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A Cornish Affair

Written by Liz Fenwick

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A Cornish Affair



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One

Osterville, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

I stood in front of a full-length mirror and didn't recognise the woman who appeared there.

'Breathe out.' Sophie, my best friend, instructed. 'How much weight have you lost since the last fitting?'

'I don't know.' The dress hung on me. 'Can we stuff something in it to fill it out?'

Sophie reached into her dress and pulled out two gel objects. 'Here, use these.'

I waited while she undid the buttons at the back of the dress. I was not a pretty sight, and not how I ever imagined I'd look on my wedding day.

'I just don't understand why you are in this dress.'

'Don't go there. Mother wanted this one.'

Sophie rolled her eyes. 'I was there. This dress would have suited Rose, or even your mother. It's not you at all.'

I took a deep breath and shoved the inserts into the corset. My boobs popped up but not really out. Sophie buttoned me up again. I knew exactly what she meant about the dress. It was fussy, and I looked like a coat hanger wearing a meringue.

'Sorry to mention Rose.'

'It's OK.'

Sophie gave me a swift hug, both of us blinking away emotion. I was wearing far too much mascara to cry.

'Are you ready?' My mother, Jane, walked into the room without knocking. She studied me from head to toe. I held my breath.

'You look …' Mother came up to me and adjusted the neckline of the gown over the bolstered curve of my bust. 'Perfect.'

'Thanks.' Another glance in the mirror confirmed her words were a lie. Mother stood beside me, gazing at our reflections. I towered over her delicate frame. Her lilac dress set off her blond hair. The only similarity between us was our mouth; I had her full lips. Rose had been the image of Mother, where I was gangly and dark.

'I knew I was right about the dress. It's far better on you than the one you preferred.'

I nodded. There was no point in disagreeing at this stage; I'd left it too late.

The leaves on the birch trees surrounding the church were still. It was as if time had stopped, yet I heard the chatter inside. I stood at the porch and tried to breathe. The air was heavy, threatening. Despite the haze, the temperature was over a hundred degrees. How could it be so hot on Cape Cod in early June?

'OK?' Dad asked as he appeared from behind and took my elbow.

I frowned, but then turned and gave him a grin.

'Nervous?' He glanced at his watch. It was three o'clock. Any moment now the music would change and I would begin my last walk as a single woman. I looked through the door and down the aisle. The church was filled with pink flowers – hundreds of lilies, to be precise. The altar was barely visible for all the massed blooms in every shade of the wretched colour; particularly pale pink. I've always hated pink. I should have said so, but I hadn't.

Beside the altar stood my fiancé, John: tall, blond and gorgeous, but even he hadn't escaped the colour. His waistcoat matched the flower girls' dresses. Like dolls, they spun around my knees with pink, stinking lilies clutched in their fists.

I held my bouquet away from me. The scent of lilies was overpowering at any time, but in the heat it was worse, unlike the fragrance of some other flowers. I looked up into Dad's eyes.

'What's on your mind, Jude?'

I leaned over and rested my head on his shoulder for a second. 'The garden we created in Abu Dhabi.'

'It was this hot too.'

'Yes, it was.' Abu Dhabi had been special. Rose had still been well when we'd lived there, Mother less frantic, and the garden was sublime. The fragrance of frangipani and night-scented jasmine came to mind. 'I loved that garden.'

'Me too.' Dad straightened his waistcoat. The heat was bad enough in my dress. It must have been unbearable in a morning coat.

'It was the first one we made from scratch.'

'A long time ago now.' He put his hand on my arm.

'Almost twenty years.' The music stopped. I felt the pressure of Dad's grasp increase on my arm. My mouth went dry.

'Ready?' he asked.

I nodded, but then I saw Mother signalling to the choir loft.

'False alarm.' Dad took a hankie out of his pocket and wiped his brow. The rosebud in his buttonhole had gone limp. I touched it.

'Not made for this heat, me or the rose.' He put his hankie away.

'I love roses, though.' A lump formed in my throat.

'She'd love all of this.' His glance made a broad sweep of the church. 'She's with us in spirit.' He found my hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Your mother's walking back down the aisle. I'd better go see what the delay is.'

He moved quickly and led Mother back to her seat. The church was packed with five hundred people all in their finest. Between John and me we might know half of them, but only a hundred could be called friends. My parents had splashed out, and I hadn't the heart to rein them in. After all, this was their one chance. I was their only child now, and had been for eighteen years. It was all I could do. They would never see Rose's wedding day, so mine was their only chance to throw a big party.

My parents stood beside the front pew with their heads

together. Around them the congregation buzzed with hushed discussions. The simple lines of the church were obscured with all the decorations. No detail had been too small for Mother's attention.

I closed my eyes, wondering what was up. I fiddled with my charm bracelet. The hump on the camel should have been worn off because of all the times I had rubbed it, wishing that Rose were still with me. Seven years my senior, I had adored her. If she were here, if the kidney disease hadn't killed her, I wouldn't be nervous and Mother wouldn't be fussing.

The music changed and I opened my eyes. Where was Dad? Shouldn't we be walking down the aisle? Searching the church, I found him settling Mother. He pressed a kiss to her temple and began to pull away.

A car drew up to the bottom of the church steps and I recognised the thick ankle that was emerging. I dashed to help Great-Aunt Agnes out of the car. She batted me away with her walking stick as her driver came round to help.

'I'm pleased I'm not late.' She grabbed the other stick from the driver and made for the steps. I walked beside her, ready to steady her. She was ninety-four and still lived independently, despite everyone except me trying to push her into a home.

'No need to fuss, Jude.' She turned to me. 'I've managed to stay alive until your wedding day, so I can damn well make my own way into the church.'

I loved her spirit. Despite Agnes' insistence on walking in alone, I glanced about for one of the ushers. It wasn't tradition for a bride to seat her guests, but Agnes was special, so I might risk Mother's ire and do just that.

We reached the church door and she took a few breaths while she studied me from head to toe. 'Nice shoes. Ghastly dress. Your mother's choice, I expect. She's always got her own way.'

I opened my mouth to reply but then shut it.

'You're a dear girl, but have always been too biddable for my taste. Keep wondering where the Warren backbone is in you.' Her voice rang out, and I wondered if she had forgotten to turn on her hearing aids. I placed a hand on her arm. 'Mind you,

your father seems to be missing it too. Your mother's always had him by the balls, from what I can tell.'

I glanced around, hoping that no one could hear her over the organ. Clasping her elbow, I began to lead her into the church when Sophie's boyfriend Tim came to my rescue. 'Handsome boy.' Agnes took his arm, then turned to me and winked.

I back-stepped to the lobby, feeling Mother's wrath as her gaze burned into me. A drop of sweat trickled down my bolstered cleavage. A breeze swept past, stirring the delicate birch leaves. Only a thunderstorm could relieve the oppressive atmosphere.

Peering down the aisle, I caught a glimpse of John standing with his best man. He looked so distant, so formal. His glance met mine and he smiled. It would be all right. Nerves were normal.

'Hasn't Jane done well with Judith marrying John? This is what she's been trying to achieve for years.' A woman spoke over the music.

'I know. The Stewarts are such a good family, and he's already a partner in the firm. But I have to say I still wonder what he sees in the Warren girl. She's nothing like Jane, has none of her style. Jane did well to marry her off.' They looked at my mother as she resumed her seat at the front.

I didn't know either woman, but they knew me, or more precisely, Mother. Mother had been over the moon when I had begun dating John, and thinking about it now, moving me towards this day from that moment. Was John my choice or hers?

The bouquet I held reached the floor with its cascade and, almost as if I weren't really there, I watched my hands tremble so much that I dropped the candyfloss mess. One of the flower girls dived to retrieve it and I extended my hand, looking at the artful design of the arrangement. It wasn't right. It wasn't *me*. This whole thing was wrong. I dropped my hand, then I ran as fast as my shoes would let me, never looking back.

The incoming tide lapped over my red toenails and wet the brilliant white froth of my wedding gown. Tears caused it all

to blur to pink, reminding me of the wretched lilies. That was hours ago, and now the salty water of the Gulf Stream had removed the stiffness from the skirt so that it collapsed against my legs. Finally I felt at peace with the damn dress.

A seagull dive-bombed into the water. I wiped my eyes so that I could see if it was successful. It was, and I smiled. At least someone had gotten what he wanted. But then, the gull knew what it wanted, and I hadn't. Big difference. I had only discovered what I hadn't wanted at the worst possible moment.

It was an effort to stand. My legs had gone a bit dead. I'd lost count of how long I'd been sitting staring at the water. It didn't hold any answers, and now I had to go back and face everyone. The sun had set, and by rights I should be on my way to Boston for my wedding night, then onto Maine to start my honeymoon, not standing by an empty lifeguard tower.

Looking at the sea again, the enormity of what I'd done hit me. I needed to talk to John, but I had no words, or none that could begin to make amends for what I had done to him.

I brushed the sand off as best I could, wishing I had a phone. All I had was a soaking dress, a veil and a useless pair of high-heeled shoes. My progress across the beach was slow. The dress hindered my movement. It hadn't been light to begin with, but Mother had been so excited, and I'd wanted to make her happy if I could. In a way, this was to have been her day as much as mine.

My legs ached. The walk felt endless. A car's horn sounded as it whooshed past me. I knew I looked a sight, and the sooner I could change the better. The house came into view and I stopped.

The flowerbeds at the front of the house were a riot of colour with the orange Hemerocallis, or daylilies, shouting for attention over the soft tones of the white peonies. Dad had thrown his heart and soul into making sure the garden would be beautiful for my day. My day … I squeezed my eyes shut. Those happy moments when John and I had worked with Dad seemed ages ago, but it was only a few weeks.

Caterers came out, and I hid in the shadow of a large pine.

Once they'd gone back inside, I limped onto the lawn and studied the one constant in what had been my peripatetic life: a weatherboard house with dark green shutters. We had come here every summer, and when Dad retired it had become our permanent home. I didn't want to go in. Mother would be in a state; and why wouldn't she?

Standing by the house, it appeared so peaceful, but that could be deceptive. It didn't look as if it was on the water from this angle, but it was. From here it could be in the woods, but walk through the door and the house opened out to reveal Eel River. It was originally built by my great-grandfather as a summer cabin in the 1920s when summer cabins were ambitious, with room for servants, and you came to Cape Cod on the train with steamer trunks.

I had let all of them down, past and present, by not walking up the aisle. Everything was so clear in my mind, but how could I explain to everyone without hurting them more? Now, hours later, I was facing what I'd done as lights shone out of all the windows of the house. It looked happy. It was dressed for a party, my party, and I hadn't turned up until it was over. The cost of the whole thing made my eyes water.

Pushing aside these thoughts, I knew that what held me in the shadows was not fear of Mother's huge displeasure, but of Dad's disappointment. How was I going to explain to my rock why I had bolted?

I moved towards my car. It was parked out of the way, waiting for my return from honeymoon. What was John doing? Getting drunk, I should imagine. That sounded appealing, but before I could do that, or anything else, I needed to get out of this damn dress. As quietly as I could, I moved to the side door where the sounds of chairs being stacked and orders given almost drowned out my mother's voice. I stood still and listened.

'What was that child thinking?' Her English accent was always more pronounced when she was angry. Her words carried on the night air.

Child? Thirty is not a child. I began to walk out of the shadows, but stopped as she continued.

'Such stupidity.'

'Jane.' Dad cut her off.

'Leaving John at the altar was such an overdramatic, asinine thing to do.' Mother paused. 'Did you see Mary's face? There was her beloved son, standing at the altar looking like a fool and our daughter was the cause. I doubt they will ever speak to us again.'

'It was terrible.' Dad's voice broke.

'I've never been more embarrassed in my entire life.' Jane sighed. 'I don't know how I'll ever be able to show my face again.'

I couldn't see my father, and whether he agreed with her or not. 'You're tired. You put so much work into making this day wonderful for her.' His voice trailed away. 'Where the hell is she?'

Jane sighed. 'I'm sure she's fine and thinking only of herself, and not of John or his parents or even us. Hasn't that always been the way with her? I'm so disappointed.'

'Me too.'

'Rose would never have done this. She was so thoughtful, and not at all selfish.' Jane sobbed.

I remained in the shadows. I couldn't move. Mother's words echoed in my head. She was right. Rose would never have done this.

Two

The lawns lining Long Beach Road were still covered in dew as I parked my car. The air was sweet with the scent of sea-spray roses. I closed my eyes and accepted that I was a contrary being. These *Rosa rugosa* were pink and I loved them. That much I knew, but not much else. I glanced at the phone in my hand. It kept beeping at me because its memory was full. I didn't want to read the hundred-plus messages all asking questions. I had read only one, John's. It simply said, *Meet me at eight AM. You know where.*

There had been no X or O or even a 'luv'. Not that I deserved any of that. I scrolled through the other messages, clicked *Delete all* then shut the phone off. The rest of the world could wait.

Tall grasses scratched my bare legs as I followed the path through the small dunes to where it opened up onto the beach. The sand that covered the long strip of land separating the Centerville River from the ocean seemed to have made its way into my throat. No matter how many times I swallowed, the dryness wouldn't recede.

The sun warmed my back as I slipped off my flip-flops and began to walk to the water. I'd lain awake for hours revisiting what I'd done and trying to put it into words, but all I got were dark circles under my eyes. How could I say that we never should have been anything more than friends? Years of summers and weekends at our parents' houses on the Cape rolled through my mind, along with drinks after work in Boston, skating and skiing. So much joint history woven together.

John sat near the water throwing shells into the sea. His shoulders were hunched while the morning light caught his

blond hair. My legs refused to move. Everything inside me contracted. The first time we'd kissed had been here on a moonless night after a dare to go skinny-dipping. I licked my lips, remembering the taste of salt on his mouth and the pure thrill of that embrace. That had been ten years ago, long before we had begun dating. For years our lives had been entwined, as friends. How long had I loved him, and had that stopped? I didn't really know any more.

I counted to ten for courage, then sank into the sand beside him. My arm pressed against his. His warmth travelled through his linen shirt to my heart. He pulled away.

'Hi.' The strangulated tone that emerged from me didn't sound normal. 'Sorry.' Never had a word felt more inadequate.

'Jude, why?'

'I …' I didn't know what to say. 'I wish I knew.' I lied. I couldn't hurt him more than I had already.

He turned to me. His blue eyes were filled with tears. He pushed them away, then threw another shell into the sea. 'What the hell's that supposed to mean?'

'John,' I began, but stopped when he stood.

'How could you do that to me?' He turned from me. 'To us?'

I looked at the water running over the sand. I deserved this, and more. 'I don't know.' But I did. I just couldn't say it.

'That's not good enough.'

'I know.' I stood.

'That doesn't help.' He turned away. 'It's not giving me answers. It doesn't stop me looking like a fool.'

'John, you're not the fool. I am.'

'Why?' The look of pain in his eyes filled me with remorse. He walked down the empty stretch of beach and I chased after him. I couldn't leave it like this. He stopped when I put my hand on his arm.

'I only want to know one thing.' He picked my hand off and looked at his ring still encircling my finger. The solitaire sparkled in the sunlight, reminding me of all the excitement when he had placed it there a year ago. 'Do you still love me?'

My heart shrank. His face was drawn. 'Yes.' My voice was little more than a croak. It was true. I did, but not the way he meant.

'Then why, Jude?' I saw all the hurt and anger in his eyes. How could I have run out on him like that?

'I . . .' He was so expectant. I couldn't tell him the truth. My shoulders slumped. How could I say that I realised he was like the dress, the flowers and the whole event – my mother's choice and not mine? I couldn't. Before I could say anything else, he turned and walked away down the long stretch of beach.

Pulling into the drive, I counted three cars and recognised them all. Just for an instant I thought about changing direction and driving away for ever. These vehicles belonged to Mother's golfing partners. I didn't wonder why they were here. Mother didn't play golf on a Sunday, but Dad did. They'd come in search of the lowdown on the bolting-bride saga and to support my mother, who was beyond humiliated by what I'd done. I opened the back door and hoped I could slip past them and up to my room.

'Judith?'

I winced. 'Yes.'

'There's a list of people who rang for you on the kitchen table. Come and say hello.'

As I walked to the sunroom, I wondered what I was going to say. I had no desire to see anyone, and these women would make me feel worse, if that was possible, than I already did. I stopped at the door and four sets of eyes stared at me.

'How are you?' Pat tapped the seat beside her.

How was I supposed to answer that? 'Been better.' I shifted from one foot to the other.

'Nerves are a terrible thing.' She smiled and I nodded. Nerves hadn't helped.

'If you'd had doubts, you could have sorted them sooner, dear.' Pat smiled at me, and I wanted to scream that I already knew this and they didn't have to tell me, but of course they did. She was only saying what everyone was thinking.

'And your poor mother had gone to all that work to make your day perfect.' She looked at Mother, and I could see this was helping her. She needed them and their support to face the gossip.

I began to speak, but Pat went on: 'And all that money your father spent.'

My mother smiled. This was the public face that she had been wearing rigidly since last night. It was a smile that said it was all right even when it wasn't. I knew it well from Rose's illness. She hadn't wanted people to know how bad things were, how our life had fallen to pieces.

'If you'll excuse me, I have phone calls to make.' I copied my mother's smile, then dropped my head and left the room. There was no other way. Everything Pat said was right. I was the hot topic everywhere, and I'd have to get used to it.

In the kitchen, I thought about the breakfast I hadn't eaten before seeing John. I still couldn't face food, but another cup of coffee might help.

While I'd been out, Mother had been busy. There was the full list of presents John and I had received. A note would need to be sent to everyone. I would have to create something that explained my actions yet said nothing at all. Sinking onto the chair, I put the mug on the table. The neat pile of pages tormented me. I had been blind. I couldn't make it right, but I could apologise.

My conversation with the realtor confirmed what I suspected. Until the first year was complete, there was no break clause in the rental agreement for my condominium in Boston. I'd thought that was a good thing when I'd signed it. After all, we had planned to move to London with John's job, and the rental income would pay the mortgage. He had done the same with his apartment. It had all worked out so well, but now I needed a place to live.

The phone rang. It had been ringing non-stop. Everyone wanted the story.

'I've finally reached you.' It was Sophie. 'Why haven't you returned my calls?'

'I …'

'How could you do it? I mean, everyone was there waiting for you. One minute you were there by the door and everything was cool, then they started the wedding march and you weren't.'

I'd forgotten the wedding march. Mother and I had argued about this endlessly. She'd wanted it, and I'd wanted Bach's Double Violin Concerto, Second Movement. However, Mendelssohn turned out to be a surprisingly good tune to run to in heels.

'Sophie, I …'

'Seriously, what were you thinking, leaving John standing there like an idiot?'

'I …'

'We've all been asking what got into you, and you haven't called any of us.' She paused for air. 'I sent you text after text, and eventually you replied "Am alive". What sort of answer is that?'

'Possibly the only one that should matter?' I said, but Sophie didn't hear me. I spun a pen around on the table. What was I going to do?

'Jude, are you listening to me?'

'Um, no.' I stilled the spinning pen.

'Thought not. All a bit much? Sorry to rant.'

'You are right to.' I walked around the central island in the kitchen.

'No, what you need is a hug and a bottle of wine, or maybe a margarita or five.'

I laughed.

'That's better. Now, tell me what's happening. Have you seen John?'

'Ah, yes.' I stopped walking.

'Didn't go well?'

'I wouldn't say well, but it went.'

'Oh dear, I can imagine he wasn't too pleased.'

'You could say that.' I frowned.

'Right, what are you doing now?'

'Looking at Mother's list of gifts to be returned, and wondering where I'm going to live and how I'm going to support myself.' I poked the list, wishing it would disappear.

'Yes, that's a bit of a problem. Have you called work?'

'Not yet, but,' I sighed, 'you know I practically begged them to give me a sabbatical so that I could move to London with John?'

'God, I'd forgotten that.'

I took a deep breath, wondering if it really was just two months ago that we had been apartment-hunting in London. After a few days of meetings in New York City, John would be opening his law firm's office in London next week. We had it all planned. A short honeymoon in Maine, then we would fly to London, where our new life would begin. 'I doubt they can help, as they've hired another archivist to do my job for two years. I won't be able to have my job back until my two-year sabbatical is over.'

'True. Well, something will work out.' Good old Sophie always looked on the bright side, and always had. Her positive attitude had gotten me through boarding school and my bachelor's degree in history at Mount Holyoke.

'I hope so.'

'When am I going to see you?'

'Soon. When are you back on the Cape?' Like so many twentysomethings who lived and worked in Boston, Sophie decamped to her parents' house on the Cape every weekend to make the most of the summer.

'I'll be down on Saturday.'

'See you then.' I put the phone down. Maybe I should drive to Boston. Sophie lived in a studio but I could sleep on the floor for a night or two. I turned to the kitchen table and the gift list. It would take me the week to write to everyone. I picked up the pen and paper, then began. I wouldn't be able to do anything until I'd completed this task. One note at a time was the way to go …

Dear Mrs Smith,

Thank you for the thoughtful and generous gift of the silver chicken-breast fork. Your kindness is greatly appreciated.

I paused. What the hell could I say? A silver chicken-breast fork? I hadn't known what it was, and had to look it up. John thought it was a mini pooper-scooper for a pet. We'd laughed for ages.

As you are aware, the wedding did not go ahead, but . . .

But what? I hadn't a clue what to put next.

thank you for coming.

No. I tore the note up and began again.

The walls of my bedroom in my parents' house were still pink. We'd never changed it because Rose had chosen the colour. She and I had shared the room. Not that we'd needed to: Eel River Cottage was far from small, but I was prone to nightmares and Rose had volunteered to be with me to keep the dreams at bay. The nightmares hadn't gone away, but Rose could just put out a hand and settle me. When she became ill it had been my hand to comfort her. I'd never been able to do more than hold her hand. So damned useless. I took a deep breath. We should have redecorated years ago; keeping the room unchanged hadn't brought her back.

The shelves were lined with books and photos of the two of us. I picked up one taken on holiday in the Caribbean. Freckles were scattered across Rose's nose, and I was as brown as a nut. Putting the picture back on the shelf, I touched the frame wishing she were here for me to talk to. This family hadn't been the same without her, especially Mother. Her companion had gone, and no matter what I had done I'd never been able to fill her shoes.

'Judith, there you are. Now that you'll be staying, maybe we should redecorate your room.' Mother stood in the doorway. She was dressed for golf in her bright skirt and top with her sun visor in her hand. 'It looks a bit young for a thirty year old. See you later. You'll get those notes finished, won't you?'

I sank onto the bed repeating her words: *It looks a bit young for a thirty year old*. What was I going to do? I couldn't live here until my sabbatical was finished and my condo became available. It was fantastic that they were willing to have me, but …

I stood and headed to the kitchen. I'd really made a mess of things. It wouldn't be so bad if I was the only one affected, but my parents had to face the gossip and possibly the burden of supporting me again. I shuddered at the thought.

It would be great if I could just go to work and get lost in it. I adored my job. It was perfect. Books, gardens and academia all rolled into one. Leaving it had been the difficult part about agreeing to move to London. Now I didn't even have London to look forward to. Ahead of me was living with my parents and being talked about by everyone.

Out of the window I could see Dad working at the far end of the garden in the rose bed. The roses were about to come into their peak. I should go and help him. I straightened the pile of envelopes waiting to be filled with those damn notes.

The notes could wait, but trying to make some kind of peace with Dad wouldn't. Mother had been behaving as if nothing had happened, her English reserve evident in every move. But Dad and I hadn't spoken. I'd thought he might understand, but thus far I'd been wrong.

Picking up my cell and my gardening gloves, I walked down the lawn, watching Eel River shimmer in the morning light. Dad looked up, then swiftly went back to pulling off diseased leaves. Kneeling two bushes away, I began the same task. This year the black spot wasn't too bad. I moved down two roses ahead of him. Each time I heard him pause, I tried to speak, but rather than the words I wanted to say, like sorry for ruining everything, other words kept jumping in front. Instead of talking, I plucked leaves off and recited the Latin names of the

different roses as I went along. The garden had been a very basic one when Dad had inherited the house. My grandparents had not been gardeners. A simple garden had suited them, but not Dad. Each summer when we'd returned, Mother would adapt the inside of the house and Dad would add his mark to the garden.

After Rose's death, we had created this bed. Together we'd pored over catalogues, choosing them – the clove-scented Souvenir de St Anne to remember our time on the Arabian Peninsular; the David Austin rose William Shakespeare because of her love of the bard; and Grace because that was her best friend's name. This had been our way of mourning her together. Was he working here now because he was missing her and I was such a disappointment? I turned to him.

'Sorry for everything, and the money wasted.'

His head came up and I could see his eyes were filled with tears. 'You've made such a mess of everything again.'

I sat back on my heels, squeezing a stem in my hands. Blood trickled through the glove where a thorn pierced my palm.

My cell phone rang. It was Mother. 'Judith, Pat's niece is stuck at the Hyannis Mall and we've decided to play eighteen.' She paused, and I knew what was coming next. 'Go and collect her. She'll be at the North entrance at twelve. You'd better get moving. Oh, and stop at the farm stand on your way back and pick up some salad things for tonight.'

'Go.' Dad put his head back down and continued with his task.

It was three days after the non-wedding, and my wrist ached. With the half of my brain that wasn't writing meaningless words on a page, I concocted a plan. I glanced at the one-way ticket to London. It had been purchased with a completely different goal in mind, but it provided me with an exit strategy. I couldn't continue to live in my parents' house; it was like being a seventeen year old again at Mother's beck and call. I would do as Dad had asked and go.

If I left then, the scandal would die down and I wouldn't

be the subject of every conversation. Even strangers at the farm stand were discussing the bride who fled. My options at the moment were limited. I had no job and no apartment, but I did have a one-way ticket to England. John would be in London with his new job, and I could begin again in Oxford. I'd done my postgraduate degrees there and it was where my godmother Barbara lived. It was the beginnings of a plan. I had some savings, I could live cheaply and if I was lucky, I could find a job.

The flight was tomorrow, unless I could change it. Flying to London with John would be too much. I picked up the phone and hoped the airline would help. Chewing the top of my pen, I worked through the automated system to reach a person. The view outside the kitchen window showed clouds building up on the horizon. A storm front was moving in.

At least the ticket change happened without drama. The woman had been very sympathetic. I just hoped everyone else would react as well.

That gave me only a few hours to sort everything and tell those who needed to know. Hopefully my parents would be relieved. Without me, they could resume their lives. I'd email Barbara now. The bigger problem was what I was going to say to John. This ticket was supposed to bring me to the start of our new life together, and now it was the beginning of our life apart. It would be tricky. We hadn't spoken since the morning, on the beach. He didn't want to talk to me, and I couldn't blame him.

I picked up the phone and dialled Aunt Agnes' number. 'Hello, Aunt Agnes.'

'Jude. I'm glad to see you do have a backbone after all.'

'I suppose you could say that.' I laughed.

'I do. How are you?'

'OK, and I just wanted you to know that I'm off to Oxford for a while so that,' I paused, 'the dust can settle a bit.'

'A good idea. Keep in touch.'

'Will do. Stay well.'

She laughed. 'At my age just being alive is well.' We said our

goodbyes, and I hoped that she would indeed stay well. I put the phone down, fighting a sadness I couldn't explain.

'There you are.' Mother walked into the kitchen. 'I just had Pat on the phone. She received your note with the returned present.'

This wasn't going to go well. Mother's lips were pursed and she had a pencil behind her ear. She was definitely not happy if she had forgotten the pencil was there. I stood.

'She tells me that you didn't explain why you didn't go through with the marriage. That you avoided the issue altogether.'

'That's correct.' I closed the lid to my laptop carefully.

'I have been more than patient waiting for you to tell me what happened. People, especially your own parents, deserve some explanation for your irrational actions.' She put the kettle on, and her voice remained as smooth as if she had been instructing me on how to make a cup of tea.

'It's none of their business.'

'Judith, you made it their business with your behaviour.'

I took my glasses off and placed them on the table. 'I've said I'm sorry and will continue to do so, but there's nothing else I can do.'

'Explain is what you can do. Everyone keeps asking me why. It was the perfect match. John's handsome, successful and from a good family.' She turned and stared at me. 'You're a fool. You'll never find anyone else who will take you on.'

'Take me on?' My voice rose sharply. 'Take me on? What? Am I some loser? I don't need someone to *take me on*. I have a career. I can look after myself.'

'Really? You think the measly salary you receive as a librarian is going to support you in the lifestyle you lead?'

'I'm an archivist, and I work for Harvard.'

'Then why aren't you teaching, instead of off in some garden library?'

I gritted my teeth. She was right to be angry about the wedding, but I wasn't going to let her undervalue my work. 'I do teach, but my main focus is maintaining the important collection of the arboretum.'

'It's just bloody gardens! It's not saving the world.' Mother poured water into the teapot. From her manner you would think we were discussing the weather, not having a fight. 'Rose would never have …'

'No, Rose was perfect.' I clenched my hands.

She put the kettle back onto the stove with a thump. 'You've been behaving like a spoilt, ungrateful brat.'

'If that's how you feel about it, I can't change that. I've apologised about the wedding, and I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment in every way.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'I'm not. It's what you just said.'

Mother spun around. 'I don't want to hear any more nonsense.'

'Sorry, but sometimes things need to be said. You want me to spill my guts about why I didn't marry John, so what's different about this? Rose was perfect. I'm not. Just say it.' I felt my face flame.

Mother slapped the teacup onto the table, shattering it. 'Judith, I said enough. I don't want to hear another word.'

'I'm leaving, which should make that possible.'

'Good riddance.' Mother muttered. As I left the kitchen, wishing that things were different between Mother and me, I caught sight of my father standing by the back door with a bunch of roses in his hand. He'd heard every word. This was not how I'd planned to tell them, but it was done now, and from the look on Dad's face, I might never be allowed back.

'What? Leaving? Are you mad?' Sophie studied me over the rim of her coffee cup.

'Clearly I am. I didn't marry the most wonderful man in the world, and I'm walking away from all of this.' I glanced round the coffee shop, avoiding the eyes of the people who were staring at me. One was even pointing.

'What are you going to do?'

'Stay with Barbara until I get a job.'

'Can you work there?'

'Dual nationality.'

'How could I forget, the passport juggle.' We both smiled at the memories of flying to far-flung destinations to reach our parents. Hers had been based in Hong Kong, while mine had moved around a lot. 'Well, I suppose I was going to lose you to London anyway, so this isn't really any different. Does John know what you are doing?'

I felt for the envelope in my bag. In it was my engagement ring, which I needed to return to him. 'No, I haven't told him yet.'

'He may not like it, but then again he may. He's still in love with you, you know.'

I nodded. My left hand looked naked without the ring, only the slight indentation remaining where it had once been. 'I'm going to drive by his parents' house now and see if he's there.'

'He's been staying with them this week.' She put her hand out and grabbed mine. 'Don't envy you.'

I laughed. 'Well, I got myself into this predicament, so I need to find a way out.'

'Yup, but let me know if I can help.'

'Thanks.' I sighed. 'I have to go. Don't let Tim slip away. You two are great together.' I stood and kissed her cheek. 'I'll be in touch.'

'Thanks.' She smiled. 'Why do I get the sense that after all these years you are finally rebelling? It's a bit late, isn't it?'

'Good question, and I don't know.' I walked towards the door.

'A tattoo would have been easier!' Sophie dashed over and gave me a hug.

'True.' I looked down at her. 'I'm going to miss you, short stuff.'

'You bet. Be good.' She stopped. 'Nah, be crazy, for once!'

'I just may.' I waved and went to my car.

Red impatiens filled the flowerbeds beside the front door of John's parents' house. I played with the phone in my pocket. He hadn't answered my calls or replied to my texts. I needed

to see him and not his parents. I had tried to call them earlier in the week, but only reached their machine, so I'd written to apologise. John's mother frightened me a bit. Whereas my mother was tiny and controlling, his was large and expansive. She was well meaning, but I had hurt her son and she had every right to hate me.

The screen door gave a glimpse into the house. No one was visible, but John's car keys were on the table just inside. I knocked and waited. When I heard footsteps over the sound of my heart, I knew they weren't John's but his mother's. My throat went dry.

'Jude.' She stood on the other side of the screen door. There was no smile of welcome, and I hadn't expected one.

'Mary. I'm here to see John, but first let me say—'

'Don't bother. I got your letter.'

'Sorry.' There was that word again.

'You've broken his heart.'

'I know.'

'I can never forgive you for that.'

I nodded. 'May I see him?'

'What, so that you can hurt him some more?'

'Mom.' John touched his mother's shoulder, then walked to the door and came out. 'Let's go for a walk.'

'OK.'

He set off quickly towards the beach. Before long we were on a long strip of sand, which, thankfully, was empty. I didn't want witnesses. John only stopped walking when he reached the water's edge. I rolled up my jeans and waded in the shallows. Each little wave stirred up the sand and clouded the water around my feet.

'John.' I took a deep breath. 'I'm going away tonight.'

'What?' He turned towards me.

'Look, I think it's best if I go, and give everything time to die down.' I turned away and studied the big houses that lined the shore across the Centerville River.

'Where are you going?'

'To Barbara's.'

'You'll be in England?' He stood in front of me. I could see hope in his eyes.

'I won't be in London.'

'Jude, I have spent the past few days, days in which we should have been making love night and day, trying to hate you.'

I winced.

'It almost worked.' John took my chin in his fingers and forced me to look him in the eye. 'The problem is, I still love you. I've spent years loving you, and it took me ages to convince you that you loved me too.'

'Don't.' I bit my tongue. 'I don't mean it that way. I …'

'These past two years together have been everything I've ever wanted. You're the only one who gets my jokes.' He gave a bitter laugh and let go of my chin. 'You and your damn books have lit up my life.' There was so much longing in his voice.

'Forget me.' I thrust the sealed envelope with the engagement ring in it at him. How could he still feel this way after how I'd behaved?

'I can't, and I don't want to.' He took it and grimaced. My fingers moved and I wanted to smooth away his frown, but I held them by my sides. He didn't understand, and I'm not sure I did either. Touching him again would make it more difficult for us both. He reached for me.

I stepped back. 'Don't, don't make this harder.'

'Jude, that's so unfair.'

'Yes, it is. I've been unfair to everyone in this whole thing, but mostly to you.' I blinked away tears. 'Forget me. Go and find the woman you deserve.' I turned and ran from the beach, leaving him standing alone.