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Molly's mouth had made a silent and perfect 'o' as she was told how much she'd won. Four point two million pounds. For her. And her alone.

She'd been told by the winners' adviser not to make any rash decisions; to take a holiday and give herself plenty of time to think things through. But she didn't need time. She knew she couldn't possibly keep all that money, especially with the men in her family. The trouble had been in deciding exactly what she was going to do with it.

So, Molly had spent two long weeks mulling over her options whilst slowly coming to terms with the fact that she was a millionaire.

A millionaire, for goodness' sake! In the peace of the shop, it was still hard to take in and it didn't really make any difference to her daily routine. Chrysanthemums didn't care if you were a millionaire: they still wanted watering, which was just the way she wanted it. She wasn't into exotic holidays, fancy cars or champagne, and her fingers, with their boyishly short nails, would look ridiculous if she were to dress them with large diamonds. Besides, that sort of ostentation had always been frowned upon in her family, and money had been the source of every single family argument. As far back as she could remember, her mother and father had fought over it. Holidays never got more luxurious than static caravans, and birthdays were kept to a bare minimum, usually involving reference books and sensible clothes.

'Presents should be practical,' her father used to say.

Her mother had never agreed. 'Books and clothes aren't presents, they're punishments!'

Then the arguing would start, and it would always end the

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same way: with Cynthia giving in to Magnus. Well, that's how it appeared on the surface. What Magnus didn't see was Cynthia picking Molly and Marty up from school and driving them into town for hot chocolate and cake, followed by a trip to the toy shop to pick out a present, which would be bought on the understanding that their father was never to lay eyes on it. For years, Marty had had to keep his train set tucked under his bed, and Molly's doll's house was hidden at the back of her wardrobe.

For Molly, even today, the filthiest word in the English language was *money*. Forget anything with four letters, the word *money* was really quite hateful to her. Ever since she was a child, she'd blamed money for bad behaviour in people. Her father had made their lives miserable at home with his penny-pinching ways. She and Marty had been the only children at school not to be given pocket money. Instead of freely handing out his cash, their father would ask them what they wanted. He would then ask whether it was absolutely necessary and, if they insisted that it was, which they rarely did through fear, he'd give them half of the money they actually needed and told them to find some odd jobs round the house in order to raise the rest.

The only time they ever got any half-decent presents was at Christmas, and that was only because their mother's family erred on the generous side.

'They're *children*, dear,' Cynthia would chide when she thought Molly and Marty were out of earshot. 'And you're only a child once. What possible harm can a little bit of spoiling do to them?'

But Magnus Bailey was never convinced by his wife's sweet reasoning. 'It wasn't the way *I* was brought up,' he'd growl

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back, and Molly and Marty, hiding behind the door, would draw their eyebrows together and wave their forefingers in the air in perfect impersonation of their father. They'd always managed to laugh at their father's behaviour. Until the day their mother had walked out.

Molly shook her head at the memory. If there was one lesson she'd learnt from the past, it was that money was to be enjoyed. Yes, bills had to be paid, and provisions made for the future, but her father's way of saving and depriving had done nothing but create barriers, and she was determined that that was never going to happen again.

Yes, she thought, if the Bailey men got wind of her win, they'd have *plenty* to say about it. They'd have it ISA'd and bonded, split over sure-fire shares and packaged off into a pension before you could say 'shopping spree'. And that was just Molly's share of it.

She wouldn't get to keep it all herself, of course. Not that she wanted to anyway. She'd give her family a share: a *small* share each. They didn't need any more money, she was quite sure of that. They were all as comfortable as old armchairs, and Molly knew that her winnings would only lie useless in a bank, accumulating even more wealth to be fought over and never actually enjoyed.

Anyway, what on earth could one person possibly want with so much money? It really was quite obscene. Sure, she'd had years of scraping by to make ends meet, and it would be lovely not to have to worry anymore, but four point two million pounds? She had more than she knew what to do with with the interest alone.

So she'd come to a decision. After sorting out her own finances at The Bloom Room, and putting a little aside for

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each family member as a token of goodwill, she was going to get rid of it.

As she rearranged the rainbow display of carnations, she realised how hard it was going to be leaving the shop, even for a short while. It had become such a huge part of her life that it was hard to imagine being anywhere else. But one just couldn't be a millionaire in a place as small as Kirkby Milthwaite, and she wouldn't be gone for long; just long enough, she thought, a smile lighting her rosy face; long enough to spread a little happiness.

'I hear you're going away?' a voice startled Molly out of her reverie.

She blinked as she saw Mrs Purdie standing in the centre of the shop. How could she know that, Molly wondered, and then she remembered that this was Kirkby Milthwaite and that news travelled faster than a summer swallow.

'Is it true?' Mrs Purdie asked.

'Yes,' Molly said, 'but I won't be away for long.'

'It's a bit sudden, isn't it?'

Molly nodded. 'It is.'

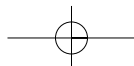
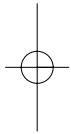
The old lady's eyes crinkled at the edges. 'A young man, is it?' Mrs Purdie gazed at Molly and, for a moment, Molly thought that the old woman knew the truth. She *knew*! But how could she? Molly hadn't told a soul. She was just getting paranoid. Maybe that's what winning a large sum did to a person.

'*Not* a young man, then?' Mrs Purdie tried again, her eyes twinkling.

Molly didn't bother to say that it was because of a whole bunch of men that she was going away. The Bailey men: brother, Marty; father, Magnus; and, at the top of the

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hoarding hierarchy, Granville – ‘Old Bailey’ himself. Each one would swoop down on her millions, like starved vultures, if they got to hear about it, and she wasn’t about to let that happen. Molly was going on a spending spree but it was going to be like no other spending spree before. And, in the process, she was going to change the route of the Baileys once and for all.





Chapter Four

Tom Mackenzie stood outside the George Hotel, wincing as the rain finally found its way down his collar. He looked up at the pearly grey sky. So much for summer, he thought. This was one of the loveliest parts of the country – when the sun was shining. He loved the gently rolling fields with their mile-high hedgerows, and the villages with more ducks than people. He loved the quietness of the land: the way the flint churches seemed to grow out of the ebony soil. Yet it was this very quietness that he found so hateful in his job because, lovely as it all was, rolling fields and candy-coloured cottages didn't exactly provide riveting copy. He'd long grown tired of the absurd annual tractor race, the endless debates over new bypasses, and local shop robberies. They just weren't the kind of news stories to stir his blood and make his fingers race feverishly over his keyboard.

In short, he was bored, and it was beginning to show in his work. Only last week the editor had shouted across the small open-plan office, 'Mackenzie, you great arse! You've got Brenda Myhill married to her own brother here!'

Tom hadn't bothered to apologise. He'd rewritten his copy and gone home. But it couldn't go on like this. He'd often asked himself why he was letting his life leak away when he knew there could be so much more. But where? Where was this life he wanted to lead? One thing was for certain: it wasn't hanging around outside hotels in the hope that a D-list celebrity might show his head and make a comment about his relationship with his much younger co-star in last year's Christmas panto.

So what was it that kept him going? That big story that would make his name? The splash that would propel him into the world of the big players? It wasn't really likely to happen in a backwater of East Anglia. But you never could tell, and that's what kept him sane: the promise of something bigger and better just over the horizon. In the meantime, he was freezing his butt off in the middle of a Suffolk summer.

Sod it, he thought. He was going to do his shopping. Shaking a hand through his dark-blond hair, which had almost turned black in the persistent drizzle, he headed for his car.

There weren't many advantages to living in the middle of the country but farm shops were one of them. Tom loved the fact that the goods for sale were grown only a few yards away and wouldn't have been flown across oceans with the possibility of foreign creepy-crawlies as travelling companions.

As he drove along the country lanes, he felt himself begin to thaw out. It had crossed his mind that he could probably get away with spending his entire career in his car, just driving around the county, making the stories up in his head.

'After a night of torrential rain, Mr Mandrake was shocked to find the river running through his sock drawer.' Or 'For

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centuries, this village has been the home of the annual duck and teaspoon race.' Nobody would notice because they were exactly the kinds of things the local paper was full of each week.

Tom turned off the road into what was really still part of a field but which passed for a car park when it wasn't a bog. He took care to avoid the potholes and kept half an eye on his rear-view mirror, making sure his guitar wasn't getting a rough ride. Perhaps he should have put it on the back seat and secured the safety belt around it rather than leaving it to roll around on the floor.

He parked the car and leant back to inspect it for damage. Being second hand, it already had one or two imperfections, so he really couldn't afford any more. He knew he should be more careful with it yet, because he could never bear to be without it, it was constantly flung from living room to car as he moved around, enabling him to strum whenever opportunity and urge coincided. But now he had potatoes on his mind so, repositioning the pale-bodied instrument to prevent further damage, he headed into the shop.

There was nobody about, which was just how he liked it. For a reporter, he found general, everyday conversation hard. The 'hello, how are you' stuff always seemed stilted and unnecessary. People normally weren't interested anyway, so why bother? It was another of the reasons why he favoured this shop, because the man who ran it liked conversation about as much as Tom did.

His name was Pike. Tom had once asked his name and, whilst pouring the contents of a man-sized bag of potatoes into a display, he'd simply said 'Pike'. Was it his surname or first name? Tom was never quite sure but one thing was

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certain, he was a man of very few words, most of them blasphemous or cripplingly rude. But somewhere, under the fleece body warmer, checked shirt and thermals, which he wore despite the change of the seasons, there was a heart of gold. Tom was almost sure of it.

Either way, Pike was quite a character. Tom had always thought it rather fitting that he should have a cauliflower ear and a nose like a Maris Piper, and he loved the way he moved over the shop floor, his shoulders hunched to within kissing-distance of his ears, and his heavy boots grazing the bare floorboards.

Piling his basket high with fruit and veg, he took it to the till. Pike was on the phone but nodded to let him know he wouldn't be long.

'You jammy bastard!' he was saying. 'I wish my honesty box was as full.'

Tom's ears pricked up. It was the occupational hazard of being a journalist.

'And you've no idea who could've left it?' Pike sucked in a good amount of air very noisily. '*Je-sus!*' There was a pause and a good deal of head-shaking. 'Well send some down this way if you don't know what to do with it. All right. Talk soon.'

'Everything all right?' Tom asked as Pike ran his massive hands through his sparse, sandy hair. He looked slightly drunk on the news he'd just received.

'That jammy bastard, Wilfred, has just had a windfall. Seems he found five thousand pounds in his honesty box this morning.'

'Really?'

'*One hundred* fifty-pound notes. Can you believe it!'

'What on earth does he sell to warrant that much?'

'That's just it!' Pike said, shaking his head in wonder. 'He only had a couple of caulis by the side of the road.'

'Blimey,' Tom agreed. 'Not a bad return.'

'Who the hell would do something like that?' Pike asked, weighing Tom's goods and writing the prices down on a large piece of yellowing paper. The till had obviously broken again or hadn't been repaired since the last time.

Tom shrugged. 'Who indeed?'

'Certainly nobody round here. Bunch of mean gits.'

'Where was it, then?'

'Up in the Eden Valley in Cumbria.'

'Oh.' Tom couldn't disguise his disappointment. Just his luck that the first piece of exciting news to come his way happened to be over three hundred miles away. Nothing newsworthy ever happened within a fifty-mile radius of his newspaper. News was something that happened elsewhere; big stories broke in other reporters' neighbourhoods. And what did that mean for Tom? He pondered for a moment as Pike placed his goods into a carrier bag. If the story didn't find him, maybe he should go in search of the story.

'Pike,' he said, the name sounding strange on his tongue, 'can you ask your mate if he's reported that story to the local newspaper yet?'

