

## ***An Extract From The Love Letter***

'Breathe *in*, Legs!'

Allegra North breathed in deeply as her sister hauled at the corset laces in the satin bodice. As her waist narrowed, her chest expanded and her white bra rose out of the square Elizabethan cleavage and burst through the delicate lace bib like airbags popping through a car windscreen.

'I knew you should have put on the whalebone basque.' Ros's reddened face appeared over her sister's shoulder as Legs crammed the offending spheres back in and peered down at the broken stitching.

'I can't believe you thought this would fit me. You were only a size eight when you married. We all remember the raw fish diet; you were sucking Smints all the way up the aisle.'

'But it was worth it,' Ros sighed, glancing down to her size fourteen curves before gazing wistfully at her sister's reflection in the mirror ahead of them. 'I love this dress.'

Legs also regarded the huge meringue that she was now uncomfortably sporting, modelled on the Ditchley portrait of Elizabeth I. It had never been to her taste, especially the high lace ruff and wired collar which she'd secretly thought made her sister look like Cruella de Vil posing as a butterfly when Ros had married Will twelve years earlier. But it was undoubtedly a spectacular creation, meticulously hand-embroidered. Now, carefully released from the plastic cocoon in which it had been resting on the back of the spare room door for over a decade, it had just been lowered onto Allegra with the reverie of a queen's coronation robes being fitted to a maid to enable a royal escape from treachery. She was at least a dress size too large and six inches too tall for the made-to-measure creation, and her familiar pink-cheeked outdoors complexion looked faintly ridiculous peering into the mirror above such delicate stitch-work and intricate detail. She fingered one of the embroidered flowers, seeded with pearls, which had been a labour of love for the designers who'd attached two hundred of them ready for The Big Day.

Ros swatted her hand away from the precious little four-petal motif and then reached behind her sister to tuck the corset laces into the skirt waist.

'I so love this dress.' She sighed again as she began buttoning up the lace panel over the stays. 'I'd always hoped you might want to wear it when you and Francis . . .' She stopped herself, face ducking out of sight behind the huge ruff. 'You do look beautiful in it.'

Rosalind's wedding day had been a no-holds-Bard Elizabethan extravaganza. Despite marrying into one of London's oldest Catholic families whose heritage dated back to before the Reformation, she'd somehow pulled it off. If they could have feasted on roast swan, Legs knew her sister would have ordered it. The occasion had been spectacular, theatrical and fun, as so much surrounding Ros had been in those days. A vivacious, clever musician still studying at the Royal Academy, Ros had been playing harpsichord in the foyer of the Barbican when Will Herbert first spotted her, her energy and passion causing him to miss the play he was supposed to be reviewing for *Time Out* and ask her for a drink instead. A year later, they were married at Brompton Oratory and Allegra and Ros's father Dorian had literally sold the family furniture to pay for it, some of the best pieces he'd collected over the years suddenly finding themselves relocated from the family's tall, Victorian Kew townhouse to his Richmond antiques shop in what he had tactfully referred to at the time as a 'much-needed declutter'.

The dress Legs was now sporting had cost Dorian a matching pair of George III Sheraton armchairs and a marble-topped Louis XV bombé and had been just as awkward to fit in the back of a vintage Rolls Royce.

Still only nineteen at the time, Ros had been a radiantly happy bride, her conversion to Catholicism as all-consuming as her love for Will. That day, bursting with joy, the new Mrs Herbert performed in public for the last time. As a personal gift bestowed from wife to husband alongside the wedding list dinner service, silverware and crystal from their guests, Ros insisted that she must give up her musical training and dedicate herself to becoming a homemaker.

To bridesmaid Legs, poised to begin studying for her A levels amid dreams of globe-trotting and career-building, such devotion to domesticity had been anathema and she'd dived out of the way when the skilfully tossed pomander bouquet had flown in her direction. But Ros firmly believed that the holy trinity of happiness lay between the altar, the kitchen sink and the font.

Within weeks, she'd fallen pregnant amid frantic nesting in the Fulham flat the newlyweds shared. When Nico was two, the family moved to a Regency villa in Ealing, meaning that Will forfeited his dreams of freelancing while writing a novel, and instead let the Herbert family pull one of their many old school ties to secure him a well-paid editorship of a worthy but dull financial journal which bored him rigid but paid the monthly mortgage interest. Once Nico started school, Ros took on private piano tuition to help ends meet, but the money and the marriage wore increasingly thin, and that Elizabethan feast which had united writer and musician seemed a world apart as husband and wife slowly became affection-starved enemies under the same roof.

The cherished wedding dress had remained in the house long after Will's tenancy ended. Five years earlier, he'd run away with the part-time nanny (and tenant of their ground floor flat), struggling scriptwriter Daisy, this betrayal made more awkward still by the fact that Daisy was a family friend who had been thick as thieves with Allegra since childhood. After a brief spell of utter disbelief followed by inconsolable fury, Ros had retreated into martyrdom, a state in which she still existed, refusing to acknowledge the second life her son now had with his father and his half-siblings.

These days, Will and Daisy lived in glorious chaos in Somerset with two more children and a third on the way, their rural idyll funded by Daisy's runaway sitcom success *Slap Dash*. Although Will picked up occasional freelance work in between cooking, childcare and chicken rearing, this house-husband role was a cause of much criticism from Ros, who thought he'd 'wimped out'. His income barely covered the maintenance, and finances remained the biggest clash-point between the sparring ex-spouses – and they were the reason Ros had decided to clamp her younger sister in the dream dress today.

'I knew it would suit you perfectly,' she sighed, on tiptoes again and looking over Legs' shoulder, their matching dark grey eyes lined up, Ros's features sharper and framed with hair the colour of cinnamon roast coffee beans cut into a neat urchin bob like a principal boy, making Legs resemble a rather blousy Cinderella by contrast, with smudges of last night's mascara beneath her wide eyes and her cloud of wild blonde hair on end, showing too much dark root.

'It's a bit short.' Legs peered at her flip-flopped feet poking out, complete with the three star tattoos on the left ankle she now regretted getting during her first term at university. Francis had made such a fuss when he saw them. At the time she'd been rebelliously unapologetic, but now she hated them, their zig-zag blue permanence a perpetual reminder of her unofficial catchphrase, that if you live for the moment, you also have to live with the consequence.

She'd been determined not to think about Francis, but now that she did, his face appeared beside hers in the mirror, seeing her in a wedding dress, blue eyes softening with pride, blonde hair swept

back from that fallen-angel face. He'd make the most debonair of bridegrooms, so tall and handsome and charming. Ever since they'd first got together as two dare-playing teenagers who'd agreed to practise their kissing techniques on each other, she'd been fantasising about their wedding, remodelling it in her mind as the years passed. At first, it had been a sparkling Cinderella dress and a horse-drawn carriage; in her later teens the plan had changed to rock and roll Chelsea Registry Office and clubbing around London all night; then when they travelled together after university, she'd fallen for exotic white sand beaches, sarongs, sandals and simplicity. A decade after their first kiss, Francis had made the fantasy real by popping the question in the tiny Ladbroke Grove flat they shared together, both by then carving careers in publishing. Together, they had planned a simple ceremony in the chapel at Farcombe within earshot of the Celtic Sea off the North Devon coast in which they had swum together since childhood, the gulls calling above the cliff walks they'd known all their lives and the coves they'd spent so long exploring. In the evening, they planned to host a huge party in the main hall, Francis's childhood holiday home, with his father playing the bassoon and Ros the piano, other musician friends joining in, the arts-festival crowd adding eccentricity and colour, their school and university friends, the families that knew one another so well, village pub the Book Inn running the bar and the locals from Eascombe and Fargoe invited, all hell-bent on enjoying the celebration of the decade. It would be a party never to forget, and it was several years in the planning, with the couple's families eagerly adding their input, including the offer of the dreaded Ditchley dress.

Legs looked at her reflection again, the dress totally unsuited to her, its corset now so tightly laced that her waist was freakishly pinched above the farthingale and her face was turning red. She looked like a wild poppy drooping in a square jewelled vase.

Yet there was something about wearing a wedding dress that suspended her customary sardonic streak and forced a wellspring of sentiment through her protective shield. Just for a moment she let herself imagine the past year had not happened and that she was getting married after all. The thought made her giddy.

'I was the happiest I've ever felt in my life when I wore this dress.' Ros had tears in her eyes. 'It makes you feel ethereal, doesn't it?'

'It's not too late to change your mind about it, you know,' Legs said kindly, reminding herself that any ethereal, giddy feelings were due to lack of oxygen. She was growing increasingly light-headed because she couldn't breathe properly.

'Nonsense! The photographer is waiting and we must press on. I'm needed at the abbey to help arrange the altar flowers. What are you going to do about your hair?'

'What's wrong with it?'

'You can't leave it like that.' Ros reached into a drawer of her dressing table. 'It's hanging all over the ruff - here!' She scraped her sister's uncombed blonde hair into a topknot and anchored it so tightly with a jewelled scrunchy that Legs winced at the impromptu Essex facelift. 'Much better. You can go into the garden for pictures I think. You'll have to bend your knees so those flip-flops don't show.'

She turned to march from the room, calling 'Nicholas! Nicholas! We're ready for you!'

Lagging behind and still fighting for breath, Legs picked up her new mobile phone to check whether Conrad had texted yet to say whether he'd make it. He hadn't. Gordon Lapis, meanwhile, had sent several emails very early that morning, complaining about the Portuguese translation of *Emerald Falcon* and asking her what Julie Ocean's typical breakfast routine might be.

When Conrad had insisted that the company fund the newest, whizziest iPhone for his PA - quite unprecedented at Fellows Howlett, where one got to take home an office laptop about as often as a

school guinea pig and at least one director had yet to go digital at all – Legs had excitedly assumed this meant that he wanted a hotline to her at all times. She now realised that he just wanted to get the agency’s most awkward author, Gordon Lapis, off his back and onto hers.

She tucked it into her sleeve and followed her sister along the landing.

Predictably, there was no answer from the room at the far end of the corridor covered with ‘keep out’ signs.

Ros knocked hard. ‘Nicholas!’ She always pronounced the last two syllables of her son’s name ‘alas’, as though he was something to regret. He’d recently announced that he would answer only to ‘Nico’, a fact his mother chose to completely ignore.

‘I need you to come and take photos of Legs in the garden,’ she insisted.

At the mention of his aunt’s name, Nico unlocked his door and peered out, only one suspicious green eye visible behind a small chink in the heavy brown fringe. Then he reached up to sweep his locks aside and gape at the Ditchley replica.

‘Wow. That’s badass. Is that fancy dress?’

Legs laughed, which was a mistake as her boobs burst up through the lace neckline again, like two lifebuoys bobbing over a wave.

Ros gave the ten-year-old a withering look and gritted her teeth. ‘*This* is the dress in which I married your father, Nicholas. Aunt Legs is modelling it so we can put it on eBay because the bridegroom now pays a pittance in alimony and I can’t afford your schooling without selling things.’

‘I’m on a full scholarship,’ Nico pointed out flatly, eyes glazing over as they always did when his mother started bad-mouthing his father in front of him.

‘That takes no account for all the extras.’ She waved her hand dismissively and started marching towards the head of the stairs. ‘Now I’ll leave you two at it because I’m already late. Nicholas, you’re needed for choir at ten-thirty; the ceremony’s at quarter to eleven. Jamie’s mother will call for you when they walk past. Be sure to wash your hands.’ She marched off, face set hard as it so often was when she spoke about Will, more so today because of the shock of seeing her wedding dress and remembering the hopes and joy that had surrounded the happiest day of her life.

Nico stood in his doorway watching her retreat, his father’s big fawn eyes blinking from his face, accustomed to his mother’s spikiness, that abrupt, no-nonsense tone she used at all times, and at stressful times most of all. Then he eyed his aunt again.

‘That really is some frock.’

‘You’ve never seen it?’

‘I sort of remember seeing it in a picture once, but Mum threw away all the wedding photographs when Dad left us. I bet she looked amazing.’

'She did. Granny North still has some pictures I think.'

'Was it a good day?'

She nodded. 'I was a bridesmaid; we all got to wear red velvet brocade and funny headdresses like nurses' hats. It was jolly hot, like today. Take my tip and wear the latest Arsenal strip when you get hitched.'

Nico closed one eye. 'Nah, I'm never going to get married. I don't like girls much.'

Legs shot him a sympathetic look and he dived back into his room for his high tech camera.

Aside from singing and football, Nico's greatest talent was photography, something Legs privately guessed he was far more passionate about than the choral practice his mother encouraged him to do each day.

'I know it's not quite *Vogue*,' she apologised as they trailed downstairs. 'But it's a start.'  
'I want to be a sports photographer,' he reminded her.

'Sure.' She smiled encouragingly. 'Capture the Gunners winning the Treble.'

'Too right.' He bounded past and led the way downstairs and out through the open plan kitchen to the pretty walled garden that stretched behind the west London townhouse, currently bursting with its best midsummer finery, the dahlias and zinnias waving vast lollipop heads of red and pink from the borders, buddleia and rambling roses bobbing overhead, lavender and sweetpeas crowding fragrantly around the trunks of the fruit trees.

It might have appeared perfect wedding weather through the window, with the striped green lawns dancing with sunlight, but in fact it was blowing a gale. Stepping onto the decking, Legs almost took off as her skirts inverted, revealing a skeleton farthingale and her bare thighs.

'DO NOT take a photograph!' she ordered from inside several layers of silk and damask as she fought the skirts back down, knowing that the temptation for a ten-year-old to capture the moment would probably be too great. The shot could be used as blackmail for years to come, although she supposed at least her face was covered in pearl-studded cream silk. But those legs would be unmistakeable in the family. They were legend.

Being called Allegra was always going to lead to one nickname, particularly fitting given how distinctive her legs actually were. Yet this nickname hadn't been bestowed on Legs as a result of her possessing long, slender lower limbs up to her armpits; quite the reverse. From toddlerdom on, her legs had always been like tree trunks, despite her otherwise slim frame. She did her best to hide them at all times, and had learned all means of cunning tactics to emphasise her good points while playing down the sturdy girders that ran from hip to ankle like two ungainly termite mounds. The maxi dress was her best friend, along with boyfriend jeans and wide-legged trousers. Elizabethan petticoats flying around her head revealing nothing but her M&S tanga, however, was not a good look.

Having fought the skirts back down, Legs adjusted the uncomfortable corset, still fighting to breathe and now ducking through flying clematis petals as she panted her way to some dappled shade.

'That's great!' Nico unhooked the camera strap from his neck and framed the shot. 'The light is perfect on those butterfly wing things.'

'Ruff, Nico.'

'Yeah, you do look a bit rough, but it's OK, I can Photoshop it.'

Legs rolled her eyes and then pouted and posed for a few minutes beneath the apple tree, battling light-headedness and crouching uncomfortably to hide her feet beneath the huge hooped skirt that billowed like a sail. She would never have cut it as an actress in costume dramas, she decided, despite the obvious appeal of being very famous and maybe getting to kiss Orlando Bloom. The corsetry would kill her, as would all the crouching required to appear shorter than her leading men. She was too tall to be a movie star, and liked her breakfast muffins too much. And she was also a lousy actress. To her great regret, Legs shared none of her sister's musical talent, nor was she gifted with a creative or literary streak, despite a passionate appreciation of the arts. In her dreams, she might once have imagined herself heralded the new Tracey Emin, Zadie Smith or Emily Watson, but in reality, it was her ability to organise, charm and multi-task that earned her wage.

Life as an overworked assistant to a literary agent was perhaps not as glamorous as the stage and screen, although an office two doors away from a Starbucks proved some compensation. And as far as her nephew was concerned, she had access to the Holy Grail by working for Fellows Howlett alongside Conrad Knight, the only man to have ever knowingly met writer Gordon Lapis in person.

'Is the new Ptolemy Finch book being printed yet?' Nico asked now.

'Nearly,' she assured him.

Nico was crazy about Gordon's white-haired little hero, with his magical powers and witty irreverence. Ptolemy was wise and brave and sassy. He was also the ultimate outsider; understood by children and adults alike. Through six bestselling adventures, his thick black hair, prematurely streaked with grey, had turned pure white. Yet he never seemed to age.

Such was his success these days, when Gordon delivered a manuscript, it was a high security operation involving bank vaults and confidentiality contracts. It was the one communication that could not be conducted electronically because of the risk of hacking. His agent Conrad Knight would fetch the disk himself and never let it out of his sight until it was delivered. One hard copy would be printed and kept in the agency safe along with the master disk. Then a copy on disk was passed to the publisher. However much Nico begged, Legs would never dream of opening the safe. Just one photocopied page in circulation before the book was published would not only cost her job, but she'd probably be litter picking on community service for weeks to come. Even she was not allowed to read the book until its release into the shops at midnight on publication day, and she was Conrad Knight's lover.

But she had promised her nephew a signed copy on the stroke of that next long-awaited midnight release, and he asked about it daily. Legs now regretted boasting that she could get it signed. It hadn't occurred to her at the time that Lapis's obsession with protecting his identity meant acquiring a signed copy on launch day was close to impossible. Conrad had muttered something vague about seeing what he could do. With a ten-year-old super-fan's huge, excited eyes on her, Legs felt the weight of expectation heavy on her shoulders.

'Do you really exchange emails with Gordon Lapis?'

'I really do.'

'That must be so amazing. You know, he doesn't ever answer his fans personally any more. He has a load of secretaries that do it. But he emails *you*. That's so cool.'

Legs thought it was very arrogant that Gordon no longer replied to letters himself, but had no desire to shatter the idol worship. 'Well he does have a *lot* of fans.' She knew that, on average, Gordon Lapis received two hundred emails and letters each day.

'What are his messages like?'

'Clever.' Often obstreperous, occasionally flirtatious, she added to herself, fishing in her sleeve to read his most recent message:

*Some questions for research: Speaking as a ruffled and feisty west Londoner, do you drink real coffee or instant? What radio station do you listen to? What is your morning routine? GL*

A new email had already queued up behind it:

*I have now been waiting three hours for a response. Julie hasn't even got to work yet, and, despite sitting at my desk, neither have I. GL*

'Can I read some of them?' Nico reeled off a few more shots on his camera.

'I don't think you'd be very interested.' She hedged, imagining star-struck Nico poring over Gordon's abstruse missives. For a man who wrote such all-consuming, action-packed fiction, he was a very abstract email correspondent, leaving her hanging for days and then expecting a dozen snappy answers on the trot.

Already growing bored of his Mario Testino task, Nico wandered off to snap the family cat, Wenger, who was chasing a bumblebee between chairs on the decking.

Legs perched on a bench and hastily composed a reply.

*I am so sorry! I've been modelling for a photo shoot (that should inspire him; Julie should be glamorous). Lots of shop coffee. Radio 2. Always running late.*

Pulling at her corset again, she half watched as Nico pursued Wenger and the bumblebee back into the house, snapping away. She started composing a text to Conrad, then paused when Gordon immediately fired back more questions:

*Is Julie vengeful? Does she harbour grudges? Would you be able to work alongside a man who had once been your lover?*

*What has Conrad told you?* she tapped back in a panic before hastily resuming her text to the man himself, now paranoid that he had told Gordon Lapis that he was going to dump her. Misspelling in her haste, she demanded to know whether they were getting together that weekend or not.

As soon as she sent it off, she stared at the phone face in alarm, already uncertain whether she'd sent the right messages to writer and lover or got them muddled up as she kept doing. Yesterday she'd sent a text intended for her friend Daisy to her sister and vice versa, only realising when Ros asked what LABATYD meant. (She had quickly improvised 'love all babies and trust your dog' for 'life's a bitch and then you die'.)

Thankfully Gordon was quick to respond with reassuring directness. *Why should Conrad say anything?*

He doesn't know Conrad's my lover, she realised with relief. Be professional, she reminded herself. *My mistake. Saturday brain not in gear. Probably couldn't work alongside my ex, no. Especially not if he'd become grizzled and hard-drinking.*

*Young, edgy, haunted by the past, he expanded; lives on a house boat, plays the fiddle and has a tame badger. Intense, witty, intelligent.*

*Not sure about the badger, but I could definitely work with Jimmy so far.*

*He's also a gambler, Gordon went on; mildly epileptic, undergoing anger management and unable to commit to any relationship.*

*I can feel sexual chemistry already.*

*That will do for now. Thank you for your input. GL*