

Fool for Love



Rachael Sommers



Chapter 1

A SEA OF BLACK AND WHITE loomed on the horizon, and Chloe eased her foot off the accelerator, wincing as she failed to skirt around one of the many potholes on the poorly surfaced country road.

In the passenger seat, Naomi jerked away from the window she'd been dozing against for the better part of the last hour. "Are we—"

"—there yet?" Chloe finished the question she'd been asked at least ten times already since they'd driven out of London's city limits. "Nearly. There's a hold up." She nodded toward the herd of animals ambling across the road in front of them and brought her van to a stop a few feet away.

Naomi's face brightened at the sight. "They're so cute!"

"They're bloody dangerous." Chloe had had more than one close encounter with a cow when she was younger.

"But look at those faces." Naomi leaned forward in her seat to get a better look, elbows resting on the dashboard.

The movement disturbed the Labrador sitting at her feet. Bella rested her head on the seat between the two of them, staring at Chloe with big brown eyes.

Chloe reached out to scratch behind her ears. "Not long now," she said. "How are you holding up, gorgeous?"

"Not so bad, thanks," Naomi said, and Chloe smacked her on the side of the arm. "Ow! Is that any way to treat the best friend doing you a massive favour?"

"Please, it didn't hurt."

"It did. Right in my feelings," Naomi said, solemn.

Chloe rolled her eyes.

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“How long does it take a herd of cows to cross a road?”

Chloe chuckled. “Has the novelty worn off already?”

“We’ve been driving for hours, Chloe.” Patience had never been one of Naomi’s strong suits. “I need to pee.”

“I told you to go when we stopped at the service station.”

“I didn’t need it then.”

“Well, there’s a bush over there”—Chloe pointed out the window—“if you’re desperate.” Chloe grinned as Naomi’s nose wrinkled. “It’s not like there’s anyone around.”

“Uh, yes, there is. There’s someone right there.”

She was right. A woman on horseback rode behind the stragglers of the herd. Her jeans were tucked into red wellies, caked in mud, and blonde hair curled around the collar of her black body warmer.

She passed in front of the van, and Chloe sucked in a breath. It had been years—eighteen, to be precise. Her face was older, and there were now laugh lines around the corners of her mouth and her eyes, but she was instantly recognisable.

Amy Edwards.

Chloe had never dreamed she’d lay eyes on her again.

Amy turned, raising a hand as if to thank them for waiting, and Chloe ducked in her seat so she was half-hidden by the wheel.

“Um, what the fuck are you doing?” Naomi looked at her like she’d grown a second head.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Naomi’s eyebrows twitched. “It sure doesn’t look like nothing.”

“I had an itch.” She scratched the outside of her knee, trying to peer through the windscreen to see if Amy had gone without revealing too much of herself. Thankfully, she had passed into the other field.

“Yeah, right.” Naomi’s eyes bored into the side of her head as Chloe straightened in her seat and tapped on the accelerator. “Do you know her or something?”

Chloe didn’t answer at first. Her throat felt tight, emotion welling in her chest, and she gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles flashed white. What was Amy still doing here? She’d sworn once she was out of Corthwaite she’d never come back—but Chloe had, too, and yet, here she

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was, driving down the single road that wound through the village centre, swallowing against the sudden rush of memories that assaulted her.

“Chloe?”

“Yeah. That’s Amy.”

“Amy?” Out of the corner of her eye, Chloe watched Naomi’s nose wrinkle. “Why do I know the name? Wait.” A hand gripped Chloe’s elbow, and Chloe kept her gaze trained on the road. “*The Amy?* The one you were still pining over when we first met? The one who broke your heart?”

That’s putting it lightly, Chloe thought, clenching her teeth. As far as first loves went, traumatic didn’t begin to cover it.

“Did you know she was still going to be around?”

“No.” If Chloe had, she might have hesitated to come back—or would have mentally prepared herself for the possibility of seeing her again, at least.

“You okay?”

Chloe blew out a long breath. “Yeah.” It didn’t change anything, after all. If Chloe had it her way, she wouldn’t be seeing much of Amy—or any of the rest of the village—at all. Get in and get out, as fast as physically possible. That was the plan, and Chloe was determined to stick to it.

The village looked the same. A handful of buildings dotted along the main road. The florist where her mum had worked sat beside the newsagents, the only place for four miles if you needed a pint of milk. The hairdresser opposite was new, replacing the butcher, and the King’s Head still stood proud on the corner, sign swinging in the wind.

They passed the church, and Chloe turned off the main road and onto a dirt track up a steep hill. In the distance, fields of green dotted with sheep and cows stretched across the horizon, the mountains beyond a dusty brown. In a few months they’d be dotted with snow, the lake winding around the foot of them would ice over, and the view would look like a stock photo for a wintry snow globe.

“Wow.” Naomi said, wide eyes taking in the sight. “This is gorgeous.”

Despite her misgivings about returning home, Chloe had to agree. As much as she loved the London skyline, it had nothing on a view like this.

The track ended in a gravel driveway, and Chloe’s childhood home rose to meet them. It had been nearly three years since it had been occupied, and it showed—the drive was overrun by weeds and the ivy winding up the

front wall of the house grew wild, covering the arched windows in places. Through the broken wooden fence leading to the back garden, Chloe spotted grass so high it could probably swallow all five feet eight inches of her.

She dreaded to think what the inside looked like.

Chloe pulled the car to a stop, and Naomi let out a low whistle. “Jesus Christ, Chloe, I knew your family was loaded, but this? This place is massive. Did you...did you have servants?”

A laugh bubbled in Chloe’s throat. “No. We had a housekeeper when I was younger. A groundskeeper at one point, too. He’d have a heart attack if he knew I’d let it get this bad.”

“Well, it looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you here, Chlo. You sure you’re up for this?”

“You know I like a challenge.”

* * *

Dust puffed from the hall carpet as Chloe stepped over the threshold, tickling the back of her throat, and she scrunched her nose, fighting back a sneeze.

“Well, I know what our first order of business will be,” Naomi said, following her inside and running a finger along the wooden banister of the stairs. She showed Chloe her grey finger. “Scrubbing this place from top to bottom.”

“Yup. Aren’t you glad you came with me?”

“Oh, delighted.” Naomi’s voice dripped with sarcasm, but she was smiling, and Chloe hip bumped her as she stepped past to push open the door of the living room. Bella followed along behind.

Small and cosy, it hadn’t changed much since Chloe’s last visit three years ago, when she’d come to bring her father to a retirement home closer to London. At the time, she’d had the foresight to cover the two leather couches—and much of the other furniture in the house—with large dustsheets, and she was glad for it now.

She reached for the light switch on the wall, breathing out a sigh of relief when the bulb overhead flickered to life. She’d called the electricity company three weeks ago requesting that they turn the supply to the house

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back on, and she was thankful she wouldn't have to call again to chase them up.

Backing out of the room, she followed the sound of clanging cupboard doors into the kitchen, where she found Naomi standing on her tiptoes.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Chlo, but I think your dad might have been a hoarder."

Chloe groaned at the sight of stacks upon stacks of kitchen utensils and crockery, far more than one man would have ever possibly needed to use. "It's going to take six months to clear everything out."

"Nah." Naomi gave her a comforting pat on the back. "You've got this."

Chloe wasn't so sure, but she hadn't been lying earlier—she *did* love a challenge.

And her first?

Make it so every inhale didn't make her want to cough up a lung.

She locked Bella in the kitchen with some toys to keep her occupied, knowing she'd cower away from the vacuum cleaner anyway. Naomi disappeared upstairs with bleach, a sponge, and some rubber gloves to tackle the bathrooms, and Chloe got to work on reducing the dust level.

Once the ground floor was habitable, she freed Bella and began on the stairs. She started with the picture frames on the wall, gently wiping away the thick layer of grime covering the glass and smiling at the scenes pictured beneath.

The first was her parents on their wedding day, staring at one another like they'd hung the moon and stars in the sky, bathed in the glow of the setting sun. Chloe had grown up wanting to find someone who looked at her like that, who could make her smile so wide it could split her cheeks, but at thirty-six she was still waiting for her perfect woman.

Next was a photograph of the day Chloe was born. She was obscured by blankets but her parents were looking at her like she was their whole world. Then, Chloe and her mother—nothing monumental, Chloe being pushed on a swing, but she knew it was one of the last photos her dad had taken before her mother had turned skinny and pale, succumbing to the disease festering inside her.

Naomi appeared at the top of the staircase as Chloe cleaned the last photo—Chloe at her graduation ceremony in her cap and gown, her dad's arm around her shoulders, a beaming smile on his face.

Chloe ran her fingertip along the face she hadn't seen in half a year, tears stinging at the back of her eyes.

"You okay?" Naomi asked, hand pressing against the small of her back.

"Yeah. Sometimes I forget he's gone, you know?"

"I know." Naomi pulled her into a one-armed hug. "Professional-looking photo, isn't it?"

Chloe cracked a smile—Naomi, the "photographer" in question, always knew exactly what to say to cheer her up. "It's all right."

"Rude."

* * *

A plate clattered out of Amy's hands and into the sink, splashing the front of her T-shirt with soapy water.

Gabi, on drying duty, turned to her with a frown. "You okay, Amy? You look like you've seen a ghost."

The ghost of my past, maybe. "I've lived here for well over half my life. I think if it was haunted, I'd know about it." She fished the plate out of the water and scrubbed it clean, trying not to focus on the lights in the distance—lights she hadn't seen on for a long time.

"I don't know," Gabi said, tilting her head to one side as Amy handed her the plate. "Ghosts could be sneaky. Pop up when you least expect them."

"I'm not so sure." With the last of the dishes done, Amy dried her hands on the towel Gabi offered her.

"So?" Gabi asked, turning toward Amy and resting her hip against the counter. "You gonna tell me what's the matter?"

Knowing that if she didn't, Gabi would weasel it out of her anyway, Amy sighed and jerked her head toward the house on the horizon, its bright windows stark against the dark sky of the countryside. "Looks like there's someone in the Roberts house. It took me by surprise, is all."

"Oh yeah." Gabi squinted to see through the kitchen window. "Well, didn't he pass away a few months ago?"

Amy nodded, remembering the sad announcement in the local newspaper. Chris Roberts had kept to himself, for the most part, after his daughter had fled the nest, but Amy had fond memories of the man.

"Maybe they're selling the house. Or maybe someone's moving in. Didn't he have a daughter?"

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“Uh, yeah he did. But there’s no way she’d move back here.”

“Why?”

“She just wouldn’t.” Amy was sure. Why would Chloe want to come back to a town that had treated her so poorly? Amy knew she’d played her part in it and felt a twinge of guilt settling in her gut like it did when she glanced at the empty Roberts house, sometimes.

“You said that about this place once, too.”

“Yeah, before my idiotic brother chopped off half his hand.”

Danny strolled into the kitchen at that moment with a squirming three-year-old balanced on his hip. Flipping her off with his good hand behind his son’s head, he said, “I think Sam wants his Tía Amy to bathe him tonight.”

“Is that right?” Amy asked, peering into a pair of wide green eyes. When Sam nodded, she scooped him out of her brother’s arms. “Come on, trouble.”

She traipsed up the stairs, glad for her strenuous day job, because the kid was getting *heavy*.

The bathroom door opened, and Adam came barrelling out of it and collided with her knees. “Watch it, kiddo.”

“Sorry, Tía Amy.” He looked at her with a cheeky grin he knew she found hard to resist.

“You in a hurry to get to bed or something?”

“Abuela said if I was good, I could read comics before bed!”

“Did she now?” Amy smiled as her mum slipped through the bathroom door at a much more reasonable pace than her grandson. “And were you good?”

“I’m always good!”

“I’m not so sure about that.” She ruffled his damp hair with her free hand.

“I was, wasn’t I, Abuela?”

“You were,” Leanne said, eyes fond as she gazed at him. Adam’s grin showed off the gap where he’d lost his front tooth a few days ago.

“Go on.” Amy stepped aside to let him pass, and he hurtled down the hallway to the bedroom he and Sam shared. Her old room, in fact, but she’d been more than happy to give it up for the privacy of the barn conversion she’d had done when she’d moved back to Corthwaite.

She and Danny had managed eighteen years sharing a roof—any more would be pushing it.

“I left the water in for you. It’s still hot.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Amy stepped into the bathroom and set Sam on the white tiles. The bath was nearly overflowing with bubbles—which Amy suspected had little to do with her mum and everything to do with Adam—and Sam giggled when she scooped some out and put them on her nose.

“You need help with those buttons, kiddo?” she asked, when he struggled with the fastening of his jeans. She waited for him to step toward her before plucking it free, and only tugged his dinosaur shirt over his head when he stuck his hands in the air.

Amy’s knees protested when she settled beside the bath to wash his hair. God, she was getting old. She thought of her mum’s arthritis, worsening every year, and knew a similar fate awaited her. Such was the life of a farmer, she supposed, carefully tilting Sam’s head back when she washed the shampoo out of his hair, knowing he hated getting water in his eyes and wanting to avoid a meltdown at all costs.

He hated the hairdryer, too, so she gently dried his mop of brown curls with a towel once he was out; Sam’s gaze remained focused on the water swirling down the drain. His favourite *Paw Patrol* pyjamas sat on the counter, and once he was in them, she let him take her hand and pull her to his bedroom.

Adam sat engrossed in a comic book, and her mum was curled in the armchair situated between the two single beds.

“Do you want me to read your bedtime story, or Abuela?” Amy asked, after Sam had climbed into bed and settled beneath the covers. A tiny hand pointed toward her mum, so Amy leant over to kiss the top of his head. “All right, I’ll see you tomorrow, chiquito.” She turned to Adam, smiling when he tore himself away from the adventures of Superman to throw his arms around her neck. “Buenas noches, Adam. Don’t stay up too late.”

“Buenas noches.” Despite Gabi teaching the both of them her first language, Adam had the accent perfect, while Amy...well. She couldn’t seem to lose her Cumbrian accent no matter how hard she tried. Gabi assured her it was the thought that counted.

Downstairs, the kitchen was dark, but the TV was playing in the living room, where Danny and Gabi sat together on the couch.

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“Night, guys.”

“You can join us if you want,” Gabi said, turning toward her.

“Nah, it’s okay.” They didn’t get enough time alone together as it was—Amy wasn’t about to intrude.

She slipped out the front door, and the unmistakable smell of cows and manure hit her nostrils. Above, the sky was unusually clear, the moon and stars illuminating the stone path to her home.

In the distance, the Roberts house caught her attention once more. Who was in there, and why? And did it have anything to do with the unfamiliar white van she’d seen earlier that day with the driver so desperate not to be seen?

* * *

Chloe didn’t sleep particularly well her first night home.

She was used to a king-sized bed with a memory foam mattress, but her old bed had a lumpy mattress with broken springs that creaked every time she rolled over. And the silence was *deafening*. Chloe didn’t have the luxury of affording a flat in London’s bustling city centre, but even on the outskirts of Twickenham, nights were never quiet. Loud, drunken voices as people spilled out of bars and pubs usually lulled her to sleep, along with the screech of car tyres or the roaring of motorbike engines, but here?

Nothing but the occasional hoot of an owl.

She gave up on sleep at 5 a.m. and reached blindly for the pair of glasses she’d left on the bedside table last night, not wanting to chance putting her contact lenses in. She’d probably poke herself in the eye. Bella, stretched out across the floor at the foot of the bed, snored away, oblivious to her owner’s restlessness.

Weak rays from the rising sun filtered through the thin curtains, glinting off the dusty spines lining the large bookcase leaning against one of the walls of her old room. Deciding reading was as good a way as any to pass the time, she reached for an old favourite and sat on the large wooden windowsill in her bedroom like she’d used to do when she was a kid.

“You’ll strain your eyes, reading like that,” her dad’s voice echoed in her head, and she remembered the wry shake of his head when he’d catch her, out of bed and by the window, wrapped in a blanket, when she was supposed to be sleeping.

Of course, he'd been right. She'd been presented with her first pair of glasses at twelve years old, and her eyesight had been worsening every year since.

A door opened, and Chloe glanced at her watch. Half six, and Naomi was awake and moving? She mustn't have slept well either.

Sure enough, an inhuman grumble greeted her when she found Naomi in the kitchen, bleary-eyed, hair still held in the wrap she'd gone to sleep in, tapping her nails impatiently on the counter as she waited for Chloe's beloved Nespresso coffee machine to brew.

"Good morning to you, too," Chloe said, and Naomi glared.

"How do you sound so awake?"

"Because I have been awake for the last"—she glanced at her watch—"two hours."

"It's too fucking quiet here. Can't cope with it."

"I know. You don't have to stay, you know. You could go back to the city."

"And trust you here alone? I don't think so."

"I'd be fine. It's only a couple weeks." She wasn't ungrateful for Naomi's presence—far from it—but she knew spending two rare weeks away from the office was asking for a lot. "And I'll be alone here soon, anyway. On the weekends, at least."

"Yeah, but at least this way I can help you get a head start. I don't mind, Chlo, honestly."

"Can I have that in writing so in about twelve hours' time when you're grumpy and cursing me I have evidence you agreed to do this of your own volition?"

"It's too early for you and your long words." Naomi sighed happily when the coffee machine beeped. She filled two mugs and pushed one along the counter toward Chloe. "What's the plan for today?"

"First order of business is probably going to be to get more milk," Chloe said, rattling the half-empty carton she'd retrieved from the fridge. "Then I think we should get started with sorting through everything." She'd been hoping that job wouldn't take long, but based on what she'd seen so far, she wasn't optimistic. "Fill the skip I ordered."

"I think you should have ordered six."

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“Probably.” Chloe sighed, peering into a cupboard overflowing with junk. “I don’t know where half this stuff came from.”

“I’m going to have a shower before we do anything,” Naomi decided, draining the last of her coffee. “We do have hot water, right?”

“I guess you’re about to find out.”

Chapter 2

AMY SWUNG OPEN THE DOOR to the village shop with her hip, her hands full with a crate of milk and eggs.

“What’s this?” She heard a woman say from one of the tiny aisles. The Cockney accent had her doing a double take—tourists in Corthwaite weren’t unheard of, but they were rare. It wasn’t like the village had much to offer compared to the bigger towns nearby.

“What’s what?” Another voice asked, and as Amy approached the counter, she caught a glimpse of one of the speakers, a pretty, black woman lifting a packet from one of the shelves.

“Kendal mint cake,” she said, waving the packet in front of her. “It sounds interesting.”

“It’s basically pure sugar.”

“Sold.”

“Really, Naomi? The last thing I need is you on a sugar high. Or worse, a sugar crash.” The second woman rounded the corner, and Amy nearly dropped the crate.

She’d dyed her hair dark, cut it short so it framed her face, and there was a scar through one eyebrow that hadn’t been there last time they’d been face-to-face, but Amy would recognise that wide, crooked smile anywhere.

Chloe Roberts, in the flesh.

The years had been kind to her. She’d grown into limbs once awkward and gangly, her body now lean as she reached over and plucked the mint cake from Naomi’s hands.

“I’m vetoing this.”

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“Need I remind you that neither of us got much sleep last night?” Naomi said, and Amy hastily turned away. She forced a smile as she hefted the crate onto the counter, trying to drown out the conversation happening behind her. “Sugar might be exactly what we need.”

“Hey, Amy.” Alex climbed to his feet—of the three people who worked in the shop, he was by the far the youngest, and always the happiest to see her. “How—?”

Something crashed to the ground behind her, and Amy turned to see Chloe on her knees, frantically trying to gather the bottles of water she’d knocked off the shelves.

“I’m sorry,” she said, cheeks flaming red, arms full of so many bottles it was a wonder she didn’t drop them all again.

“It’s all right.” Alex looked amused as he watched Chloe restock the shelf.

Naomi was staring at Amy, eyes narrowed, and Amy’s stomach dropped. *I know what you’ve done*, her expression seemed to say. Judgement seeped into Amy’s skin, and she knew she deserved it.

“I need to go,” Chloe muttered, shoving the carton of milk she was holding—not one of her own, Amy noted—into Naomi’s hands before charging for the exit.

Amy didn’t blame her.

“How much for this?” Naomi asked, gaze flicking over to Alex. “Oh, and this.” She paused to grab the packet of mint cake Chloe had taken off her.

“Three pounds thirty.”

Naomi dug a hand into her pocket, and Amy used the moment of distraction to take her in. The Doc Martens on her feet looked barely worn, her long red coat seemed expensive, and as she approached Alex to hand over her cash, Amy felt inelegant beside her in her mud-spattered jeans and worn trainers. Naomi and Chloe had spoken with an easy familiarity, the sleepless night comment making Amy wonder if they were together, but she noted the lack of wedding ring on Naomi’s left hand as she accepted her change.

“Thanks.”

She left with one last contemptuous look thrown Amy’s way, and Amy released a long breath once she’d gone.

“All right?” Alex asked, eyebrows raised, and Amy gave a jerky nod.

So, her suspicions had been right. Chloe *was* back. Was it for good? Or just for now? And was Amy going to keep bumping into her, sending her hiding behind her steering wheel or hurrying out of doors?

She hoped for both their sakes the answer was no, but something told her she didn't have that kind of luck.

* * *

“Christ, Chloe, will you slow down?” Naomi caught her as she breezed past the King's Head, hand catching her elbow. “You're not in London anymore.”

“Sorry.” She slowed, tugging gently on Bella's lead to bring her to heel. “I know you wanted to have a look around, but I had to get out of there.”

“I know. But she's not following you.”

Chloe refrained from looking over her shoulder to check. “Right. You still want a tour?”

“Nah, it's okay. I think I've got everything. Shop; vets; florist; pub.” Naomi pointed to each of the buildings behind them in turn before pointing in front of them. “Church.”

“Do you mind if we cut through here?” Chloe asked, glancing at the gate leading to the attached graveyard. “I want to check something.”

“Sure.” Naomi followed as Chloe traced a once-familiar path she hadn't walked in a long, long time. She paused before a headstone engraved with the words, *Annie Roberts. Beloved wife, mother and friend*, and was surprised to find a fresh bouquet of flowers. She'd expected it to be overgrown, and was touched to find it in near-perfect condition.

“Your mum?” Naomi asked quietly.

“Yeah. She was cremated, but my dad wanted to have somewhere we could visit to remember her. I was thinking about seeing if I could get one put in beside it for my dad.”

“He'd like that.”

Chloe stood there for a few minutes, thinking of the brief flashes of memories she had of her mother. She'd been too young to remember much, but her father had kept her alive with his stories, and Chloe could still recall the shape of her smile, the comfort of her arms when Chloe scraped her knee.

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“Let’s get back,” she said, turning away from the headstone and linking her arm through Naomi’s. The hill leading to the house was steeper than she remembered, and both of them were out of breath by the time they reached the top.

“Where do you want me?” Naomi asked, stepping inside and kicking off her shoes.

Chloe pursed her lips. “Kitchen? Unless you want to tackle under here.” She pulled open the door to the cupboard under the stairs, revealing stacks upon stacks of boxes—all of which needed removing before the plumber came on Tuesday to see if Chloe could stick a downstairs toilet in there.

“And deprive you of discovering what treasures your father left for you? I could never.”

Naomi disappeared into the kitchen, and the sound of rattling crockery filled Chloe’s ears as she reached for her first box.

“Treasures my ass,” she muttered when she found dozens of photo albums within.

In fact, the same could be said for the majority of the boxes—much to Naomi’s delight when she appeared to ask Chloe a question sometime later.

“Oh my God, are you in these?” she asked, reaching for one of the albums and flicking through the pages before Chloe could stop her. “You are!” She flipped it around so Chloe could see herself grinning at the camera, missing three of her front teeth. “You were adorable.”

She leafed through some more pages, smile widening with every one. Chloe was going to have to make sure she didn’t pocket any of them to take back home to show their friends.

“What is this hair?”

“The height of fashion in the late eighties, clearly.” She couldn’t have been older than four or five in the picture. Her dad’s poor attempt at pigtails were lopsided.

She reached for an album of her own, giving in to the distraction. In this one, she was older, around twelve or thirteen. She’d been cast as the lead in the school play, and there were at least twenty photos of the whole sorry production; she remembered her dad sitting in the front row, bursting with pride, smile catching in the stage lights whenever Chloe glanced into the audience.

“Looks like you could’ve had a career on the stage,” Naomi said, holding a photo of her in another play, this time the Christmas nativity. “Were you Joseph?”

“Yup.” She remembered her reception teacher, Miss Wolfe, doodling a moustache on her upper lip in eyeliner. “We had one boy in our class that year, and he refused to do it.”

“And naturally, you stepped up. Hoping you’d get to kiss a girl?” Naomi asked, eyebrows wiggling.

Chloe snorted. “I think that would’ve scandalised the village.”

“Who was your Mary?”

Chloe didn’t have to glance at the photo. “Amy.”

“Ah. You, uh, you guys were close, huh?”

Chloe knew Amy was in a lot of the photos. They’d been joined at the hip from the ages of four to seventeen, one never far from the other, and she was willing to bet at least one of these albums was filled with pictures Amy had taken with the camera Chloe’s dad had bought her one Christmas.

“Inseparable,” Chloe said, eyes on a picture of her and Amy on horseback in one of the nearby fields. There were more: her and Amy in the farmhouse kitchen, in the treehouse in their back garden, playing Monopoly on Chloe’s dining room table. Amy’s mum’s arm around Chloe’s shoulder, Amy’s dad teaching her how to drive a tractor. “Her family looked after me. I lost my mum, and dad was away on business a lot, so I was always over there. Or she was over here.”

“No wonder it’s hard being back.”

“Yeah.” Chloe set the album back in the box—getting lost down memory lane wasn’t going to empty out the cupboard, and she was running on a tight schedule. “But at least it’s not for long.”

* * *

Chloe hummed along to the radio as her putty knife scraped along the wall, removing the last stubborn scraps of paper clinging to it.

She’d never liked the decoration in the living room, the white wallpaper covered in a mishmash of brightly coloured garish flowers clashing with the sickly green paint on the ceiling. It was *supposed* to be an ode to her mother’s floristry, but to Chloe, it had always felt too...busy.

Hopefully her dad would forgive her for pulling it down.

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She knew all the decoration in the house had been done by the two of them when they'd moved in, knew her dad hadn't changed much after her mum died. Keeping the house the way it had been when they'd lived there together, happy, had been part of his coping mechanism after she was gone.

But unfortunately, the styles fashionable in the nineteen-seventies when they'd moved in wouldn't get her a good price for the place. Especially considering her parents' rather questionable taste in décor.

"Um, Chloe?" She turned to find Naomi, wallpaper steamer in hand, looking out the window with a frown. "There is a woman on a horse heading this way."

Chloe moved to stand beside her and watched a magnificent brown shire horse come to a stop beside her van in the drive. Pressing her face closer to the glass, she recognised the woman sitting astride the animal. "It's Amy's mum."

"Want me to go chase her off?" Naomi asked as Leanne dismounted. "Say you've gone out?"

"No, it's okay." She slipped from the room, skirting carefully around the plumber, whose legs were sticking out from the cupboard beneath the stairs, and going out the front door. She met Leanne halfway up the path—where she was immediately enveloped in a warm hug.

"Chloe, it's really you." Leanne sounded like she was fighting back tears, and she smelled like leather and horses and *childhood*. Chloe hugged her back tightly. "Let me look at you." She pulled back and cupped Chloe's cheeks in her hands. "You're too skinny," she said, sounding so much like Naomi's mum that Chloe huffed out a laugh. "But you look well. I'm so sorry about your father. He was a good man."

"Thank you."

"Oh, it's lovely to see you. Are you back for good?"

"Uh, no. I'm here to do some renovations, sell the place on. I'd invite you to come in and have a look, but..." She glanced at the horse resting his head on Leanne's shoulder.

"Yes, I suppose he wouldn't fit through the door. This is Thor."

"He's gorgeous." Chloe held out a hand, letting Thor sniff her before giving his head a gentle stroke.

"Do you still ride?"

"I haven't for years."

“Well, we still have horses. You’re welcome to come over any time. It would be lovely to catch up, find out what you’ve been doing all these years. Or better yet!” Her eyes lit up, and Chloe swallowed. “Come over for dinner.”

“Oh, I, uh...” She trailed off, desperately trying to think of a polite way to say *that is literally my idea of hell on earth, no thank you*.

“Your...friend? Girlfriend? Wife?” Leanne’s gaze flitted over to the window, and Chloe turned to see the curtain falling back into place. “Is welcome to come, too.”

“We wouldn’t want to intrude...”

“Nonsense, we’d love to have you.”

Who’s we? Because it sure as shit isn’t Amy or Danny, if he’s still around.

“I—”

“We eat at six,” Leanne said, seemingly deciding Chloe had accepted the offer. She turned back to Thor and put a foot in the stirrup. “Come over tonight. You don’t have any dietary restrictions, do you?”

“I...no, but—”

“Excellent.” She climbed onto Thor’s back with more grace than a woman of her age should possess. “I’ll see you both later.” With a click of her tongue, they were off, striding back down the lane and leaving Chloe staring dumbly after them.

What the hell just happened?

“What was that all about?” Naomi asked, when Chloe returned to the living room, feeling as though she was in a waking nightmare. “Chloe? You all right?” Her hands settled on Chloe’s shoulders and steered her toward the couch they’d shifted to the centre of the room; the dust sheet crinkled as she sat. “You don’t look so good.”

“She invited us over for dinner.”

“You said no, right?”

“She wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Chloe dropped her head into her hands, and Naomi squeezed her shoulder.

“Hey, it’s okay.” She sat beside Chloe, wrapping an arm around her back. “We don’t have to go. We can turn off the lights and hide the van in the garage and pretend we’re not here. Or we can turn around and go back home.”

Fool for Love

“I can’t do that.” Chloe was many things, but a coward wasn’t one of them. Eighteen years ago she’d run headlong away from her problems, and she wasn’t about to do the same again. “No, we should go. How bad can it be?”

“I dunno. But whatever happens, you’re not alone. I got you, okay?”

Chloe shifted to pull Naomi into a hug, throwing her arms around her neck. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Don’t go soft on me, now,” Naomi said, squeezing. “You know I don’t know how to deal with crying women.”

Chloe laughed. “I’ll try my best,” she promised, leaning back. “Okay, these walls aren’t going to strip themselves.” She nudged Naomi in the side. “Let’s get back to it.”

* * *

“Where was my invite?” Amy asked, when her mum strode into the stable block leading Thor behind her.

“You wouldn’t have wanted to come if I told you where I was going.”

“And where was that?”

“The Roberts house. I went to see Chloe.”

Amy froze, brush hovering a few inches above Regina’s back, watching her mum untack Thor with easy efficiency. “You went where?”

“I invited her over for dinner tonight,” Leanne continued, and Amy’s stomach dropped.

“You did *what*?”

“Have you gone deaf, dear?” She said it pleasantly enough, but her gaze was shrewd, calculating, and Amy took a calming breath. “I thought it would be nice. It’s been so long since we were all together.”

“Have you forgotten there’s a reason for that?” Amy couldn’t believe Chloe would accept such an invitation, but her mother could be persuasive when she wanted to be. Had probably strong-armed the poor woman into saying yes.

“Of course I haven’t.”

Amy had never told her the full story—had barely told her any of the story—but she’d always suspected her mum knew more than she let on, and had blamed her for the loss of the girl she’d considered one of her own. Amy’s long stint away at university and travelling had gone a long

way to repairing their relationship, but Chloe's re-appearance seemed to be opening more than one old wound.

"But perhaps it's time to make amends."

"Make amends?" Amy echoed. "After eighteen years?"

"Why not? In any case, she's coming, and I expect you to be there, too. It's a family dinner."

"And have you told Gabi and Danny?" She could imagine the sour look on Danny's face when he heard the news. He'd never been Chloe's biggest fan, and after the horrid things he'd said to her, Chloe wasn't his, either.

"Not yet, but I will, and they'll be there too. As will the woman Chloe's with."

"Great." The sarcasm earned her a glare, but Amy didn't care. Her mum let her be, taking Thor to the field and leaving Amy and Regina alone. Sensing her agitation, Regina stamped one of her feet, and Amy gave her a scratch. "Why are you always so grumpy?"

A snort was her answer.

Amy tacked her up, needing the endorphin rush of racing over the fields now more than ever. Riding had always been her escape, her safe space, and she breathed in a lungful of fresh air as she urged Regina toward one of the many dirt tracks winding through the farmland.

Above, the sky was dark grey, rainclouds threatening to drench them, but Amy didn't mind. Wind whipped through her hair as they progressed into a brisk trot, and Regina soon lengthened her stride, raring to go faster. Though her passport said *Irish Sports Horse*, she had the temperament of a thoroughbred, and Amy didn't mind it in the slightest.

But the rush of wind through her hair, cooling her cheeks and sending her eyes streaming, wasn't enough to ward off her churning thoughts. Thanks to the hill it sat upon, Chloe's damn house was visible no matter where she rode, looming on the horizon, and in Amy's mind.

Why had she had to come back? Not that it was fair to blame Chloe. Chloe wasn't to blame for any of it, but God, Amy was—and she owed her one hell of an apology, but didn't have the slightest idea where to start.

Sorry for not standing up for you? Sorry for distancing myself from you when the name calling started? Sorry for making out with you behind closed doors and pretending it never meant anything? Sorry for breaking your heart? For fucking it all up?

Fool for Love

She'd known at the time what she was doing was wrong, but looking back on it now...it was reprehensible.

How Chloe could stand to be in the same room as her, Amy didn't know. She didn't think *she'd* be able to, were their positions reversed.

And yet in a few short hours, they were going to be.

Amy sighed, shortened her reins, and turned Regina in a wide circle, pointing her toward home. They were both out of breath, sweat beading on Amy's brow, and she knew there would be marks beneath Regina's saddlecloth, but she still had plenty of energy as she cantered back the way they'd come, ears pricked forward in an unusual show of happiness.

Maybe tonight wouldn't be so awful, Amy thought, slowing Regina to a walk as the farmhouse came into view. Maybe if she could manage to apologise, it would be an opportunity for them to finally put the past behind them and start anew.

But only if Chloe wanted that, too.

Amy wasn't going to force it.

She owed her that much, at least.

Chapter 3

AT HALF PAST FIVE, THE heavens opened, rain sluicing against the windows, and Chloe thought it was apt, considering her stomach had been churning since that morning, mood blackening by the hour.

On the plus side, she'd thrown herself into her work with reckless abandon, and all the downstairs walls were bereft of paper. It left the place looking bleak—not helped by the weather—but she could now assess the walls underneath for damage. As she'd suspected, more than one needed re-plastering, chunks of it missing in places and leaving the underlying brick exposed.

But that would have to be a job for another day. Time was charging onward, each passing minute bringing her closer to her doom.

“There’s still time to back out,” Naomi said, sticking her head into Chloe’s room while she was getting ready. “If you want to.”

A tempting offer, to be sure, but Chloe had pulled on her nicest pair of black skinny jeans, and had therefore committed to leaving the house. “No, it’s okay. I’ve got this.”

Naomi didn’t look convinced but she didn’t argue as she followed Chloe downstairs.

Bella stood at the door waiting for them, turning on her best puppy dog eyes when Chloe reached for her boots.

“We won’t be long,” she promised, kissing the top of Bella’s head.

It took five minutes to walk between their houses, but Chloe elected to drive. Rain bounced on the roof of her van as she and Naomi climbed inside. The drive was almost as long, thanks to the lack of a direct road, but Chloe didn’t mind.

Fool for Love

She could use the time to build herself up.

“We should have a safe word,” Naomi said as they walked the path to the farmhouse door. “If you’re ever uncomfortable, say...cucumber, and I’ll think of an excuse to leave.”

“Cucumber?” Chloe asked, lips twitching despite the nausea swirling in her gut. “Seriously?”

“What’s wrong with ‘cucumber’?”

“How am I supposed to slip that into casual conversation?”

“You’re a smart woman. You’ll figure it out.”

“I—”

The door opened, and Chloe’s words died in the back of her throat as they were bathed in light from the hallway.

“I thought I heard voices,” Leanne said, looking delighted to see them. “Come in, come in.”

She ushered them over the threshold, and Chloe felt like she was stepping back in time. Few changes had occurred in the years since her last visit: the same wooden floors, the cream wallpaper in the hallway unchanged, the large dresser beside the door filled with mismatched trophies, picture frames scattered over the walls.

It still felt like coming home, and Chloe’s throat was tight as she shrugged out of her jacket.

“We haven’t been introduced,” Leanne was saying to Naomi, oblivious to Chloe’s inner turmoil. “I’m Leanne.”

“Naomi.” She offered a hand for Leanne to shake, widening her eyes at Chloe as she was pulled into a hug instead.

“So, you two are...?” Leanne trailed off once Naomi had been released, looking between her and Chloe with her eyebrows raised.

“Friends,” Chloe said, and Leanne nodded to herself.

“Food is nearly ready.” She retreated down the hall, toward the admittedly fantastic smell of cooking, and Chloe and Naomi followed behind.

“Remember,” Naomi said, stepping close and keeping her voice low, hand reaching for Chloe’s and squeezing. “‘Cucumber’ is all you have to say if you want me to put my spectacular acting skills to use.”

“Here we are,” Leanne said, ushering them inside the largest room in the farmhouse, which Chloe found busier than expected.

Three seats at the round table were occupied: one by Danny—same shaggy blond hair, nose still crooked from the fight he'd gotten into at fifteen with one of the boys at school, eyes as cold as Chloe remembered when they gave her a once-over—and the others by two young boys with the same dark hair. The older of the two was playing cards with Danny, nudging him impatiently to continue the game. The younger one was colouring on a sheet of paper, oversized headphones clamped over his ears.

A slender brunette stood at the counter, a kind smile on her face, but Chloe's gaze skittered away when her eyes landed on Amy, standing beside her, half-empty bottle of beer held in one hand.

Breathe, Chloe reminded herself sternly. *You just have to survive one dinner.*

"This is Gabi," Leanne said, taking it upon herself to do the introductions when no one else spoke up, indicating the brunette with a wave of her hand. "Danny's wife."

"Nice to meet you," Chloe said, fully aware the words sounded hollow—there was nothing nice about this. She felt Gabi's eyes appraising her, and wondered what, if anything, she'd been told.

"Snap!" the older boy cried, hand lying flat over the pile of cards on the table, his eyes bright.

"That's Adam," Leanne said, "and his brother Sam."

Sam didn't look away from his colouring, and Chloe didn't blame him. She wished she could bury her head in a book and not take part in this charade.

"And this is Chloe's friend, Naomi," Leanne finished. "Please, take a seat."

Chloe glanced at the table, weighing up the best place to sit. She settled on the chair beside Adam. Naomi sat next to her, the chairs crammed so close together their shoulders brushed.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" Gabi asked, her words lightly accented. "We have wine, beer, soda."

"Water for me, please," Chloe said. Mixing alcohol and stress with the dark, winding road home probably wasn't a good idea.

"I'll take a beer."

"I hope you're both okay with cottage pie," Leanne said, pulling a dish out of the oven. "Chloe, I know it used to be your favourite."

Fool for Love

In truth, most of Amy's mum's cooking had been her favourite. Chloe had inherited her limited skills in the kitchen from her dad, who, while he'd tried his best, had never managed to live up to Leanne's home-cooked meals.

"Though there are some chicken nuggets available if not," Gabi said, pulling out a baking tray once Leanne had moved aside and tipping them onto a plastic *Paw Patrol* plate along with some vegetables. "Sam might spare you a few if you ask nicely."

"Cottage pie is more than okay with me," Naomi said. "It smells amazing."

"Thank you, dear."

"Shall we put the cards away, mijo?" Danny asked, the endearment only a little clunky in his accent, and Chloe tried not to do a double take when he reached for the pack. Two fingers and half of his thumb were missing on his right hand.

"Can you give this to Sam?" Gabi handed the *Paw Patrol* plate to Amy, already turning back to help Leanne dish out the food for the rest of them.

Amy leaned over Adam's shoulder to get his brother's attention, rapping her knuckles gently on the table. Sam glanced up, lifting one of the headphones away from his ears. "Dinner time, chiquito. You can finish your colouring later."

He dropped his crayon in favour of a fork, letting his headphones fall back into place as Amy pushed the plate in front of him.

"Here we are." Leanne and Gabi set full plates in front of everyone, the table filling up as they took their seats. "Enjoy."

It was as good as Chloe remembered—the meat perfectly cooked, flavour exploding on her tongue—and when she told Leanne as much, she beamed.

"So, Chloe, tell us what you've been doing all this time. What do you do?"

Chloe finished her mouthful of food before she answered, feeling a few curious pairs of eyes on her. "I run a property development company in London."

"Like your father?"

"Similar. He asked me if I wanted to take over his company when he retired, but...it was too big for me to want to take on by the time I was

ready for it. More business and planning high-rises, less of the hands-on stuff.” Getting her hands dirty was the best part of the job. “So he helped me start my own. We focus on smaller buildings. A lot of renovations, but we’ve been getting some bigger contracts lately.”

“Wow. And do you two work together?”

“Yeah, but not at the same company.”

“I have my own,” Naomi said. “An architectural firm. And I’m the only architect Chloe knows, so naturally she comes crawling to me whenever she needs my expertise.”

“Both business owners,” Leanne said. “Impressive.”

“I’d like it to be known that she copied me,” Naomi said, taking a sip of her beer. “I branched out first.”

“By like a month.”

“Hey, it still counts.”

Chloe relaxed into the familiar banter despite her surroundings. “As you keep reminding me.”

“And how did you meet?”

“At university. Naomi was president of one of the clubs I joined my first week there. Took me under her wing.”

“I couldn’t not. She walked into our first meeting, this country girl lost in the big city, scared of her own shadow.”

“I was not,” Chloe muttered, but it was a lie. It had been a month after she’d left Corthwaite, her heartbreak fresh, and the sign for the LGBT club had caught her eye. She’d barely been able to say her own sexuality aloud when she’d joined, but Naomi had coaxed her out her shell, and Chloe had found comfort in her own skin, surrounded by others like her.

“You were. And you kept getting lost.”

“London is a big place!”

“I can sympathise with you there, Chloe,” Leanne said, watching her and Naomi with a fond smile. “When Stephen and I went to visit Amy there, we got lost all the time.”

Chloe’s eyes snapped to Amy. “You were in London?”

“I...yeah. I had an apprenticeship there at a photography studio.”

“When?” Chloe had been so fixated on the two of them being in the same place again, but had it happened before? Could their paths have crossed without either of them realising it?

Fool for Love

“Eleven, twelve years ago. I lived there for a couple of years before I came back here.”

Two years. Two years they’d been in the same city, and Chloe had had no idea.

“Did you not like it?” Naomi asked, and Chloe wondered if she could sense her distress. “Is that why you moved back?”

“No, I loved it. But after Dad passed away...” Amy trailed off, the pain of it evident in her eyes.

“I was sorry to hear about that,” Chloe said. Stephen had always been kind to her when she was a kid, and when her dad had told her he’d died, Chloe had mourned the loss of a good man, taken too soon.

“We still miss him.” Leanne twirled the wedding ring hanging on a chain around her neck. “But I’m sure you know that better than most.”

Chloe’s throat tightened at the reminder her own loss. “Yeah, I do.”

“I went back to London after the funeral,” Amy continued, inspecting the label on her beer bottle. “But then Danny got into an accident, and I was needed here more than I was there.”

Chloe had been wondering what would draw Amy back to this place, to the job she’d sworn she never wanted, and now she had her answer, rooted in tragedy and misfortune.

“And now she thinks she owns this place,” Danny said.

Amy gave him the finger.

“Mami, Amy hizo algo malo!” Adam said.

“Traitor,” Amy said, but she was smiling, and Adam stuck his tongue out at her.

“English when we have guests Adam, remember?” Gabi touched his shoulder gently. “Sorry,” she said, turning toward Chloe and Naomi. “It’s hard to keep them connected to their Mexican roots all the way out here, so we try and use the language as much as possible.”

“Oh, please, don’t stop on our account.” Naomi leant back in her chair, plate clean. “I speak some Spanish. And after being subjected to my family on the regular, Chloe’s good at getting the gist even if she has no idea what’s being said.”

“True. Although I know some Patois now.”

“You’ve had enough years to learn.” Naomi turned back to Gabi. “Where in Mexico are you from?”

“Guadalajara.”

“We spent a week in Cancun when I took Chloe to see some of my family back in Jamaica one year, but I always wish we could’ve stayed longer, explored some more. We did get to see Chichén-Itzá, though. It was beautiful.”

“You’re not the only one to think so,” Gabi said, glancing at Amy. “Amy and I met when she was backpacking through Mexico, in search of the perfect photograph.”

“I was wondering why you traded Guadalajara for here.” Chloe tried not to obsess over each piece of information about Amy, tried not to put them together, solve the puzzle of what she’d been doing with her life for the last eighteen years.

“All Amy’s fault. We travelled together, for a while, across South America. At the end, she asked if I wanted to visit England, see where she grew up. I got here, and I met this one”—Gabi reached for one of Danny’s hands—“and I fell in love.”

Chloe bit her tongue to refrain from asking *how*. Maybe Danny’s personality had improved since she’d left town. It certainly couldn’t have gotten much worse.

“Do you work on the farm, too?” she asked instead.

Gabi shook her head. “No, I teach over at the high school. Spanish, with some History and Geography thrown in when they need it. I love it. The variety’s nice, and because the classes are so small you really get to know all the kids.”

And the kids really get to know each other, Chloe thought. *Which isn’t always a good thing.*

She was relieved when the plates were cleared and Danny began shooing both his sons upstairs for baths. Chloe sensed an opportunity to make her escape. She was halfway out of her seat, mouth opening to bid everyone goodbye, when Amy paused by the side of her chair.

“Can we talk?” she asked, tugging at her sleeves again, teeth worrying at her bottom lip.

And say what? Chloe wondered. Hadn’t they already dredged up enough of the past tonight?

But curiosity raged within her, an itching desire to see what Amy had to say for herself, after all these years.

“Okay.”

Fool for Love

* * *

Chloe followed Amy onto the deck outside, away from prying eyes, her stomach twisting as the door clicked shut behind them. The rain had eased, though the scent of it hung thick in the air, and the wood of the deck was slick beneath the soles of Chloe's shoes.

One of the few things she'd missed about living in the depths of the countryside was the night sky and how clear it was without the pollution of thousands of lights. But now, with the moon and the stars obscured by clouds, the darkness felt oppressive.

Amy's face was cast in shadow, and she wrung her hands, her mouth opening and closing like she was struggling to find the words she wanted to say.

Chloe wasn't going to help her.

She wasn't even sure any words would come out if she tried.

Allowing herself to look in a way she hadn't dared in the kitchen, Chloe catalogued all the differences in the woman standing in front of her. The woman who had once meant everything to her, but was now a stranger.

Her hair was shorter than Chloe remembered, lightened by years of working outside, and her skin was tanned by the rays of the spring sun. Her arms held more muscle, her hands were calloused and no longer perfectly manicured, and there was dirt under her nails.

The eyes were the same, brilliantly blue, even in the dark. Eyes that had always been bright and sparkling, until they'd turned hard and cruel. Now, they shimmered with so many words left unsaid.

"I'm sorry about your dad," Amy said eventually. "He was a good guy."

"Yeah. He was." Somehow, Chloe doubted that was what Amy had brought her out here to say. She waited, trying to ignore the adrenaline flowing through her veins, screaming for her to run.

"And I'm so sorry about everything else, Chloe." Amy's eyes burned into her own. "If I could go back and change it..."

There were a lot of things Chloe would change if she could go back, too. Like not fall in love with her best friend.

"If I could go back and change it, I'd do everything differently. But I can't, so an apology is the best I can do. I know it's long overdue. Eighteen years overdue. I know I hurt you. I was downright cruel to you, did so many unforgivable things. And you don't have to accept it. God knows I probably

wouldn't, if I were in your shoes, but I...I wanted—needed—you to know. What I put you through wasn't fair."

Chloe's throat tightened under the weight of Amy's gaze, the only sound the hoot of a nearby owl. Eighteen years, she'd waited for this. Eighteen years, and it felt like an anti-climax.

"You're right," Chloe said, her voice hoarse. "It wasn't fair."

Amy winced, but what did she expect? For Chloe to smile and say "Okay, no problem." like it erased everything between them?

"I'm sorry. I know that doesn't come close to making up for it. And it's not an excuse, but back then I...I was so confused. I didn't understand what I was feeling. I didn't think it was normal. You thought I was just messing you around, using you for practice, but it...it wasn't one-sided. I had feelings for you, too, but I didn't know how to deal with them, so I pushed you away."

Chloe blinked, letting the words sink in. All this time, she'd never once thought her feelings were reciprocated. How could Amy have discarded her so easily, if Chloe had meant so much to her?

Eighteen years, and she was finally getting the truth. Proof she hadn't been crazy, when she'd sworn she'd seen something in Amy's eyes. But it didn't feel like vindication.

It felt like regret. Felt like: what were you *thinking*? Felt like: we could have had it all, you and I, if you'd *talked* to me.

"Why are you telling me this?" Chloe asked, because what was Amy hoping to get from this? Why was she dredging up old wounds? Chloe hadn't asked for closure; she'd put this behind her years ago, and if Amy had just let her go on her way—ignored her the way she had in the months before Chloe had left Corthwaite behind—they'd both be better for it.

"Because you deserve to know." Amy ran a hand through her hair, her fingers trembling. "I just wish I'd been brave enough to tell you earlier."

So do I. "So you're..." Chloe trailed off, needing Amy to say it.

"Gay? Yeah." Amy tucked her hands into the back pocket of her jeans and rocked back on her heels. "And like I said—insecurity and fear was no excuse for hurting you the way I did, but...hopefully it explains some of the things I did."

"I don't know if I can forgive you," Chloe said, teeth worrying at her bottom lip. "I know it's been a long time, and we're both different people now, but..."

Fool for Love

“One conversation doesn’t magically make all the pain and the hurt go away,” Amy said, her smile sad. “I get it. I...I’d like the chance to try and make it up to you. I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness or your time, and certainly not your friendship, but it’s been nice, having you here tonight. Learning about your life. So if you ever get lonely while you’re here, I know my mum would like to see you. And...I’d like that, too.”

“I...I don’t know.” Years ago, Chloe would have jumped at the offer. But older and wiser—not the same girl she’d been when she’d left Corthwaite—she hesitated. Tonight had been too much, in every way, and her head was a scrambled mess.

“I think I need some time to think about things.” Time, and distance, to see if she could set her head straight. To decide if she wanted to bother repairing bridges that had long ago been burned, especially since she was only going to be in the village for a few months.

“Okay.” Amy ducked her head, and for a moment, Chloe was reminded of the girl she used to know. “I—”

Amy was cut off by the back door banging open, and Chloe tried not to flinch when she saw Danny looming in the doorway.

Had he come to check up on them? *Just like old times.*

“Are you going to stand out here all night?” he asked, voice gruff, eyes on Amy’s face and ignoring Chloe entirely. “Or are you going to do your job? It’s your turn to do the night milking.”

“I’m aware of what day it is, thank you,” Amy said, teeth gritted, and she glanced at her watch. “It’s not time yet.”

“Near enough.” He let the door slam behind him, and Amy rolled her eyes.

Chloe blinked at where Danny had disappeared, feeling like she could breathe a little easier now he’d gone. “I see he’s still a ray of sunshine.”

“Oh, he’s delightful. I should probably...” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the milking shed.

“Right, of course.”

“It was nice to see you again,” Amy said, and Chloe paused with her hand wrapped around the door handle. “I’m glad you came.”

Chloe couldn’t quite return the sentiment.

She slipped back inside to where Naomi was waiting, eager to say her goodbyes and get back to the safety of their own house.

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FOOL FOR LOVE

BY RACHAEL SOMMERS

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