

Chapter 1

Cassie

Even in the snoozy Cotswold countryside, the mid-morning air isn't entirely filled with melodious bird song and the soporific mooing of cattle. Sometimes an impostor makes its presence felt.

“Caaaaassssiiiiiiiiieeeee!”

Oh bugger.

Just as my dream man is leaning in for our first electric kiss, something else needs my attention.

“What?!”

“I’m sorry, Richard. I’ll only be a second. Why don’t you pour us some more of Tesco’s finest and I’ll be back before you’ve burped up the first few bubbles?”

“Cassie!” The voice comes again.

Could that be another man after my attentions? Phew! What a morning!

I haul myself out of the flowerbed where, back in the real world, I’ve been planting a red rhododendron, and dust off my knees.

“There’s something on the girly wig!”

“Don’t worry!”

This had better be a full-on disaster, I think, as I hoick up my too-tight-therefore-unbuttoned trousers. My daydream was so real I was actually getting drunk on it.

“Why don’t you come and help me here, so I can see what

you're doing?" I call out.

Silence.

"Wiggy," I say a little more sharply, as the rhododendron collapses on its side. "Wiggy!" My call receives no reply. "Oh...f...iddle."

I round the corner of the cottage onto a semicircle of crazy paving. It should have been normal paving but D.I.Y was never my strong point. I call it D.D.I.Y. – don't do it yourself.

"Wiggy!"

Because of the dazzling sunlight, the scene that confronts me takes several seconds to become clear.

Underneath the whirly gig (or girly wig as Wiggy calls the clothes carousel) is a small bundle with something moving inside. The clothes still clinging on are thrashing about like spinnakers in high wind.

I approach with caution, crouching down like the tourists you see rushing from helicopters after a five-minute spin over The Grand Canyon or Rio de Janeiro, or the many other places I haven't been with my dream lover but would like to visit.

"Wiggy!"

"Here," says a small, frightened voice.

"Are you ok?"

I reach down into the heap and dig about for the reassuring warmth of a childish form. Finding it, I fumble for a hand and pull Wiggy free from what must have seemed an alarming avalanche of bed linen, teddies, nighties and a tablecloth (had a slight disaster with a glass of red wine on Saturday night).

I sit her on one of the whitewashed garden chairs and, giving her a rub on the head, turn my attention to the carousel. The sound it was emitting has greatly reduced but it still appears to be half-filled with crepe paper being rustled by a large kindergarten group.

I pull the washing apart, revealing the pheasant I adopted

after he suffered a broken wing.

“You stupid, stupid bird, Eeyore.”

I grab him roughly and place him on the ground. “How did you get in there?”

He gives me an indignant roll of his eyes as if to say, “How do you think?” Then, with a stropy flap of his wings, he scurries off into the hedge to brood.

Wiggy’s now smiling brightly and wagging her feet like paddles under the chair. “He’s a silly bird, isn’t he, Auntie Cassie?” she giggles.

My two cats, Piglet and Roo, are play-fighting under her, twisting and rolling like leaves in the wind. I stoop down, stroking both cats and, now at Wiggy’s eye level, ask her if she’d like some lunch. (I’ve bought alphabet spaghetti especially.)

“Can I have an avocado?” Wiggy chirrup.

“Sure,” I say, a little taken aback at her sophistication.

“With some French dressing and some chives?”

“If that’s what you want.”

I take her hand and lead her through the French windows into the kitchen, my mind already wandering back to my earlier daydream.

How perfect this quiet country living would be with just a tiny bit less babysitting and a smidgen more sex.

Nick

As I wake-up I experience two sensations in quick succession. The first is a pleasant vibration around my groin. The second is like the pain of being kicked in the bollocks, only transferred to my head. The rest of my body feels like it’s been in a road traffic accident.

I eventually persuade my hand to reach down and wrestle my buzzing mobile from the pocket of my jeans.

“Nick Ratcliffe,” I croak into the handset. The mouth isn’t so

good either: a dry, desiccated wasteland, vaguely tasting of stale lager.

“Nick, it’s Debbie.”

My sister’s voice twitters anxiously down the phone. What kind of girly crisis has she managed to get herself into this time?

“Nick...are you there, Nick?”

I groan to confirm I’m still alive.

“Nick, Scotty didn’t come home last night. I can’t get him on his mobile and I’ve no idea where he is and...”

Oh God! She’s sobbing, and sobbing means I’m going to do whatever it is she’s about to ask me. What is it about a crying woman that makes a bloke drop everything and go running?

“Ok. I’ll get dressed and come over.”

It’s only a small lie but it seems to pacify her. I can’t get dressed because I’m already dressed.

“No, don’t worry, I’ll come to you.”

“See you in a bit then.” I hang up.

I must have just crawled straight into bed when I got in, whatever time that was. Perhaps a shower will help.

I roll off the bed into an undignified heap. I have to use the corner of my chest-of-drawers to haul myself up. At least I managed to take my trainers off before I passed out.

I shuffle down the hall and into the bathroom, trying to decide whether I need to be sick or whether...

“Eurchhhh!” My foot touches something warm and soft on the floor of the bathroom.

I turn my bleary eyes downwards and see what appears to be the decapitated body of a man wearing nothing but an England away shirt.

My head swims. I try to work out exactly who might have put it there and what happened to his head.

The answer slowly comes to me. I’d recognise that arse anywhere. Anyone who has ever driven behind a coach taking Owls supporters to an away game would recognise that arse.

I prod the body tentatively with my foot. I get a pained

grunting noise in response.

“Scotty, get your head out of my laundry basket and get some clothes on, will you? Deb’s looking for you.”

Cassie

I watch Wiggy squeeze out a large blob of gouache onto my pine kitchen table and then raise a mucky paw to her mouth.

“No, don’t eat it, sweetie.” Her multi-coloured fingers make their way to her lips. “Mummy will not be pleased if you go home with a tummy-ache.”

She’s already enjoyed two avocados, half a packet of (low fat, please) crisps and a satsuma.

As I scrub her hands for the second time in an hour, Jilly arrives to pick her up.

“Thanks so much again for looking after her.” She plonks herself down on a kitchen chair and gives an exhausted sigh. “What a morning!”

“So how are things at Corruptly & Dork?” I ask.

“I need lunchtime alcohol! This woman looking round the barn conversion wants her husband to come and view it later this afternoon. Can’t say no really but, if she doesn’t buy this one, I’m going to tell her to find another agent. You know the kind of thing.” Jilly puts on a superior voice, “‘The kitchen’s a bit pokey. How many acres does the house come with? Ghastly wallpaper, that’ll have to go. Carpet’s a bit frayed.’ She comments on everything, looks at the place three times and then says, ‘No, it simply won’t do. I’m not living in a hovel.’ I’ve nearly punched her several times.”

I tut sympathetically and pour her a glass of Rioja. She glugs it back in one and gasps, “Thanks Cass, you’re a saint.”

“Much to do this afternoon?” I sit myself down, putting my elbows on the table.

“Christ yes. I’m cooking for Jeff and a few of his clients

tonight. Suddenly got a terrible feeling I've left the beef in the deep freeze, so I'll have to buy another joint. Then I've got three more viewings to get through..."

"You're a miracle on legs."

"I'm a mess." She looks at her watch. "Oh Christ, Cass, I've really got to run. We'll catch up another time, ok?"

She gathers up Wiggy and bolts out the door. I wave as she backs out at action-movie speed and careers off down the lane, shouting at Wiggy to put her seatbelt on.

I wander back into my little garden and gather up the debris a lunchtime spent with a child has caused. Wiggy is so exhausting I really don't know how Jilly copes. Let alone working too. I do worry about her. It can't be healthy living life at her speed, though I do help out with Wiggy whenever I can. It relieves her of some of the pressure, but it leaves me drained. I've made a mental note that if I decide to have kids to adopt a little person aged eight, so they have at least basic independence. I bet Jilly wished she'd done that too.

As I gather up the wrappers and discarded morsels of food, I think about the work I must crack on with this afternoon. I have a portrait to present on Tuesday and it's nowhere near complete.

Dumping everything in the kitchen, I scamper up the stairs and cross the tiny landing to my second bedroom, converted by an easel and a rubbish tip of paint tubes into a 'studio'. The light is good up here. It comes slanting in through the dormer window and fills the room with an attractive glow, perfect for painting.

At school, art was the only subject I was any good at. I couldn't add or subtract, I couldn't speak French and I didn't see the point of English literature, although I've always read loads of romantic trash.

My latest commission is for Mrs Ponsonby, a landed gentry type from Lower Slaughter. I'm painting one of her prize stallions, a handsome fella called Mr Topsy. The day I went to photograph him was a nightmare. Not only would he not stand

still, but something unspeakable happened between his legs while I was doing a close-up of his hindquarters. I'm not sure I will ever fully recover from the shock, or the memory of Mrs Ponsonby shouting, "Oh Mr Topsy, I know she's a pretty little thing, but really!"

I squint critically at the painting. I'm relieved to conclude it's going ok. It is definitely a horse, not a hippo, or a wildebeest. No way do I want to go back for more photos.

"It's not bad, is it Tigger?"

My mallard is perched on the paint-splattered stool, blinking at the canvas.

"What do you think?"

He turns his brown, dappled head in my direction and quacks.

"Hmm. Me too," I agree. "You've got to budge now, honey. I need to get on."

Nick

I've never managed to work out how Scotty made the transition from being my best mate to being my brother-in-law. We were in the same class all the way through school. Pubs, football matches and holidays followed. Then suddenly, out of the blue, he started shagging my sister. I seem to remember he did very graciously ask my permission, but only after he'd already been doing it for a month. Next thing I know, she's got him down the aisle and he's a bloody relative.

I look across at him now as he sits on my sofa in the pair of boxers I've just lent him. Not an edifying sight. Either they've shrunk, or he's a lot fatter than I am.

"Sorry about puking in your washing, mate. I could have sworn it was the bog." He swigs from the mug of tea I've just made him and goes back to reading the paper.

"It's alright." I shoot an ironic smile at him. It isn't alright, but I don't feel well enough to argue about it yet. The

excruciating headache has started to ease off, but I still feel rough.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work or something?” he asks, not looking up from the paper. He seems incredibly chirpy for someone who drank half a brewery last night.

“No. Got sacked, didn’t I?”

“What?”

“The wedding on Saturday got out of control. The best man lunged in for a snog with one of the bridesmaids. She told him to piss off. The groom intervened, then another bloke. End result: me breaking up the scrap in the hotel car park and getting smacked onto the pavement. I got a grazed cheek out of it, so I hit the best man and he complained to my boss.”

“Oh. Bad luck, mate.”

The news doesn’t seem to have an impact on him. Perhaps I shouldn’t give a toss either. I never planned to work in conference and banqueting; it just happened. Organising other people’s weddings is the pits. Don’t ever let anyone tell you they’re happy occasions. They invariably end up in fights, arguments and customer complaints.

Scotty folds the newspaper. “We were bloody robbed!” He gestures at the picture of England’s players despondent after a late defeat.

Coming from an ardent Owls’ supporter that’s quite a statement. We should be used to watching our team lose.

I let my thoughts wander back to last night. Both of us sitting in the pub, fists clenched, waiting for that last free kick. The tension...

The memory is violently interrupted by the terrifying sound of screeching brakes followed by an almighty crash. An enormous set of ladders smash through the bay window onto the floor of my living room, spraying us with glass.

“What the fuck?”

We both race for the front door.

Outside there’s a white transit van parked where my front garden wall used to be. It has charged over the pavement,

obliterated the garden gnome and come to rest at an angle. There's a remaining ladder left clinging to the roof rack.

Debs' fast crumpling face is lowered over the wheel.

"What the hell have you done to my van?" Scotty screams, rushing over to comfort his vehicle. I half expect him to wrap his arms around it and stroke the huge dent in the bonnet, or scoop up the water that's flooding from the radiator and pour it back in.

"Oh, my God!" Deb cries, already opening the driver's door. She jumps down to the ground and rushes back to the road where I suddenly spot a small, lifeless body.

There are tears running down her cheeks now. "He just came out of nowhere. I tried not to hit him. Nick, what are we going to do?"

I wrap my arm around her shoulder to comfort her. I can feel her shaking.

"I've killed him, haven't I?" She buries her head in my chest, smearing snot and tears over my nice, clean t-shirt as she has done in times of distress ever since we were kids. I guess that's one of the many pleasures of being a big brother.

But Scotty isn't in the mood for cuddles and comforting. He seems oblivious to the medical emergency we have in front of us. He's just walking anxiously around his van, tutting. Still wearing nothing but my boxers.

Cassie

'Twitchy' in my home is called being 'Piglet's tail', which seems to have a life completely separate to its owner's. Many times I've watched Piglet's little face track his tail with a mixture of alarm and horror. It flicks about like a miniature black hose that's had the water pressure turned up too high. That's how I am sometimes if I'm getting behind with things: I feel a bit 'Piglet's tail'.

I'm feeling like that now as I squeeze an autumnal selection of colours onto my palette and mix up a dark bay to work on Mr Topsy's face. I've realised I'm going to have some difficulty here because the only shots I managed to get of his head make him look like a mad thing, with wall eyes and flared nostrils. I think Mrs Ponsonby is looking for something altogether more regal. I may have to nip down to the library to find a photo of a non-mad horse head to work from.

Once I start working I become so absorbed that time drifts away from me like a rapidly receding tide. It's mid-afternoon when the phone goes, jolting me out of my concentration with a sudden, shrill ring. I've been painting in a trance since Wiggy left.

In the hall I have one of those old phones with the 'brrring, brrring' bell and a dial for the numbers. It's not that I want to live in the past; it's simply that the phone was here when I moved in and I found no reason to change it.

I rush down the stairs and lift the black, chunky receiver.

"*Buenas dias!*" I say brightly. For some reason I think this is amusing. Don't ask me why. Perhaps I think it makes me look well travelled. Tee hee.

"Hello, mother," I continue, less brightly. A call when I'm this absorbed in my work is not good. My mother is a terrific talker. Anything less than half-an-hour 'to catch up' is unacceptable. The trouble is 'catching up' is at best pedestrian, at worst darn right funeral. My mother describes each day since we have last spoken in minute and exacting detail. A rip in the left-hand glove of the marigolds, their black Labrador's general state of health, problems with the Aga – they're all terrifically newsworthy.

So imagine my surprise when my mother says, "Darling, this is just a quick call because I'm awfully tired, but I just wanted to warn you that you'll be getting a call tomorrow from Andrew...Hang on a sec."

I hang on listening to my mother shouting at my father, "What was the name of the chap you met today?"

In the background I can hear my father rustle his paper and mutter, “Andrew.”

“Yes, I know that, darling, but what’s his surname? Hughes was it, Hewitt? Something like that...”

“Hendry,” my father calls back. “Say hi to Cassie from me.”

My mother fiddles with the phone and relays the news.

“He’s down from London for a week to play polo and he’d like a portrait of this spaniel he’s bought for his parents. It’s their thirty-fifth anniversary.”

“When does he want it by?” I make a mental note to tell Jilly I have no need for a webpage with parents who are this good at networking. She’s been on at me to get one for ages.

My mother tells me a couple of weeks, which will just about be ok. I only have one other painting I’m working on (a much-loved cat) and that’s not due for a month. My mother signs off telling me Bumbles is in tolerably good health, though his cataracts are getting worse, and to let her know what happens with Andrew Hughes, no Hewitt; “No! Hendry,” my father calls out again.

“He’s knee-weakeningly good-looking, by the way,” my mother gasps before signing off, “and we think he’s single.”

Well, that’s preferable to being bum ugly and married, I think to myself, and skip off to the kitchen for a quick snack.

Nick

“Right, that should do the trick.” Scotty steps back to admire his handy work.

I give a half-hearted smile. I don’t see why I should be too grateful. It was he and Debbie who turned up and wrecked my flat between them. It’s been a stinking hot day – not the kind of weather where you want your windows boarded up.

“I’ll come round and put a proper one in when the van’s fixed,” Scotty tells me.

“And the front wall?”

“I’ll send one of the lads round from the site tomorrow if there’s any slack. If not, I’ll pop round next weekend myself, shouldn’t take long.”

I suppose having a builder for a brother-in-law does have its advantages. I wouldn’t have got the flat looking as good as it does without his assistance.

“Ahh! I think he’s wagging his little tail. Look!”

We both look over to Debs who is maternally stroking the little black bundle of fluff that she mowed down this morning; the bundle that is now wearing a plaster cast on his front-right leg and one of those plastic buckets around his head.

“Never mind sweetie. Uncle Nick will look after you,” she cooes in a nauseating tone as she stands up and grabs her handbag off the sofa. Suddenly, her words rearrange themselves inside my head and click into coherence.

“I think you’ll find Uncle Nick has already stumped up the money for a large vet’s bill and been conned into buying him a nice new bed on the way home, even though it wasn’t him that ran the poor little bugger down in the first place.”

“He can’t come home with us, Nick. I’ve just had all the carpets shampooed. Besides, he must be from around this area. It’ll be easier for you to track his owner down.”

I don’t know why I bother to argue with Deb. I can’t ever recall winning.

“What if I don’t track his owner down?”

“Course you will.” Scotty goes over and gives the fluff ball an affectionate tickle.

“They’ll not want to be without you for long, will they mate?”

“Alright.” I know I’m giving in. I always do and it’s probably best not to prolong the agony. “He can stay here for a week and then he’s off to the pound.” I sound decisive.

Debs’ mouth falls open and a distraught wail echoes around my living room. “You can’t send him to the pound, you evil sod! How can you be so awful?”

“You take him home if you’re so keen then.”

“I can’t, you know I can’t. What will we do with him while we’re both at work? At least now you’ll be in to look after him.”

The sound is suddenly sucked out of the room and an awkward silence is pumped in to fill the void.

“Thanks for reminding me.”

If being insensitive were an Olympic sport, my sister would be heading the Great British team.

“Come on love, time to head home.” Good old Scotty, always reliable. “See ya later Rooney, mate.” He gives the fur ball another tickle before ushering Debs out of the room and towards the front door.

I survey the day’s carnage. One big plywood monstrosity for a window, one dog with a broken leg, a coffee table with severe ladder impact damage and a dustpan full of broken glass left neatly at the corner of my new laminate floor.

Why do builders always do that? They make the effort to sweep up but they never get as far as tipping the sweepings into a dustbin, do they? I suppose I’d better do it myself.

I pick it up and plod out to the small backyard that plays host to the wheelie bins.

“You got it all fixed then?”

I turn to see Mrs Timmons’ head bobbing over the top of the fence. “I think we’re just about water tight.” I smile back. She’s a bit of a nosey old duck, but harmless enough. Just a lonely old lady.

“I was wondering, while you’re here.” She gives me the full show of grinning dentures. “I’m off to my sister’s next weekend. I wondered if you could just keep an eye on the place while I’m gone. That’s if you’ve got nothing planned.”

I can answer that question with certainty.

“No, I’ve not got anything planned for this weekend, Mrs T.”

“You’re a good boy.” She returns my smile, waves and ducks back behind the fence.

I sigh and tip the broken glass into the bin, and then it all hits me again really hard.

Heading South

I was supposed to be getting married.

I close the dustbin lid with a slam and in a fit of anger give it a good kick. I throw the shovel onto the ground and then stomp off back into the flat.