

Chapter 2

AVE MARIA

There was a persistent and impatient rap at the door. I had just stepped out of the shower. Dressed in a slack cerise dressing gown and Mickey Mouse slippers, I shuffled down the hallway, praying that Liam had mislaid his keys again.

“Oh. Colin. What’s up?”

“You didn’t tell me you were selling your house.”

“Didn’t I?”

“No.”

“Is there a problem?”

“You are then?”

“Yes.”

Colin twitched and looked me up and down.

“Am I interrupting something, Jack?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re wet.”

“That’s generally what happens when you take a shower.”

He gawked at my slippers.

“You like?” I said. “Look, would you like to come in?”

Colin was an easy neighbour but had perfected the art of calling at the most inconvenient times. As usual he was neatly dressed in Marks and Sparks knitwear, brown corduroy trousers and tan Hush Puppies. Horn-rimmed spectacles perched precariously on the end of a lumpy nose, and he was clutching a bulging continental purse. I was fluffy-robed, knicker-less and vulnerable.

“I’ll just make myself decent.”

“No need, I’ll be quick.” Colin swept into the dining room, sat cross-legged at the table and adjusted his hearing-aid.

“Look, Jack, I’ll come straight to the point. How much do you want for the house?”

“You want to buy my house?”

“Yes. In cash.”

“In cash? You want to buy my house in cash? I’ll make some tea.”

I beat a retreat to the kitchen. I needed thinking time. Had this upstanding, tee-total, retired accountant finally lost his immaculately arranged marbles and hit the sauce? Why did he want *this* house so badly? I re-tied the sash around my robe; this was no time for a *Basic Instinct* moment. This was time for a big bucks moment. Be calm, Jack. Be civilised. Be mercenary.

“Sugar, Colin?”

“Just milk.”

“How’s work?”

“Fine. Look Jack, let’s get this sorted.”

Then it happened, the first phase of an unstoppable chain reaction. Following a ridiculously brief, matter of fact but amicable negotiation, we agreed a price for the house. Colin didn’t want a survey and wasn’t prepared to waste money on a solicitor either. He

was a loony buyer and I really didn't care why. He unzipped his purse and retrieved a monogrammed cheque book holder and inset fountain pen.

"I'll give you a deposit now."

"It's fine, Colin, I trust you. We're agreed. The house is yours."

Colin returned his neatly pressed cheque book to its place of safety and we shook hands to seal the contract.

"Done," he said.

"Done," I said. It didn't feel legally binding in Disney slippers but a deal was a deal.

"So where are you off to?" asked Colin.

"Bodrum."

"Good God, Jack, Turkey? You're a homosexual. There aren't any homosexuals in Turkey."

"My dear Colin, there are homosexuals everywhere. We're like the Irish."

Colin sipped his tea for inspiration. "You do know that Turkey's a Muslim country?"

"No shit?"

His brain clanked and whirled like a Babbage prototype, spitting out a chain of increasingly infuriating questions, each designed to challenge our toxic choice of destination.

"What's wrong with Spain?" he said.

"What's wrong with Turkey?" I said.

Colin was unyielding. I tried my well-rehearsed *I love Turkey because* homily. He listened impassively. It was a lost cause.

"You know what, Jack?"

"What?"

"It's your funeral."

"Well thanks for the vote of confidence."

He smiled. "You can rent the house until you leave."

There we had it. Mad Colin was definitely on something. Someone had popped a pill in his Lapsang Souchong.

"Say that again, Colin."

"And I'm the one with the hearing aid."

"I could kiss you."

"Please don't. I vote Conservative."

We sipped our tea and sat in uneasy silence. Colin's eyes darted about to survey his new kingdom. He was off with the covetous fairies, muttering incoherently like a novice Buddhist at an inaugural Puja. Christ, the old boy was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. I could have my throat garrotted at any moment.

He broke the peace. "I like your furniture."

"It likes you, too."

"I'll buy it."

"Done."

With that, my very own fairy godfather made his excuses and scampered off into the cold East End air. Business was concluded. House and contents sold. I poured a stiff gin and tonic, floated in to the lounge, collapsed onto the sofa and fiddled with my mobile phone. I should ring Liam. *"Hello, hub. I've just sold the house to our psychotic neighbour. No, it's fine, he paid in cash. Contract? Don't be silly. Yes, you're right; our world has just changed on the turn of an indecently short conversation with a lunatic."*

I decided against the call.

The house was perfectly still apart from the persistent clicking of a carriage clock on the mantelpiece. I looked around the room and said my goodbyes to the sofa and the sideboard, bequeathing them to Colin in my head. I guessed he wouldn't want the signed picture of Tammy Wynette.

From [Perking the Pansies](#), Jack and Liam move to Turkey.

