

CHAPTER ONE

2014

“Christ!” Lucy’s shoulders jumped in their sockets. How could Ralph have crossed the lawn without her noticing? But here he was, in his black suit, and holding out a stiff white envelope. “What are you doing, creeping up on people like that?” she snapped. There’d been too many shadows, too many ghosts, this past week.

Ralph shrugged the corners of his mouth. “It looks important. But I can take it back inside if you prefer.”

“What kind of important?” Lucy narrowed her eyes and tucked the secateurs into her gardening belt.

“Well, for starters, it has an official seal.” Her husband was right to think that black drew too much attention to his eyebrows, which had remained defiantly dark, long after the rest of his hair had turned white.

“Oh, give it here!” Lucy thrust out an ungracious hand and snatched the letter.

After a few steps, Ralph made a half-turn. “Don’t forget. We need to leave for Dom’s funeral at ten forty-five. That’s *leave the house*, not time for you to start getting ready.”

Lucy had done her best to ignore the time. The thought of the coffin’s misshapen oblong shuddered through her. “Miserable so-and-so. I always hated the bastard.” The falsehood snagged in Lucy’s throat. Inside she was wailing; cursing the God she didn’t believe in. Angry at Dominic for leaving her. Guilty at the relief she felt now he was gone.

“I hope you don’t say the same about me once I’m safely out of the way.”

Hub! A harsh breath left her mouth. “You were never miserable.”

“Well, you might find it in your heart to hate Dominic a little less –”

“What? Now he’s no longer here to piss me off?” Her pooled eyes spilled over. Here she was, taking it out on the one person who didn’t deserve the sharp end of her tongue. Ralph only said what he’d said because he understood the truth. For both of them, Dominic’s absence was knife-like.

“Poor sod stuck around as long as he could.” Ralph moved away carefully, as if he was thinking where to make each footprint.

By the time Lucy had recovered her poise, he was almost at the patio. Safe to clasp one cold hand over her mouth. To grasp at a memory so intent on freeing itself. A snapshot. Dominic’s head thrown back; raucous laughter.

Not as he was when she’d last seen him, prostrate on a narrow cot, sucking something puréed through a plastic straw. No point in asking how he was feeling when the answer was etched on his face. Pretending she hadn’t seen the unfinished letter he’d left on the wheeled table that slotted over his bed, she’d dumped her handbag on top of the words he’d written: *outlook bleak* – as if it was the weather he was forecasting. Her eyes came to rest on his watchstrap, metal links hanging loose, a precise measure of how much of him they’d already lost.

Unbearable. Dominic, who’d lived life more fully than anyone she’d ever met, who never just walked into a room but *arrived*, coattails flying. Reduced to eating baby food. As Lucy had told Ralph repeatedly over those last weeks, she was no good with hospitals, the corridors of magnolia, the flowered curtains, the chairs upholstered in wipe-clean PVC.

“It’s just Dom. You don’t need to put on a performance.”

“It’s alright for you,” she said. “You’re a man. You and Dominic can mull over the cricket for a good few hours.” Besides, there was not and there never had been *just Dom*. Not for her and certainly not for Ralph.

Ralph, of course, had more experience of hospitals and hospices. He’d spent hours sitting by bedsides in the second half of the eighties and the early nineties, at the height of the epidemic. Sitting by a bedside, just holding a hand.

“How can you bear to do it?” she’d asked.

“It really doesn’t seem like enough,” he’d said. “Not when you see what they have to go through.”

Lucy had tried to contain her fears when Ralph arrived home with words she’d never heard before. *Pneumocystis carinii* and *Candida*, *sarcoma lesions* and *cryptococcal meningitis*. First, there had been the fear of blackmail and exposure. Now this thing would cast another shadow over their lives. Ralph distanced himself with complicated terminology. To Lucy, the terrible disease would only ever be AIDS.

“You’ve been tested?”

“Yes, I’ve been tested.”

She bit her lip. She was not his mother. She wouldn’t continually ask if he was being careful.

Dominic’s disease was cancer, not AIDS. But she knew how the well-thumbed liturgy of the bedside vigil brought it back for Ralph. All of those deaths. All of those dear loved ones.

On the final occasion Lucy visited Dominic – and by then he was in St Jude’s hospice – Ralph wasn’t there to act as a shield.

There had, though, been one small satisfaction. “You’re wearing the pyjamas I bought you,” she said, smoothing a ridiculously expensive silken sleeve. That had been her quiet rebellion, her refusal to buy cheap just because he wouldn’t get much wear out of them.

Dominic didn’t reply, at least not in any way she would have wanted. His eyes, huge in his skull, pleaded *I’m trapped*. An agonising moment. A voice, somewhere that might have been inside her whispered, *I’ll do it. Whatever you want*. But before it could form itself into anything more concrete the moment was broken.

“Would you like me to pray with you?”

Lucy turned to see a woman standing in the doorway, dressed plainly, a silver crucifix hanging around her neck.

Dominic gathered every ounce of strength and barked, “Fuck off!” The woman shrank into herself, and, as she backed away, he actually hissed. The two of them had clutched their sides: Lucy, howling in joy and agony; Dominic shaking with the effort of trying to rein in his ferocious joy, lest he trigger another unstoppable spasm of coughing. It was the last joke they shared. The last words she heard him say.

Fuck off!

Though Lucy rarely prayed, the interruption had sparked something inside her. With her sides still aching, she pleaded silently: *Help him find it in himself to let go*. How could he carry on when there was so little of him left?

She excused herself, saying that she needed coffee when what she really needed was escape.

In the cramped ladies’ toilets, Lucy splashed her face with cold water and blinked at her shocked reflection.

You can do this.

Because what choice was there? Five years ago, it had been a false alarm. Death had donned his black hooded cloak but Dominic had resisted. Not this time. By the time she arrived back at his bedside, Dominic had slipped away. She noticed the silk scarf knotted around his neck, a cast-off of Ralph’s. He would be pleased when she told him. She couldn’t for the life of her remember if Dominic had been wearing it earlier. That detail would go on bothering her.

“You need to leave half an hour to get changed.”

Lucy looked about her, bewildered to find herself standing in the middle of her rose garden, eyelids heavy. Ralph, she saw, had paused outside the French windows. "I'll go as I am. He won't be happy unless he has something to moan about. He never liked the way I dressed."

It's not that. It's just that I prefer you naked.

Ralph was leaning on the doorframe for support. "He can't answer you back any more."

"Oh, he'll find a way. Count on it." Lucy thought of Dominic's interruptions as his echo rather than his ghost. She'd heard them during his absences in his lifetime. Why should it be any different now?

"You might rack your brains for something... I don't know... *pleasant* to say about him. Just in case the press are out in force."

Lucy stifled bitter laughter. This was as close to sarcasm as Ralph ventured. A media tornado was about to descend. So much for being allowed to grieve in private.

Only half of her attention was on the envelope as she tucked a thumb under its flap and tore the seal, jagged centimetre by jagged centimetre. "They won't want something positive. They'll want something caustic to regurgitate as a headline."

"Then 'I always hated the bastard' it is."

Despite everything, despite the day and the fact that she'd been snapping at Ralph from the moment they'd woken, Lucy smiled. *I'm sorry*, her eyes said. Her husband was aware of the problem. For Lucy to haul herself out of an indigo funk, she needed to pick a fight. That was where Dominic had come in so useful over the fifty-odd years she'd known him. Never holding back on opinions of her – or anyone else for that matter – he'd been such an obvious target. Tooth and claw.

He'd always known how to goad her. "*Why must you constantly demand that I apologise? I can't help the fact that I wasn't born working class.*" The permanent chip on Lucy's shoulder – that and her lack of formal education. And how, goddamn it, was Dominic so qualified to dissect whatever she produced? He'd known nothing about poetry when she'd met him. Not a jot.

"I'll leave you to your letter, but keep an eye on the time," Ralph said and entered the house through Lucy's office.

Unfolding the single sheet, she experienced a quiver of pleasure at the way both ends had been folded towards the centre, rather than the more usual Z shape. She admired the precision of it, reminded of the rituals of pre-email days: filling her fountain pen; blotting paper; blowing on blue ink until it dried. But her smile froze. *Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire*. As her eyes zigzagged furiously downwards, it was as if she was being pulled underwater. The words massed and swam in shoals, becoming foreign to her. She, who dealt in the currency of language. Lucy pulled her glasses onto the bony ridge of her nose, but still her brow furrowed. The embossed seal felt official as she passed the pad of her thumb over it. If this was someone's idea of a practical joke, it was a very expensive one.

So this is how you thought you'd exact your revenge. Because it could only be the work of one person. And then she was cutting the paper. Cutting it with her stiff secateurs. Fierce little snips. Triangles and polygons. *Today of all days, you pull a stunt like this.* The shapes became the thing. A row of inward angled snips at one edge, then upwards, a deep cut linking them together. A confetti-fall of dissected words. A snowfall of envelope. The fragments clung to her clothes. They spangled and feathered the jewelled grass. The hand holding the secateurs took control. There was a level on which Lucy could see herself as an observer might. Quite detached, unaware of sending instructions from brain to hand, only that she mustn't stop until the job was finished. And there was another level on which she worked herself into a frenzy, an insult accompanying every snip. *Well, I shan't. You aren't the Pied Piper any more.* Once the secateurs had made short work of the invitation, they started on her rose bushes, conscientiously removing every head, so that rich velvet petals joined with the flurry of vellum. Great splashes of dew were released. The soft thud of heavy heads on mulched bark, one after another. To Lucy, the sound of each impact was amplified: great timpani struck with felt-tipped drumsticks, bouncing off the low ceiling of a basement jazz club. As she worked around and between the semicircular beds, tugging at the thorn-snared hem of her skirt, there was a mania to her movements. She gave herself up to the destruction of the thing she had created and loved completely.

Dominic's voice was inside her head. *Swapped your wire cutters for secateurs?* The air filled with a heady blend of Turkish delight, violet, apple, clove, citrus, moss and honey – the *soul of the rose*. It buzzed thickly with insects. Track-marks appeared in Lucy's pale threadbare skin. She shook one knuckle-gnarled hand. Where her thumb had been punctured, a single bead of rich red blood stood proud. As she sucked at it, tasting iron, the hard topaz of her oversized ring was comfortingly cold against her cheek. She was ankle-deep in petals. Cleopatra had not done this much for Anthony.

"Lucy?"

As her familiar name sliced the potent air, Lucy saw that she'd been cutting deep into the sleeve of her boiled wool cardigan. Ralph was powering towards her, breathless. A dark tie hung loose around the raised collar of his shirt.

"Not bad news, I hope?" he asked, saying nothing of the surrounding chaos.

From the tightness of her eyes and the fogging of her glasses, Lucy realised she'd been weeping. Words erupted from deep within her. "I didn't do everything I've done to become a national fucking treasure!"

"No one could accuse you of trying to win a popularity contest, that's for sure."

"Then *why?*"

He looked at a loss. "Why what?"

"It's an invitation from the *Palace*. They've put me on the New Year's *Honours* list." Even saying the words, Lucy felt sullied.

"Ah," Ralph said, a slow, measured sound. "Now that, I wasn't expecting." His feet shuffled.

"No!" Her entire adult life, she'd spoken out against the government. From Suez to Iraq, she'd challenged their actions. What's more, she'd criticised those who compromised their work by accepting honours, justifying the decision by claiming they'd stuck around long enough to move from anti-establishment to establishment.

"Damned if you do..."

"Exactly." She was shaking.

"There *is* a third option..." Ralph's mouth curled upwards, into what Lucy understood was an awkward shrug, rather than the crooked smile others might have taken it for.

"What?" she scoffed. "Do a Westwood?" Lucy was friendly with Vivienne, but she'd said as much to her face: One does not simply *forget* to wear knickers, not to the Palace. It doesn't take the knowledge of a world-class dress designer to understand that circular skirts lift and hover when you twirl around. Every little girl knows that.

From the twitch of Ralph's shutter finger, Lucy could tell he was itching to ask. Her voice was a challenge: "Go on! Fetch your camera."

"The light's perfect," he said, as if there was nothing unusual about the scene. Just a stage set plundered from his imagination.

The speed at which her energy drained ambushed Lucy. Sand slipping through an egg timer, an avalanche thinning to the finest trickle. Her empty hand reached for support where there was none to be found. She staggered slightly, righting a badly placed foot. What little enthusiasm she'd had was waning. She didn't think she could bear to hear the vicar say that Dominic had been 'called home' or that he was in 'a better place'. *This* was his home. His place was *here*, with *them*. Lucy had a clear idea of what hearing herself described as the 'friend of' or 'Dominic's poet friend' would unleash in her. And she wouldn't stand for any unthinking individual pinning the equivalent of these inadequate labels on Ralph. And yet Lucy couldn't be the one to abandon the idea. A lifetime of rebellion had left her sense of duty undiluted.

"What about the funeral?" she called after him.

Ralph turned. "Fuck the funeral. We both know what sort of thing it will be. All hymns and speeches. Dom wouldn't dream of going unless he had to. You're staying right there."

Relief flooded through her, countering the earlier sensation of drowning. Better to remain here, in the house Dominic had shared with them. She summoned her wits sufficiently to look at the devastation.

What have you done? You've disgraced yourself, you stupid old woman. If only slightly, only privately. But time and time again Ralph had presented her with proof. Creation can come from destruction. This was what he did; what he'd always done. He would capture her in a way – perhaps an unexpected way. Something that would grace the covers of tomorrow's papers. A white-haired woman with trailing mascara, a shock of too-bright lipstick, standing in the ruin of her beloved rose garden. Even the tattered sleeve of her cardigan and the pulled threads of her ankle-length skirt would be saturated with meaning.

Her eyes like small slits, bleary, barely capable of remaining open; her leg muscles weak, she sank to the damp grass, crushing precious oil from scattered petals. A near-perfect triangle of vellum picked from her cardigan absorbed her completely. A moment passed in perfect misery, before Ralph's cold fingertips tilted her chin upwards. "Just a little. And a wee bit to the side. That's it."

He walked backwards over rose petals, flattening blades of grass, and took his place behind the tripod. If hers was a discipline, a religion, Ralph's art was instinctive. He gave no other direction. There was no need. She heard the rapid repeat of the shutter.