mirror, Zillah knew that unless she could lose two stones in three days, then Saturday night was going to be a total disaster.

Oh, why did her reflection never match her imagination?

At least they agreed on the clouds of dark-brown hair and the black-lashed dark eyes and the tanned skin. Where they started to fall out was over the wrinkles and dimples and folds and cellulite and yes, damn it, the sheer middle-aged avoirdupois.

Of course, the looking glass in her bedroom was less than flattering. It always had been. It wasn't her, it was a flaw in the bevel, honest. The mirror stubbornly refused to see her as the taut-skinned, firm-jowled twenty year old she knew she was inside, and spitefully insisted on giving her the full-on, fifty-something, outward truth.

It also delighted in giving her several chins, ridiculously shortened bulbous legs, three spare tyres and a bottom that protruded like a Volvo estate's parcel shelf.

However, on this occasion, maybe the mirror had a point. Maybe skin-tight lime-green spandex really wasn't her thing.

In fact, skin-tight lime-green spandex surely wasn't anyone's thing?

How many years had she been through this rubbish? How many years had she sworn never, ever again? How many years had she then been swept up in the general village excitement and thought what the heck? How many years had she actually itched to say that maybe there was something more than a little odd about celebrating someone who *might* just have lived umpteen hundred years ago and who, even if he had been canonised, which was doubtful, was clearly insane?

Oh, sod Gwyneth for suggesting the spandex. Sod Fiddlesticks for being so bloody archaic. And even more, sod mad old St Bedric for having his Eve in flaming June.

And now she had to get out of this darn thing and – ooooh! Great. Crotch poppers undone and one arm free. Now for the other – ouch – no chance.

In the middle of her gyrations, Zillah caught sight of the alarm clock on her bedside table. Crikey! Where on earth had the time gone? Now she only had an hour before she was due at work and there were millions of things to do before then and – oooof! – she simply had to get out of this stupid outfit and –

With mounting horror, Zillah came to the conclusion that second-skin spandex and the hottest morning of the year were not a great combination. No matter how much she tugged and wriggled the stupid outfit wouldn't budge. In fact it seemed to cling even more tightly, nestling into sweating nooks and crannies she'd not even noticed before. The more she struggled the more the damn stuff squelched and snuggled.

After a further ten minutes the situation really was getting seriously scary. Exhausted, every inch aching, she was alone in her bedroom encased in a shiny chin-to-knee body suit that The Only Gay in the Village would die for, and was probably about to expire from dehydration.

Maybe she could hop to the window and shout for help across the village green.

Stumble-trip-hop – sod it. Hop and hop and – hallelujah! Help came mid-hop.

'Zil! Yoo-hoo! Are you upstairs?'

Joy, oh joy! Big Ida from Butterfly Cottage next door. At the foot of the stairs.

Zillah stopped writhing. Big Ida was OK. Big Ida and a gaggle of chums wasn't.

It was yet another problem with living in Fiddlesticks. No one locked their doors and everyone just wandered in. Now she'd probably got half the village in the hallway and she would have to waddle out on to the landing to greet them looking like something left over after a wrinklies fetish festival.

Bugger, bugger, bugger St Bedric!

'Yes – whoomph – I'm up here, Ida.' Despite the years of living in Berkshire, Zillah's soft Cornish accent still came to the fore in moments of stress. ' Aaah . . . Won't be a – oooh – minute . . . I'm just trying to – aaah . . .'

'You all right, duck? You sound a bit breathless – 'ere, you haven't got someone up there with you, 'ave you?'

'I wish . . . No, I'm all alone. Oooomph . . . Erph . . . Are you?'

'What? Alone? Yes – Zil, you sure you're all right?'

'I – erk – yerp.'

The upside, Zillah thought, was that at least Big Ida didn't have a clutch of Fiddlestickers in tow. The downside with Big Ida as rescuer was that Zillah'd probably end up without any skin, but what the heck – she'd just have to hope Big Ida would be gentle with her.

Big Ida, nearly six feet tall and built like John Wayne, had apparently done a Charles Atlas body-building course in her youth and the rudiments were still with her some six decades later.

Ida sounded as though she was all ready halfway up the stairs. 'I only popped round to say we're putting the

kettle on for elevenses in Gwyneth's. We thought you'd like a cuppa before you go to work – and anyway, Gwyneth's like a hen on pins over this Amber arriving today and you know you always manage to calm her down.'

Zillah pulled a face which owed nothing to the vice-like grip of the spandex. Gwyneth Wilkins, her other octogenarian next-door neighbour, had talked about nothing but Amber for days now. For her own reasons, Zillah really, really didn't want to hear any more about Amber's imminent arrival in the village. Not now. Not ever.

'Zil? Can you 'ear me?'

'Yes . . .' Zillah puffed. Forget Amber, she told herself, there are more urgent and immediate problems to address here. Oh, sod it, she'd have to risk the skinning. 'Ida, be a dear and – errumph-oooh – give me a hand here. I'm in the bedroom . . .'

Big Ida wasted no time in thundering up the stairs.

'Blimey, Zil. What do you think you look like?'

'Probably like an overweight middle-aged woman stuck in a stretchy thing. Don't laugh . . . Ow . . . It's not funny.'

'I ain't laughing. It ain't no laughing matter, duck.' Big Ida, looking for all the world like Les Dawson in drag, hitched up her massive bosoms beneath her floral wrap-over pinafore and pursed her lips in disapproval. 'Aren't you a bit long in the tooth for that sort of get-up? Is it for work?'

'Whooomph . . . yes to the first, no to the second. Gwyneth picked it up at a Hazy Hassocks jumble sale. She said – ooooph – that as everyone has to wear green on St Bedric's Eve she thought it would be lovely with one of my long skirts over the top, but – oomph . . .'

Big Ida shook her head. Her steel-grey pudding basin hair didn't move. 'That outfit weren't meant for someone of your size, Zil. You shouldn't 'ave even tried to squeeze yerself into it, duck. You know how Gwyneth tends to lose

'er head when she thinks she's got a bargain. That's like trying to get a quart into a pint pot. If you ain't careful you'll cut off your circulation.'

'Thanks so much. I've managed to undo the poppers but now I'm really stuck. Look, do you think you could just grab the sleeves while I sort of tug it over my head because it hasn't got a zip or anything and – ouch!'

'Stand still,' Big Ida grunted. 'Brace yerself against the dressing table and don't be such a baby.'

Zillah braced. There was a brief undignified and extremely painful tussle.

'You-didn't-use-talc-first-did-you?' Ida panted.

'Nooooo – ouch. And how do you – ow! Blimey – careful! – know about talc?'

'My godsons told me,' Ida gritted her teeth for the final heave. 'They had a bit of a thing for spandex last Christmas. It's crushed velvet this year. Catsuits. Nice.'

Zillah nodded. Big Ida's godsons were always at least one dainty step ahead of the fashion police.

With a wrench and a squelch, Zillah and the bodysuit finally parted company.

As Ida, still clutching the lime-green spandex, rocketed backwards with the propulsion, Zillah whizzed forward into the dressing table with a clatter. Owing to her now being practically naked, this hurt. A lot. And her eyes and nose were running and every inch of her generous flesh smarted as if she'd been body-waxed.

'Thanks, Ida,' she sniffed, blindly rummaging for her dressing gown. 'And I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anyone.'

'You know me, duck.' Ida picked herself up from the bed and adopted a pious smirk. 'I ain't no tittle-tattler.'

Yeah, right, Zillah thought, still sniffing. It'd be all round Fiddlesticks by lunch time.

It didn't even take that long.

By the time she'd showered – very gingerly – and dressed in one of her trademark long flowing skirts and a

baggy T-shirt, and fastened her damp hair up with a haphazard collection of combs, and stepped over the broken-down fence which separated her cottage from Gwyneth's, the bodysuit incident had already passed into rural myth territory.

Gwyneth Wilkins, sitting on a kitchen chair outside her front door with two cats on her lap and a large dog of dubious origins snoring across her sandals, and expertly shelling peas into a battered colander at her feet, grinned at her.

'That all-in-one thingy not much good then, duck? Ida said it were like trying to get the peel off a green banana with gloves on.'

Zillah lowered herself carefully, because of the soreness, onto the front-door step and glared across at Big Ida who was sitting innocently on the worn and weathered bench fastened to the front of Gwyneth's Moth Cottage and which looked as if it might not quite manage to support Big Ida's bulk for much longer.

Judas.

'It wasn't a great fit, no. I must have put on a few pounds. Sorry, Gwyneth, it was very kind of you to think of me. I'll have to find something else. Maybe I could wear what I wore last year or dye one of my dresses?'

'Maybe – although you've had some disasters with dye in the past, haven't you, duck? The last time you tried it you didn't add enough salt and it ran all down your arms and legs and everyone thought you'd got some lurgy. Still, as long as it's green. You know it has to be green for St Bedric's.'

Zillah nodded. She knew. On account of St Bedric's assertion that the moon was made of green cheese. Of course.

'I'll go and get the tea, shall I—' Big Ida peered at them from beneath her steel grey, pudding-basin fringe '– now that young Zillah has finally joined us?'

Gwyneth nodded. ‘You know where everything is. Oh, and bring a bowl of water out for Pike, will you, duck?’ She indicated the dog. ‘And some biscuits – for us as well as ’im. The cats have got their stuff in the shed.’

Big Ida eased herself to her feet. The bench instantly sprang back to horizontal as she lumbered into the depths of Moth Cottage.

‘Why is it always you that has to do elevenses?’ Zillah hissed at Gwyneth. ‘Ida’s so tight. She never offers tea when we’re in hers – and after all, she only has to step over the fence.’

Gwyneth shrugged and whizzed another podful of rattling peas into the colander. ‘Zil, duck, Big Ida and me have lived next door to one another for the best part of sixty years. She’s always been careful with the pennies. She ain’t going to change now, is she? And she only has her pension to live on.’

‘So do you,’ Zillah said quickly. ‘Well, apart from your little jobs on the side – and we all know you get paid peanuts for them. Still, having a lodger will help out with the finances a bit, won’t it?’

Gwyneth looked shocked. ‘Eh? What lodger?’

‘This, um, your friend’s granddaughter.’ Zillah rolled the name round her mouth then spat it out like a bad taste. ‘Amber.’

‘Oh, I won’t be asking young Amber to pay for her keep – wouldn’t dream of it. How could I, Zil? She hasn’t got a job and being a youngster I doubt if she has any savings. No, the invite to stay here weren’t never financial. It was because the poor lass really didn’t have anywhere else to go and I thought she might enjoy a bit of a change from city living.’

Zillah gave a hollow laugh. ‘Fiddlesticks’ll certainly be that – but I really think you should take some money from her. You’re far too soft. You can’t afford to feed both of you and all the animals on your pension.’

‘I’ll have to take on some more little jobs then, won’t I?’

'You'll kill yourself if you do. You're over eighty. Get this Amber to earn her keep. She's not coming here on holiday, is she?'

Gwyneth smiled gently. 'No, of course not. And I'm sure she'll look for work when she's settled in. Give her a bit of time, Zil. She's bound to find it all a bit strange to start with. After living in the city this may come as a bit of a shock.'

Shock? Zillah stared out into Gwyneth's narrow front garden, a tumble of head-high lupins, foxgloves and delphiniums leaning together in a haphazard rainbow arch almost hiding the path. Opposite the gate the rest of Fiddlesticks arranged itself neatly round the village green, which was scorched to dusty gold and shimmered beneath the sun.

The green was criss-crossed with sandy pathways, dotted with willow trees, and had a rustic bridge over a fat brown-bedded stream. Apart from the distant disembodied voice from someone's radio and the constant flute of bird song, Fiddlesticks was silent and sleepy in the heat of a perfect June morning. Butterflies preened themselves on the abundant buddleia bushes as bees bumbled and fumbled in and out of the blossoms, heavy and drowsy with pollen-dusted legs.

Zillah shrugged. 'Shock? She'll think she's landed in paradise. And right on her feet if you're going to let her stay for months without paying a penny. She's, er, going to ring you when she arrives, is she?'

Gwyneth nodded. 'Ah, she's going to ring on her mobile thingy when she gets close to Reading station. It could be any minute now.'

Zillah sucked in her breath. She wished Amber would never ring. Never arrive. She knew what would happen when she did.

Still, looking on the bright side, this city-girl Amber might take one look at a horde of villagers dressed in green and eating verdant cheese and singing inebriated praises to

a saint who probably never existed, and flee back to where she'd come from.

Zillah really, really hoped so.