

A **NOSEY PARKER** Cozy Mystery novel

MURDER

on the

MENU



FIONA LEITCH

A Nosey Parker Cozy Mystery

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‘A sparkingly delicious confection to satisfy the mystery reader’s appetite’
Helena Dixon, bestselling author of the Miss Underhay Mysteries
The first book in a NEW cosy mystery series! Still spinning from the hustle and bustle of city life, Jodie ‘Nosey’ Parker is glad to be back in the Cornish village she calls home. Having quit the Met Police in search of something less dangerous, the change of pace means she can finally start her dream catering company and raise her daughter, Daisy, somewhere safer. But there’s nothing like having your first job back at home to be catering an ex-boyfriend’s wedding to remind you of just how small your village is. And when the bride, Cheryl, vanishes Jodie is drawn into the investigation, realising that life in the countryside might not be as quaint as she remembers... With a missing bride on their hands, there is murder and mayhem around every corner but surely saving the day will be a piece of cake for this not-so-amateur sleuth? The first book in the Murder on the Menu cosy mystery series. Can be read as a standalone. A humorous cosy mystery with a British female sleuth in a small village. Includes one of Jodie’s Tried and Tested Recipes! Written in British English. Mild profanity and peril.

Содержание

Murder on the Menu	6
Contents	7
Prologue	8
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

Murder on the Menu
A Nosey Parker Cozy Mystery
Fiona Leitch



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Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Jodie's tried and tested recipes #1](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Thank you for reading...](#)

[You will also love...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Fiona Leitch](#)

[One More Chapter...](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

This book is dedicated to my parents,
and to

Jacinda, Ashley, and the #TeamOf5Million

Prologue

I'm not superstitious. I never have been. I make a point of walking under ladders and I positively encourage black cats to cross my path. My old partner on the beat, Helen, used to laugh and tell me that I was tempting fate, like I was standing there glaring at it, fists raised, going, *Come on then, is that all you've got?* But I wasn't, not really. I've never tempted fate; I just can't help poking at it. If I see something wrong, I can't resist getting involved.

I'm not superstitious, but I do have a few rituals, which is more to do with avoiding bad karma or Murphy's Law. Lots of coppers do. Stuff like, when you go out to a café or restaurant, always sit facing the door, so you can see everyone who's coming in and going out (which makes life difficult when you're out for a meal with another police officer, because if you can't get the right table and neither of you gives way, you end up sitting next to each other). Or not polishing your shoes before a Friday or Saturday night shift because if you do you're bound to run into a drunken hen party trying to stab each other with their stilettos outside a nightclub at 3am, one of whom will definitely unload seven Bacardi Breezers and one doner kebab all over your shiny black footwear as you get her in the van. That kind of thing.

The other ritual I have is always leaving a good-luck card for the new occupants whenever I move house. I've moved house *a lot*. There was the skanky bedsit I lived in when I first relocated to London. I loved it because it was the first place which was *mine* (even though it was rented) and I had become a grown-up and my life was just getting started and it was all so exciting. I was away from my parents and following in my dad's footsteps without being in his shadow for once. All this despite the bedsit having hot and cold running mould and a wicked draught from the one solitary window, and a landlord who refused to get anything repaired until I told him I was a copper. And then he *still* didn't repair anything; he just put the rent up by another hundred quid a week until I moved out. There were the shared houses – often with other police officers from the same nick – which kind of made sense until we all ended up doing different shifts, so it didn't matter what time of day it was, there was always someone trying to sleep and someone else waking them up as they came home and someone getting ready to go out. That had been particularly stressful. There was the nice flat I finally found myself in, just before I met Richard; it was small but perfectly formed, and quiet. I bought a cheap poster print of a famous painting of the coast near my home town in Cornwall and I would sit there, in the peace and quiet of my lovely flat, staring at the picture and thinking about the way the light reflected off the sea back home, and I would cry because I was so flipping lonely and homesick when I wasn't actually at work, but I wasn't about to give in and go back and admit I'd been wrong to leave.

And then there was this place. This was the first house I'd ever actually owned – *we'd* owned, me and Richard – and although it wasn't perfect, it was full of memories. Memories of Richard carrying me over the threshold after we got married, banging my head on the door frame as he did so. *That* was bad karma and should have made me wary of what was to follow. Of bringing our daughter Daisy back from the hospital after a long-drawn-out labour that put me off having any more children, at least for a year or so, and by then Richard had gone off the idea anyway. It was a few more years before I found out why.

The good-luck card lay on the kitchen counter, which had been cluttered with cookbooks and gadgets the day before but was now empty. They were inside a box, inside the removal van, which had already left. The picture on the front was of a lovely country cottage made of stone with climbing roses around the door. It was ironic because it looked nothing like this house but wasn't too dissimilar from where we were moving to. I picked up the pen and composed in my head what to write.

Good luck in your new home. I hope you are as happy here as I was.

...Or as happy as I was before I found out that my stupid useless can't-keep-it-in-his-pants husband was cheating on me.

I hope you are as happy here as I was once I got him out of this house and our lives, before he moved in with his new girlfriend ten minutes away, but STILL constantly let his daughter down by turning up late when he'd promised to take her out (if he turned up at all). If we're living miles away he can't let her down anymore, as she won't expect anything from him (she already knows better than to do that, but she's only twelve so she can't help hoping).

I hope you are as happy here as I was when I could still afford to pay the mortgage, before he started kicking up a fuss about paying child support and before I left the job that I absolutely loved but which (after a particularly nasty incident) my daughter didn't. I could see her point. If anything happened to me she'd have to go and live with her dad, who, as I think we've already established, is a total waste of space, oxygen, and the Earth's natural resources. So I left and retrained and now we're both ready to start again somewhere else.

I hope you are happy here spending an absolute fortune on this cramped house with its tiny garden, noisy neighbours, and busy road outside while I'll be paying considerably less for somewhere bigger with a lovely view of the sea and neighbours who are more likely to wake me up at 6am with their loud baaing than at 3am with their drunken return from a club.

Hmm. Maybe I was overthinking it. I opened the card and wrote inside it.

Good luck.

It was definitely time to go home.

Chapter One

Funny how things turn out. I only went in to buy a sofa.

Penhaligon's was one of those old-fashioned family-run department stores – the type that once upon a time every town had but which were now disappearing (and with good reason, to be honest; most of the stock looked like it had been procured in the 1950s and came at such an exorbitant price you were forced to step outside and double-check you hadn't inadvertently wandered into Harrods by mistake). But Penhaligon's had persisted, remaining open through world wars, recessions, and the rise of internet shopping. The zombie apocalypse could hit Cornwall (*I know, I know, would anyone even notice?*) and Penhaligon's would *still* be there, clinging stubbornly to its prime spot on Fore Street, serving the needs of both locals and the undead brain-hungry horde (or 'holidaymakers', as they were otherwise known).

I wouldn't normally have bothered with Penhaligon's, but we'd been at our new house for four days now and Daisy and I were sick of sitting on my mum's old garden chairs – they were literally a pain in the backside – so as I was passing I ventured inside.

It hadn't changed much since the last time I'd been there. It had barely changed since the *first* time I'd been there forty years ago. But I was pleasantly surprised to see that someone had given the furniture department a bit of a makeover and there were a few lounge suites that looked like they'd actually been designed sometime after the fall of the Berlin Wall (as opposed to before the building of it).

I sank gratefully into a big, squashy sofa, stroking the fabric appreciatively and reaching for the price tag. The figures made me suck in my breath in mild horror (along with an unfortunate fly who was just passing), but the words 'Next day delivery!' had an immediate soothing effect.

I stood up to get a better look at it and jumped as a voice boomed across the shop floor at me. 'Oh my God, Nosey Parker! Is that really you?'

I turned round, already knowing who it was. Tony Penhaligon, great-grandson of the original Mr Penhaligon, old classmate and sometime boyfriend (we went out for two weeks in 1994, held hands a bit, kissed but didn't – *ewww* – use tongues), stood in front of me, a big smile on his face. Like his family's shop, he also hadn't changed all that much over the last forty years and every time I looked at him I could still see a hint of the annoying little boy with the runny nose who had sat next to me on my first day in Mrs Hobson's primary class. But he had a good heart and it was nice to see a friendly face.

I did a double-take as I took him in properly. Hang on a minute; he actually *had* changed. The last time I'd seen him, on one of my trips back to see my mum, he'd been sporting a dad bod, a paunch brought on by too many pasties and pints. But that was gone and he was looking rather trim. Also gone was the unflattering store uniform of white polo shirt and black chinos, replaced by a sharp, well-tailored, and expensive-looking suit. A little voice in the back of my mind went, *I'd blooming well let him use tongues now*, before I shut it up with a contemptuous internal glare.

'It's been a while, Tone. I haven't seen you since—'

'New Year's Eve, three years ago.'

I laughed. 'You've got a good memory.'

'Last time anything exciting happened here. Did you stick to your resolution?'

'That was the first Christmas after I broke up with Richard,' I said. 'I think I probably made a lot of drunken resolutions that year.'

Tony grinned. 'Yeah, there were one or two. Tell me you've stuck to the main one though? "Avoid idiot men"?''

'Oh, *that* one I live my life by these days. What was yours?'

He shook his head. 'I never announce my resolutions. That way nobody knows whether I followed it up or not.'

'And did you?'

'Nope. But it doesn't matter now anyway. So what're you doing here? Visiting your mum? I heard she'd been ill.'

'Buying a sofa,' I said.

'You do know we don't deliver to London,' he said.

'That's just as well because I don't live there anymore.'

He looked surprised. 'Since when? Are you back, then?'

'Yeah.'

I could see that he was dying to ask me more but the thought of pushing it too far and losing out on his commission was too much for him. Plus, he knew that if I was sticking around he'd get it out of me eventually.

'So what do you think of the sofa?'

I sat back down. 'Honestly? It feels like my backside has died and gone to heaven where it's being caressed by the wings of an angel.'

He laughed loudly. 'Do you want a job in our marketing department? I always said you should be a poet, not a copper.'

'I'm not either anymore,' I said, fishing in my bag and handing him one of my new business cards.

'"Banquets and Bakes",' he read. 'What's this?'

'My new business,' I said. 'I've just started up—'

'Wait, are you a chef now? Do you do weddings?' Tony looked at me hopefully.

'Weddings, christenings, bar mitzvahs, you name it. If people want to eat there, I can cater for it.' I *hoped* I could anyway; I hadn't actually had any clients yet, but in theory...

'This is brilliant!' cried Tony. 'It's ... what's that word? Serentipidy?' I thought about correcting his pronunciation but decided against it; it would only make both of us feel bad. And anyway, he was waving across the shop floor to a woman who was stalking proprietorially around a display of crystal glass vases. 'Cheryl! Come over here! I've found a caterer!'

He held out my business card as Cheryl approached. She read it, then looked me up and down, clearly not overly impressed with what she saw. Which was fair enough as I had really only popped out to get some teabags in between coats of paint and was looking more like the Michelin Man than a Michelin chef.

'We're getting married,' said Tony proudly, and I could understand why. Although the expression currently occupying Cheryl's face was reminiscent of a bulldog sucking a lemon, she was (probably, in the right light) quite attractive, and she had to be ten years younger than him, even if she did dress a bit like Dynasty-era Joan Collins. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen shoulder pads that size outside of the Super Bowl. It also explained the dapper suit that Tony was currently sporting, as well as his newly svelte figure.

'Congratulations,' I said. He deserved happiness. Tony's first wife had left him for her driving instructor, the betrayal made all the worse by the fact that Tony had paid for the lessons and she hadn't had the decency to leave him until she'd passed her test (after three attempts), done a motorway safety course and a defensive driving course, and was halfway through getting her HGV licence. The driving instructor hadn't lasted long and, according to my mum, who knew her mum, she now drove tankers up and down the country with just her dog – a Pomeranian called Germaine – for company.

I hoped he was going to ask me to do their catering – I needed the money – but at the same time I wasn't sure I wanted to risk cocking up his nuptials. Oh, well, I would just plan everything really, really carefully.

'Our caterer let us down and the wedding's next weekend,' he said.

Next weekend? Holy—

‘I was just saying to Jodie’ – he turned to his fiancée, indicating me with a wave of his hand – ‘I was just saying, it’s serentipidy—’

‘Serendipity,’ she corrected, smiling at him condescendingly. *Hmm.* ‘So – Jodie, was it? – what are your credentials? How many weddings have you done? We’ve got a very upmarket venue – Parkview Manor Hotel, do you know it? – and lots of guests coming from all over the country.’

I opened my mouth to confess that I hadn’t actually done any weddings but if they were this close to their wedding day, good luck finding someone else as willing (or as desperate for the money) as me. But Tony beat me to it.

‘Her credentials are, she’s an old friend and ex-copper, and you don’t get better references than that,’ he said. Cheryl pursed her lips but didn’t argue, aware that if she didn’t want to end up feeding her upmarket guests pasty and chips in the very downmarket Kings Arms in Market Square, she didn’t have much choice. I smiled.

‘I’ll do it for whatever the last caterer was going to do it for, if you throw in the sofa.’

So that was how I found myself, six days later, standing outside the imposing entrance to Parkview Manor Hotel. It was early evening, the day before *The Wedding of the Century™*; many of the guests were staying overnight and Tony had (against Cheryl’s wishes, I thought) invited me to join their welcome drinks. I tugged down my dress; I’d put weight on since leaving the force, and even more since doing my catering course, and my going-out clothes, which I didn’t get the chance to wear much, were all starting to get a little snug. My shoes were already pinching my toes. They were hardly Jimmy Choos but they were the only ones in my wardrobe that weren’t made by Nike or Dr Martens. I comforted myself with the thought that I’d be in the kitchen tomorrow and back in my eminently more sensible jeans and trainers, took a deep breath, and entered.

The hotel foyer was very plush and wouldn’t have looked out of place in London, rather than in the Cornish countryside. Marble covered every conceivable surface and I got the feeling that if I stood there gawping for too long I’d get marble-ised as well. There were lush, exotic ferns and birds-of-paradise dotted all over the place, and the plant-killer in me (I have brown thumbs) immediately suspected they were plastic. I surreptitiously stroked a leaf as I passed (thereby condemning the poor unsuspecting fern to an early grave); they were real and all very well cared for.

I vaguely recognised the woman behind the reception desk. Although I hadn’t lived in Penstowan for almost twenty years, I’d grown up and gone to school here, and seventy-five per cent of the inhabitants were either old classmates, siblings of classmates, or parents of them. She smiled and inclined her head slightly towards the sign that said, ‘Penhaligon and Laity Wedding Party’, with a photo of the happy couple and an arrow pointing towards a function room. It was forebodingly quiet, with very little in the way of music or chatter floating into the foyer.

Inside the function room, there were a few guests standing at the bar chatting, with Tony holding court. He was clearly very excited about his upcoming big day, chattering away with a boyish enthusiasm that was quite endearing. It was still fairly early so presumably this wasn’t it; Cheryl had said they had guests coming from all over the country so maybe they just hadn’t arrived yet.

‘Nosey!’ called Tony. Now *that* was less endearing. I really needed to have a word with him about using my childhood nickname. I plastered on a smile and tottered over, grimacing at the blister that was already threatening a little toe.

But I never reached Tony and his chums because everyone's attention was suddenly drawn to the doorway of the function room. The double doors had been thrown open and Cheryl stood there, smiling beatifically at the assembled guests. She was dressed to the nines in a fitted cocktail dress of deep scarlet silk, while her hair had been seriously coiffured and hair-sprayed to within an inch of its life. She was still rocking that 80s kind of vibe, but there was no denying that she did it well. My cheap chain-store dress and ugly shoes felt even more uncomfortable under her gaze and I could not wait to go home and put my pyjamas on.

She paused for a moment longer, milking her dramatic entrance, then opened her mouth to speak.

Her words were lost as she suddenly disappeared from view, bulldozed and tossed to one side by a screeching harpy in a khaki boiler suit.

Chapter Two

For a split second nobody moved; we were all wondering what the hell had just happened. And then came the sound of bitch-slapping from the foyer.

I yanked off my stupid uncomfortable shoes and ran outside to see Cheryl lying on the ground, her hands thrust upwards and attempting to choke the madwoman sitting astride her – a madwoman who was still managing to wheeze threats at her.

‘Mel?’ Tony arrived seconds after me, and stood staring in astonishment.

‘Is that really Mel?’ I said, amazed. I hadn’t seen Tony’s ex-wife for years, and the last time I had she’d possessed a head of wonderful red curly hair. The harpy’s hair was bleached blonde and cut very short and spiky.

‘You can’t marry him!’ the harpy screeched. ‘You don’t love him! I won’t let you ruin his life!’

‘*You* already did that, you cow!’ snarled Cheryl, who was having trouble breathing under Mel’s not inconsiderable frame. I had to admit she had a point.

This was entertaining but getting out of hand. No one else was going to stop it – they were all still too gobsmacked – so I waded in. I’ve had the training, after all.

‘All right, ladies, that’s enough,’ I said, as I tried to prise Cheryl’s fingers away from Mel’s throat. When that didn’t work – she had a strong grip for someone with such well-manicured hands – I chopped her hard on the inside of the elbow with the side of my hand, making her yelp and let go. Then I dragged Mel to her feet and positioned myself between the two women.

I glared at Tony and the crowd (who were mostly male) gawping at us.

‘It’s all right, lads, don’t bloody help or anything, will you,’ I said, rolling my eyes. Tony shook himself and helped Cheryl to her feet.

‘She can’t marry him!’ cried Mel, straining to get to the furious and not-so-blushing bride-to-be again. I shook her and made her look at me.

‘Mel,’ I said. ‘Mel! Calm down. Do you remember me? Jodie?’

She looked at me and slowly recognition dawned. ‘Aren’t you the one who went off and joined the police? What are you doing here?’ A look of relief washed over her. ‘Are you investigating them? Are you—’

‘Just calm down,’ I said. ‘I’m going to let go of you so we can talk properly, okay? I don’t want a repeat of whatever that was.’

‘I want the police here RIGHT NOW!’ shouted Cheryl. She was understandably shaken, but I couldn’t help feeling she was almost enjoying being the centre of attention, or help noticing that her lacquered hair had barely moved under the onslaught. She must’ve sprayed it with liquid Kevlar.

Tony looked at me helplessly. I seem to have that effect on men; at some point in our relationship they always look at me helplessly. I sighed.

‘Let’s not be hasty, Cheryl,’ I said. She glared at me but I carried on before she could start shouting at me. I don’t normally take an instant dislike to people but I really could not warm to her. ‘It’s the night before your wedding, all your guests will be arriving tonight, and you’re meant to be having a party. Do you really want to spend the evening at the police station? It’ll take hours for them to take statements. Your whole night will be ruined.’

Tony looked at me gratefully and I forgave him for being a helpless wuss. My kind heart will be the end of me one day.

‘Jodie’s right,’ he said. ‘Let’s just go and have a drink and forget about it, yeah? No harm done.’

Cheryl looked for a moment like she was going to open her mouth and unleash such a stream of verbal abuse that it would make a navy blush.

‘Ello, ’ello, ’ello, what’s going on here then?’ The man’s voice stopped Cheryl in her tracks. We all turned to stare at the small group of guests who had just arrived in the foyer and were looking on, bemused, obviously wondering if they’d missed the evening’s entertainment.

I took in the appearance of the man who had stolen what was, by rights for an ex-copper, my line. He was in his early sixties, dapper and well dressed in casual but expensive-looking clothes. A Ralph Lauren polo player gambolled discreetly on the breast pocket of his shirt and the chunky diver’s watch on his wrist did not look like a cheap knock-off from the local market. He radiated self-assurance and good humour, particularly if it was at someone else’s expense. Behind him stood another, younger man, good-looking in a cocky kind of way – the sort of bloke you knew deep down you couldn’t trust, but who could probably persuade you otherwise just long enough to get into your knickers. A sardonic smile, almost a sneer, crossed his face as he looked at Cheryl, who had gone uncharacteristically silent.

‘All right, Chel?’ His voice had a mocking, slightly belligerent tone to it. ‘My name weren’t on the invite but I’m sure you didn’t mean nothing by it.’

‘We did send you one,’ said Tony awkwardly. ‘The post round here...’

The older man smiled – he was clearly very amused both by Tony’s obvious discomfort and by the tableau in front of him – and inclined his head towards Mel.

‘Is this the floorshow? I don’t think much of your strippergram.’

Oh, so he was a dick. Good to know up front.

‘That’s really not helping, Mr...?’ I said, in my best police officer’s voice. These things never leave you.

‘Laity. Roger Laity.’ He held out his hand to shake, but my hands were still occupied with holding onto Mel. ‘Uncle of the blushing bride.’

‘Well, Mr Laity, if you and the rest of the group could make your way into the function room, rather than stand there making funny comments, that would go some way towards salvaging your niece’s party, don’t you think?’

He looked at me appraisingly. I got the impression that he expected me to blush or falter under his gaze but then, he really didn’t know me. He turned away and patted Tony on the back condescendingly: *you can stand down now, son, the real man of the family has arrived*. Tony looked like he wanted to wash and possibly disinfect the spot his uncle-in-law-to-be had touched, and I felt a rush of sympathy for him. All he’d wanted was a nice wedding.

‘Come on, babe,’ said Tony, tugging at Cheryl.

The bride-to-be bestowed a murderous glance on Mel, who deserved it, to be fair, and on me, who didn’t, and then allowed Tony to take her hand and lead her away. But she stopped and turned to me, hissing, ‘Get that ... that *thing* out of my sight or I really will call the police!’

We waited while Tony, Cheryl, and their guests left the foyer and then I led a now docile Mel out of the hotel and into the grounds. We found a bench in a secluded spot near a pond full of koi carp, and sat down.

‘So what was all that about?’ I asked. Mel looked remorseful.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, miserably. ‘I tried to talk to her but she brushed me off and I just got this rush of blood to the head.’

‘That was quite a rugby tackle,’ I said. We looked at each other, the image of Cheryl and her hair flying into the air running through our minds, and both stifled giggles.

‘You don’t like her either, do you?’ asked Mel.

‘I hardly know her,’ I said, and she laughed gently.

‘That’s not a no, then,’ she said, and I laughed too.

‘No, it’s not.’

We sat quietly for a moment, letting her calm down and marshal her thoughts.

‘I don’t think she loves him,’ Mel said finally. ‘She’s going to ruin his life.’

‘At the risk of sounding judgemental...’ I started.

‘I know, I know, I already ruined it.’ She sighed. ‘I didn’t do it lightly. And I did love him. I just fell in love with someone else as well.’

‘Your driving instructor.’

She looked at me, surprised. ‘I keep forgetting that everyone knows everyone’s business in this town. Your mum and my mum—’

‘They both go to the OAPs’ coffee club at the church hall on Wednesdays,’ I said. She nodded.

‘Of course. Anyway, I fell for my instructor but I still loved Tony. I wasn’t stringing them both along, I just didn’t know who I wanted to be with.’ She sighed again. ‘If it’s any consolation, I chose the wrong one. She did to me what I did to Tony.’

I looked at her miserable face. I remembered how I’d almost instantly fallen for Daisy’s dad – PC Richard Doyle, to give him his official title, or ‘that cheating swine’ to give him the unofficial one my mum always used – spotting him across the room at a team briefing. He’d just transferred to the station and I had to show him around. I ended up showing him a lot more than that after a few drinks in the pub after work. I hadn’t known he was married at first, and I didn’t care about his wife when he left her because it meant he’d chosen me. I’d been a lonely workaholic and I wasn’t letting him go. Doubtless the woman he left me for – who I was sure was just one of many sad extra-marital conquests – twelve years later didn’t care how I felt, either. It had felt like he’d ripped my heart out and stamped on it. And stamped on Daisy’s, too, because when he left me he left her as well.

There wasn’t a finite amount of heartbreak in the world. It didn’t make any difference how many people suffered from it, it didn’t lessen the sting. I sighed.

‘Of course it’s not a consolation, not to anyone. Not even to Tony, because he’s not like that.’ I picked up a piece of gravel and tossed it into the pond, watching the ripples spread out. I turned back to Mel. ‘But what makes you think she’s going to ruin his life?’

‘She’s not marrying him for love,’ she said firmly.

‘What makes you say that? What’s she marrying him for?’

‘Money.’

I laughed. ‘He hasn’t got any, has he? I mean, I know the shop’s still going after all these years...’

She looked at me steadily.

‘The shop?’ I said. ‘You think she wants the shop?’

Mel shrugged but didn’t say anything. Why would Cheryl want the shop? It can’t have been that profitable; I was amazed it was still going. Smaller shops were closing all the time in seaside towns like Penstowan.

I looked at her thoughtfully. ‘You said to me earlier, was I here investigating them. Investigating who?’

‘The Laity family,’ said Mel without any hesitation. ‘Are you?’

‘I’m not a police officer anymore,’ I said. ‘I’m just doing the catering.’

‘Oh.’ She looked disappointed.

‘I’m still nose-y, though,’ I said. I had to admit that my childhood nickname had become quite apt during my years on the force. ‘Why should the Laity family be investigated?’

She looked around nervously. ‘My cousin works for the council. Let’s just say, that family have got plans for Penstowan that not everyone will agree with.’

‘What sort of plans?’ I asked.

‘Everything okay?’

I looked up into Tony’s concerned face. He looked anxiously from me to Mel, a worried smile on his face.

‘Tony! I’m so sorry...’ started Mel, looking like she might cry.

‘Do you want me to leave you to talk?’ I said, standing up. Emotional scenes are not my thing. But they both looked horrified at the idea. Mel grabbed my hand.

‘I just wanted to make sure you were okay,’ said Tony. ‘I know it must be hard for you, seeing me move on and be happy—’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, Tony, this is not a bloody love triangle with you in the middle!’ she snapped. He looked affronted, then annoyed.

‘Oh, so you just decided to rock up and ruin my wedding for a laugh?’

Mel got to her feet and it was in danger of all going off again. I jumped up and stood between them.

‘Tony, thank you for checking on us; everything is fine. Mel is going to go home now so you get back to your party and I’ll be in for a drink in a bit.’ I really needed a drink after all this. To think I’d been expecting to be bored. I gave him a little shove towards the hotel and took Mel’s arm.

We left him standing there with his mouth open, catching flies.

‘So what were you going to say?’ I asked Mel, when we were out of earshot. But she shook her head.

‘No. Balls to him. If he wants to marry her, let him get on with it.’

We were almost in the car park by now. She disentangled her arm from mine and stopped.

‘Thank you for stopping me make an even bigger idiot of myself,’ she said. ‘I appreciate it, honestly.’ She looked over at an old and slightly battered Vauxhall that was parked on the other side of the gravelled drive. A small, furry, and undeniably cute face peered out of it, nose sniffing at the window. ‘I left my dog in the car. She must be hot.’ Mel must have seen my disapproving expression; the window was open a tiny crack, barely enough to let any air in, and it had been a hot day. ‘I can’t leave the window down any further than that or she gets out,’ she explained, and chuckled. ‘She’s so clever, she throws all her weight at the top of the window until she forces it down, and then wriggles out. I should have called her Houdini. I’ll just let her out for a pee and then I’ll be off.’

She went to leave but I grabbed her arm to stop her.

‘If you ever want to talk...’ I said. ‘I’d give you my business card but I left my bag in the bar.’

She smiled softly. ‘Thank you. If you’ve moved back to Penstowan I’m sure we’ll run into each other.’

I watched as she opened the car door and made a fuss of Germaine, faithful companion and would-be canine escape artist. Then I went back to the bar.

I thought I should probably stick around long enough to have a glass of wine, and then I would make my excuses and leave. It really wasn’t my kind of party. But there was someone else missing from the bar too: Cheryl.

Tony saw me enter, brought me a glass of champagne, and steered me over to the window.

‘So, do you think she’ll come back?’ he asked.

I gulped at my champagne. ‘Who, Cheryl?’

‘No, you muppet. Cheryl’s having an early night. Mel. Will Mel cause any trouble tomorrow?’

‘Oh, right. No, I don’t think so.’ I shook my head. ‘And anyway, if she does turn up, I’ll be right over there in the kitchen, preparing vol-au-vents and making dinner for a hundred people. I will have access to a lot of sharp pointy things.’

‘You could do your awesome ex-policewoman ninja stuff again.’ Tony laughed. ‘That was so hot...’

I gasped in mock horror and slapped him. ‘Anthony Penhaligon! You’re practically a married man!’

He smiled. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘I’m very lucky.’

‘Hmm,’ I said non-committally, sipping at my drink.

‘You don’t like my wife-to-be much, do you?’ he said.

‘I hardly know her.’ I was painfully aware that was the exact thing I’d said to Mel. He laughed.

‘That’s not a no, is it?’ He stared out of the window for a moment then turned back to me. ‘I know Cheryl can be a bit...’ *What? A bit of a fucking nightmare?* ‘A bit high maintenance. But she’s not had an easy life.’

I thought about the things I’d gone through over the last few years.

‘Lots of us have had a hard life—’ I started.

‘She lost her parents when she was fifteen.’ *Oh crap.* ‘That’s how she ended up with her uncle. I don’t know what her parents were like – they didn’t live round here – but her uncle and his lot...’ Tony shook his head and lowered his voice. ‘They’re not very nice people. So cut her some slack, yeah?’ He touched me gently on the arm. ‘I’m glad you’re back, Jodie. I’d really like you and Cheryl to be friends. Will you try?’

‘Of course,’ I said. And I meant it, for him.

I finished my drink and left the bar. Should I go up and talk to Cheryl? Part of me wanted nothing more than to just go home and relieve my mum of her babysitting duties – Daisy liked to think she was a grown-up, but she was still only twelve – but the concerned (or nosey) part of me thought that maybe I should pop up and check on her.

I stood outside her room, hesitating. Maybe I shouldn’t disturb her if she wanted an early night. But I could hear movement – a lot of movement – from the other side of the door. So I knocked.

There was silence. To my mind it was a guilty silence – like someone had been caught doing something they shouldn’t. Don’t ask me how a silence can be guilty, but it can. I just have this instinct...

Just as I was becoming convinced she wouldn’t answer the door, she did, opening it a crack. She had a smile on her face which dropped as soon as she saw me.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said.

‘Just checking that you’re all right after that little incident earlier,’ I said sweetly. I can do sweet.

‘I’m fine,’ she said. Through the crack in the door I could see a suitcase on the bed with a mess of clothes half in and half out.

‘Getting everything ready for your big day?’ I said. ‘Packing for the honeymoon?’

‘Yes,’ she said, attempting to close the door a little tighter. I had a horrible feeling that packing wasn’t what she was doing.

‘Look, we may have got off on the wrong foot,’ I said. ‘If you want to talk—’

‘Not really.’

‘Okay.’ I was relieved. ‘Tony’s a really good guy, you know. He deserves to be happy.’

Her face dropped. *Uh oh.*

‘I know he does.’

‘So if you’ve got any doubts...’

She looked at me for a few seconds, then plastered on a fake smile.

‘No doubts at all,’ she said. ‘Thank you for your concern.’ And with that she shut the door in my face.

I went home and went to bed, first looking in on Daisy, who had given up waiting up for me and gone to bed, and on my mum, who was staying in the spare room. I'd mentioned her moving in with us permanently as she was getting on a bit and I worried about her being on her own (especially since she'd been diagnosed with angina a few months ago, which had helped persuade me now was a good time to move back), but she'd been almost indecently hasty to reject that idea, saying that she valued her privacy and she could hardly bring a man home if her daughter and granddaughter were there.

I turned the light off and stared at the ceiling before finally falling into a restless sleep. My dreams were filled with 80s hairstyles, rugby tackles, and dickheads in Ralph Lauren, and somewhere in the middle of it Tony saying he'd deliver the sofa tomorrow. Except of course he wouldn't because it already had pride of place in my living room and tomorrow was his wedding day.

I woke the next morning and saw the text from the groom, and in my sleep-fuddled state I thought, *He's arranging a time to deliver the sofa.*

When I opened it, I was unsurprised to read that the bride had disappeared.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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