

An extract from Love Hunt

By Fiona Walker

Prologue

'It's a hoar frost,' Trudy breathed in an undertone to nobody in particular, watching her breath cloud and condense in front of her face like a small, steamy puff from a dragon. She'd always found the phrase amusing, imagining lots of very chilly trollops with goose bumps and pert nipples gallivanting around whitened flowerbeds pursued by Jack Frost's long, icy fingers.

Ahead of her, in the milky cold darkness, she could just make out the lace-edged skeletons of big, lonely trees scattered across formal parkland. Like a distant city that never sleeps, stars dotted the navy blue sky beyond them.

One was on the move – at speed. A shooting star. Trudy closed her eyes and wished for freedom.

It was just past midnight at Eastlode Park. The Vale of the Wolds Hunt Ball was in full cry. All those who had gathered upon the frosty steps for a cigarette between courses agreed that it was proving to be a vintage year.

Yet to Trudy Dew it was a double-edged occasion. Upon arrival, the guests had quickly divided into youth and oldies, and husband Finn had kept her circulating with the oldies upstairs, not with the younger crowd in the cellars, where she'd longed to be all evening. Now that they were eating, the two age groups had at least reconfigured temporarily, but Trudy, seated between a yellow-toothed racing bore and her ungracious brother-in-law, was still isolated from her gossipy, irreverent, young-at-heart comfort zone and rapidly losing her sparkle.

As always, the huge Cottrell family into which she had married took up three tables with noisy aplomb, their many red-cheeked house guests relishing a rare prolonged spell of decent heating. Dinner talk was almost entirely taken up with antiques, gardening and racing, which made Trudy feel like a prematurely ageing relic going to seed in a one horse race to the exit.

Now, standing outside to cool her face and catch her breath, she drew strength and calm. Opening her eyes and looking at the stars, she rolled her head on her stiff neck and braced herself to return to the fray. She was damned if she was going to spoil a rare night out with her own bad temper.

Few had noticed her absence, but her very drunken brother-in-law Piers, who was always particularly raucous at hunt balls, had taken advantage by eating her main course, as well as polishing off his own and most of his wife Jemima's.

'I suppose it'll help the spring diet,' Trudy laughed magnanimously, although Piers made no attempt to apologise.

'You should have your stomach stapled,' he suggested, showering her with a light splattering of port *jus* from the venison that she should have enjoyed. 'Pickle Mainwaring had it done last summer – she was an absolute heifer, bigger than you, Tru – and now she's out hunting three times a week with thighs like a Russian gymnast's. Marvellous sight. Where the devil is she? *Pickles!*' He was on his feet, scanning the room and bellowing, much as he did when standing up in his

stirrups on horseback in search of a stray hound

Jemima reached up a slim arm and hooked her husband back down by his soup-splattered lapel. 'She's not here, Piers. Skiing in Klosters, I think'. She turned to Trudy, china blue eyes glittering with a malicious challenge to engage in a little bitchy banqueting badinage. 'But I'll give you her number, if you think it might help. I know she'd tried everything, too – diet, drugs, personal trainers, lipo.'

'Thanks.' Trudy's stiff smile matched her stiff neck as she feigned polite gratitude and turned away to join in a conversation about Cheltenham hopefuls. Taking on Jemima – or any competitive Cottrell – in a verbal spat was a blood sport she no longer participated in. She preferred, instead, to nurture the younger family crowd.

Yet when she finally joined them in the mass exodus to the cellars after dinner to listen to two local bands play live sets, she still felt alienated, this time too old and reactionary to blend in. Her sense of unease was not helped by Piers, who followed her down in the hope that she might be harbouring narcotic substances to go with his third port. Even after all these years, Piers still believed that Trudy scattered Es on her breakfast muesli, ate hash brownies for lunch and freebased crack cocaine all evening, simply because she had once been a part of the music scene. Consequently, when very drunk, he reverted into a reckless adolescent and badgered her mercilessly to share her 'goodies'.

'Here.' She fished a couple of supermarket paracetamol from her handbag and pressed them furtively into his sweaty palm. 'Don't tell anyone.'

'You are a darling girl.' He gave her an oleaginous kiss before knocking them back with a dash of Dow's 1983 and loosening his bow tie. 'Let's dance – can't have you being a wallflower all night.'

He started manoeuvring her around the packed cellar dance floor with a vigorous technique that was part ballroom, part rugby ball control and entirely at odds with the throbbing, hypnotic beat, so they looked like two left-footed breakfast TV stars in the first round of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

At this point, Trudy was forced to laugh and join in his high spirited fun for fear of crying. She wondered what the hell had happened to her. Ten years ago, she'd been chic, cutting edge cool, ultra fashionable and idolised by many. Now she was a nondescript Cotswold housewife who was in serious danger of losing her ability to pull out all the stops and put on a show when she chose to. The vintage oyster silk dress that had looked so understated in the shop, emphasising her curves and her wonderful golden skin, now made her feel pale and sallow. Her strappy kitten-heeled shoes – hardly skyscrapers compared to the harlot four inch trotters she'd once adored – killed her ankles and pinched her toes.

At least the music cheered her. It was vibrant, sensual, life-affirming stuff and reminded her of how much talent was out there and how much fun it had been working at this level, hoping for a big break. She'd already sent a demo tape of one of tonight's bands to some contacts in the industry and she knew that they were eager to set up a meeting. She tried not to dwell upon the fact that her own lack of original material was of more immediate concern to those contacts. Only this week, her agent had warned her that she was losing touch with 'bankable sounds'.

Grateful at being released by Piers so that he could return to his

duty dances in the ballroom upstairs, Trudy turned to watch the beautiful young bodies writhing so effortlessly to the hypnotic beat, and felt like a ghost from another age.

And when, much later, she limped to the loo, she found that her make-up was an inch lower than she'd originally applied it, and her normally sexily dishevelled curls had gone so flat and static in the heat, she looked as though she'd been working as a motorcycle courier all day. Trudy rarely dressed up these days – opportunities were few and far between – but when she did, she was loath to let herself down.

Her familiar face gazed back at her from the mirror; those knowing hazel eyes seeing a self-conscious thirty-something caught on the painful cusp between youth and middle aged spread.

In the great scale of things, she reminded herself firmly, she didn't look half bad. She did, after all, possess her mother's enviable bone structure with a smooth, high forehead that many women her age spent a fortune on Botox to achieve; wide cheeks with beautifully sculpted hollows beneath them that no amount of cookie munching filled out and that other women had to have teeth removed to achieve; a similarly lucky genetic inheritance from her father had shaped her face to an exquisite heart and gifted her a classic profile without a hint of a double chin, with a long enough neck to balance her broad shoulders, and with enough height in her long-backed, athletic body to carry extra pounds without looking fat. A perfectionist would claim her ankles were a little thick, her bust a little heavy and her nose a little wide, but to criticise her looks with undue self-hatred was wasteful. So what if she had once been regularly compared to Debbie Harry and Michelle Pfeiffer, and now – on the rare occasions that she was talked about in the media – was more commonly aligned with Anna Nicole Smith or Jayne Mansfield? The latter two had still been complete sex sirens, although both had conducted torrid love lives and met decidedly sticky ends.

To be judged purely physically, as Trudy had been so often thanks to her career, regularly left one in a state of perpetual dissatisfaction, blaming lacklustre nights such as tonight on bad hair, an unflattering dress or unfair genetics when the truth was much more deep-rooted. If beauty was only skin deep, then happiness went through to the marrow of your bones.

Trudy was wised up enough to know that her size fourteen curves, topped with a fabulous and still buoyant cleavage, tailed with a pert bottom and shapely legs, centred with an hourglass waist and crowned with a pretty face, was an enviable package. She didn't need to lose weight – she needed to gain self-esteem. Had she once been a tongue-tied, breathless size twenty whom nobody had noticed, she'd love her shapely, seductive body and outward serenity now. But she had been an effortless size eight with fan clubs, lookalikes, acres of press coverage, a personal stylist and boundless mischievous verve. That was a hard act to follow. No wonder she so often shunned dressing up and putting on a public face these days.

Outside the loos, she bumped into a very overexcited Dilly – lead singer of local band, Entwined, and a young, blonde bombshell who had already been compared to Trudy in her heyday.

Radiating a glowing, healthy, sexy energy that could light up a neighbourhood grid, Dilly danced from toe to toe as she kissed Trudy on the cheeks.

‘Did you hear us play? Wasn’t it *amazing*? I thought we’d flunk it, but Mags was fantastic and pulled it all together. Thank you so much for all your help. You’re the *biz*.’

Trudy shook her head. ‘You’re the ones with the talent.’
‘You encouraged us so much. I hope you don’t mind my saying, but we all think of you as “Mummy” now.’

Trudy laughed, although she did secretly mind; she minded a lot. The original members of *Entwined* – Dilly, her talented boyfriend Magnus, and Trudy’s own in-laws Flipper and Nell Cottrell – were all in their twenties; it made her feel prehistoric to be thought of as their mother. She was only thirty five.

‘You are *the* coolest chick ever,’ Dilly said breathlessly, making her feel marginally better – although when the *Cotswold Life* photographer dashed up to capture them both, she still found herself vainly edging her bottom behind an ornamental colonnade, turning her body threequarters away, lifting her chin, sucking in her cheeks and pressing her tongue to the top of her palate as a model friend had once taught her before flashing the very expensive veneers that her fortune had bought her a decade earlier. Beside her, Dilly just grinned goofily and still looked twice as gorgeous.

‘Could you move a little closer to your mother, darling?’ the photographer called, then lifted his chin to study Trudy over his camera. ‘Didn’t you used to be Trudy Dew?’

‘That’s right,’ she muttered through the clenched, artificial smile that she had once perfected through a thousand magazine shoots.

‘She still is!’ Dilly defended hotly.

‘No I’m not,’ *Trudy* kept the smile rigid. ‘I’m Trudy Cottrell. I usually drop the Dew.’

‘A dewdrop!’ Dilly giggled as the photographer fired his rapid shutter, capturing her looking ravishingly happy and Trudy looking haunted.

‘“’Tis of the tears which stars weep, sweet with joy,” she sighed. ‘Is that a line from one of your songs?’ asked Dilly, as the photographer wandered off.

‘Just an old poem my father used to recite.’

Her father had been absurdly fond of *Festes*, the epic verse written by the absurdly young, absurdly handsome nineteenth century poet, Phillip James Bailey. Kit Dew had often quoted that line, along with another: ‘Dewdrops, nature’s tears, which she sheds in her own breast for the fair who die. The sun insists on gladness, but at night when he is gone, poor nature loves to weep.’ Nowadays Trudy understood its bittersweet truth far better and longed to tell her late, great father so. But unlike Bailey – who had never replicated his first great work in a long lifetime of disappointments – Kit Dew’s life had been too short, leaving the world with far too little of his talent and legacy. ‘I think it’s a shame not to call yourself Trudy Dew any more,’

Dilly was saying. ‘If I ever become famous, I’ll keep my name forever, even though Dilly Gently is bloody awful.’

Still thinking about her father, Trudy nodded. ‘You’re right. Perhaps I’ll resurrect it.’

‘You do that. After all, you’re much more successful than Finn. Why should you take his name?’

Trudy smiled as Dilly dashed off to rejoin Magnus – so in love that five minutes apart felt like a lifetime. After ten years of marriage, Trudy was only too grateful that Finn had given her some free rein

tonight. Like many married couples, they worked best socially if they parted company at the door upon arrival, along with their coats, only to be reunited when they left. And yet these days, for all her gratitude that he left her alone to party with the children while he networked with the grown-ups, she couldn't help wondering if he did so because he was embarrassed to be seen with her.

'There you are! We should have left hours ago. The Vestey's taxi hasn't turned up and I've promised them a lift home. They're dead on their feet.'

He stalked up to her on long, stiff Basil Fawlty legs with his handsome jaw set disapprovingly like a cartoon character. He handed her a cloakroom ticket, waggled his car keys, jerked his head to the door, tapped his watch and stalked outside. It was his shorthand marching orders. When Finn wanted to leave a party, he preferred to do so without ceremony and with military efficiency. To avoid his wife's usual protracted and jolly leave-taking of friends and family, he would have already made farewells on Trudy's behalf, heavy with the apologetic insinuation that she was too dizzy and socially inept to make them herself. Now she had five minutes to gather the coats and the mysterious Vestey's – to whom she couldn't even remember being introduced – and stand obediently in line for collection, or risk the full force of his wrath.

Wandering outside instead, she rejoined the smokers enjoying a final cigarette with their brandies on the magnificent front steps of the hall beneath the grand, classical stone portico. The hoar frost had hardened to a sharp, nose-biting night of bitter chill, dusting every stone in the gravel sweep ahead of them with shimmering white. Shivering, Trudy looked up at a cluster of stars and vowed that she would make a supreme effort to overcome self-doubt and vanity next time she was out on show – an occasion that was only just around the corner.

The annual Auctioneers' Ball was traditionally held at the end of March. Every year, the Cottrell family sent a representative. This year the task fell upon Trudy's and Finn's shoulders to uphold the Cottrell auctioneering, estate and land agency dynasty.

Pretentious, formal, and ridiculously expensive, the ball was among Finn's favourite social events and Trudy's least. But that was about to change. This year, in a smart country hotel in the Surrey hinterlands, a convenient gavel fall from London, Trudy Dew would pull out all the stops and bring the house down. She had a month to get her act together.

As if on cue, summonsed by her own silent cry for an ego boost, a low voice purred her name and a warm arm reached round her shoulder, at the end of which a perfectly manicured hand sporting a gold signet ring initialled 'H' swirled a vast cognac in a balloon glass.

'You look absolutely heavenly, tonight, Trudy,' purred Giles Horton, local roué, as he lit a cigar, blond hair gleaming in the frosty half-light.

'Thank you.' She took his brandy glass and helped herself to a long, warming sip. 'Where's your date?' Giles had been ostentatiously parading a staggering blonde all night, letting off sparks of newly forged sexual energy.

'Gone home to her husband,' he sighed. 'Finn?'

'Fetching the car.'

'Damn – I can't sneak you away and ravish you, then?'

'No,' she laughed. Giles was always refreshingly lecherous.

Suddenly the oyster silk didn't seem quite so drab.

'Another time?' he kissed her bare shoulder where her stole had slipped.

'Of course.'

It was their standard patter. Trudy had never imagined that time would actually come. Now she wasn't so sure.

Blue eyes twinkling, Giles growled, 'I'll hold you to that.'

Catching sight of the kiss so casually and intimately dropped on his wife's bare shoulder as he turned his Range Rover on to the gravel sweep, Finn Cottrell narrowed his eyes and drummed his fingers on the leather steering wheel. The irritation was not at his cousin Giles's customary libertinism. It was that Trudy was not wearing her coat and had therefore clearly not bothered to queue at the cloakroom yet.

Finn bristled. He had worked hard on the Vestey's to persuade them that he should play chivalrous chauffeur instead of ordering another cab – they lived quite some distance from him and Trudy and had a babysitter to get back to, now well into 'extra hours'. Finn had been hopeful that Gavin Vestey, a hugely successful hedge fund manager he had been buttering up most of the night, would coinvest in some projects he was working on, but Trudy had just blown that prospect. Now the Vestey's were no doubt furious, exhausted and unlikely to show any further interest. It stood to reason that if Finn couldn't control his own wife, how could he hope to control Gavin's money?

With a sudden blast of cold air from the open passenger's door, Trudy flopped into the car beside him, smelling of cigar smoke, gratefully kicking off her strappy shoes and reaching for the heater controls on the dashboard.

'The coats?' he hissed apoplectically. 'The Vestey's?'

'Oh yes! Oops!' she replied brightly, reaching for the door handle, her feet stabbing around in the footwell to relocate her shoes.

'Don't bother – I'll go!' he snapped, snatching back the cloakroom ticket which was still crumpled in her hand. 'If you embarrass me like this again, you'll be sorry,' he hissed, leaving Trudy wondering quite what she had done to embarrass him. They had barely been in the same room since dinner, and she hadn't dribbled, spat or crashed face-down into her pannacotta during that.

'I'll hold you to that,' she sighed, echoing Giles's words as she settled back into the heated seat and closed her eyes, thinking about the Auctioneers' Ball and her determination to feel better about herself. 'I'll hold you to that.'