

AN EROTIC SERIES SO STEAMY IT SPARKLES...



HEARTS AND DIAMONDS

JUSTINE ELYOT

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Excerpt from *Fallen*

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About the Book

The celebrity and the bad boy?

Former celebrity judge Jenna Diamond has embarked on a steamy affair with a perfect stranger who cares far more about her body than her fame.

However, as the press scrutiny of their relationship intensifies Jenna cannot resist trying to smooth out her lover's rough edges. But Jason is a man who refuses to be tamed. Can their relationship ever be more than a kinky fling?

Addictive, romantic and devilishly sexy, *Hearts and Diamonds* is part of the Diamond trilogy and perfect for fans of Sylvia Day.

About the Author

Justine Elyot's kinky take on erotica has been widely anthologised in *Black Lace's* themed collections and in the most popular online sites.

She lives by the sea.

Praise for Justine Elyot

'If you are looking for strings-free erotica, and not for deep romance, *On Demand* is just the book . . . Indulgent and titillating, *On Demand* is like a tonic for your imagination. The writing is witty, the personal and sexual quirks of the characters entertaining'

Lara Kairos

'Did I mention that every chapter is highly charged with eroticism, BDSM, D/s, and almost every fantasy you can imagine? If you don't get turned on by at least one of these fantasies, there is no hope for you'

Manic Readers

'. . . a rip-roaring, rollercoaster ride of sexual indulgence; eloquently written, at times shocking, and always entertaining'

Ms Love's Books

Also by Justine Elyot:

On Demand
Seven Scarlet Tales
Fallen
Diamond

Hearts and Diamonds

Justine Elyot

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Chapter One

FROM THE FRONT, it was easy to see that the house had once been handsome, almost stately, before the rot had set in. It might stand inside a barrier of weeds and its blank, shuttered windows might need a little care, but years of neglect could be reversed. There was hope for the place, and the hope was symbolised by the man standing on the front porch, painting the panels of the door.

Despite the paint-spattered overalls it was clear to see that the man was young and handsome, his rolled-up sleeves revealing strong, tanned forearms streaked with pillar-box red. The photographers ranged about the front gate certainly thought he made for a good snap.

So a casual observer might think that there was cause for hope. Ruin was being averted by new and enthusiastic owners who would restore the house to glory.

Approach the rear of the house, however, and hope would not be the dominant emotion. The wild and unkempt state of the gardens was one thing, the splintered window frames and sporadic roof tiles another, but the eye was inevitably drawn to something more sinister. A fence of yellow tape, rustling in the summer breeze, surrounding a square-shaped hole in the patio. Beside the tape stood a temporary tent, in and out of which people in plastic overalls came and went.

A helicopter, hovering overhead, had a good position from which to observe proceedings. Its occupants must have seen an attractive woman in her mid-thirties come out of the sparkling new patio doors with a tea tray, which she set down on a low wall before conferring privately with one of the plastic-overalled crew.

She looked up, so quickly it was almost over before it could be perceived, then ran back inside.

‘Did you get her?’ The helicopter co-pilot’s tone was anxious. ‘That’s the first time we’ve seen her all day.’

‘I think so. Just.’

‘Great. Something for the evening edition.’

That same photograph, of the woman looking up at the helicopter while a forensics expert stood beside her, was in all the next day’s papers.

‘CURSE OF HARVILLE HALL’

Jenna Myatt read the *Gazette’s* headline aloud as she sat at the kitchen table waiting for the coffee to brew.

‘More tabloid bollocks,’ said her lover and front-door-painter, Jason, with dismissive contempt. He cracked several eggs aggressively into a basin and beat them to within an inch of their life with a fork.

‘You don’t think this place is cursed then?’ Jenna put aside the paper with a sigh.

‘How can I?’ He turned to her, his head on one side. ‘It’s where we met.’

‘You’re right.’ She smiled at him, glowing. ‘My biggest bit of luck in years.’

‘Mine, more like. You were already living a charmed life.’

‘Yeah, well, it was losing its charm rapidly, or I wouldn’t have come here.’

‘From LA talent scout to Bledburn hermit,’ said Jason. ‘Riches to rags. Hero to zero. Sublime to ridic—’

‘All right, I get your point.’ Jenna’s tone was slightly frosty. ‘And it’s none of those things, because it was my choice to leave LA and *Talent Team*, and I’m certainly not in rags yet. In fact, I’m still what you might call bloody loaded.’

‘The new Lady Harville.’ Jason whipped up the egg so vigorously the yellow mixture slopped over the side of the basin.

'I'm hardly that. I bought Lawrence Harville's house, that's all. It doesn't make me a member of the family. Just as well, given what a dodgy crowd they've turned out to be.'

'Even dodgier than their lodger,' said Jason with a grin.

'Their *unknown* lodger,' said Jenna, mirroring his smile, remembering the moment she'd discovered him in the attic of her new house, lying on his sleeping bag, unshaven, unkempt and surrounded by painting paraphernalia. Some people left lampshades or curtains in their houses after they'd sold them. Not many left a living, breathing, secret sitting tenant.

Jason tipped the beaten egg into a pan, tipping it this way and that so the yellowish mixture filled the foaming surface.

'Your sabbatical hasn't exactly been relaxing so far,' he said.

'No. I may need another one to recover.'

He smirked over the omelette pan. 'You need to take up yoga or tai chi. Aren't they meant to be good for stamina?'

'I wasn't talking about *that*,' she said, her cheeks heating in memory of the vigorous wake-up call he'd given her earlier on in bed. 'I meant generally, in terms of stress and constant bloody argy-bargy. First all that stuff about Lawrence Harville trying to frame you for his own stinking drug crimes, now a mysterious skeleton in the hidden cellar. I can see why the papers are going gaga over it all. I'm like a walking copy of *Now!* magazine.'

'Are those forensic guys coming back today?'

'No. They got everything they needed yesterday. It's all lab work from now on.'

'D'you think it's that chick Harville told you about? The one who was meant to have committed suicide? Fairy Fay or whatever he called her?'

'Could be. I've no idea. Harville might have been making it up to freak me out. That would be typical of him.'

'He must have known that cellar existed. He lied about that. Got any ham?'

'Some prosciutto, I think, in the fridge.'

Jason gave her a look.

'Is that ham or not?'

'Yeah. Wafer thin Italian ham. It's nice. Try it.'

Jason went to the fridge mumbling something about British pigs being good enough for him.

'I wonder if he's been charged,' said Jenna, her mind still running on the Hall's former owner and Jason's near-nemesis.

'You know he was.'

'No, not with the threatening behaviour towards me. There's bags of proof for that. I mean the drug stuff.'

Jason shrugged, peeling open the packet of prosciutto.

'Up to the CPS now innit,' he said. 'And Kayley holding her nerve. And Mia finding hers.'

'I feel for those girls. He manipulated them.'

'Don't let your heart bleed too much. They knew what they were doing - Mia especially.'

Jason's tone was bitter and Jenna succumbed to an urge to go over and wrap her arms around his waist from behind, resting her head against his shoulder.

'What? I'm OK.'

'You're still hurt. She really let you down.'

'Yeah, well. These things happen. Especially on the Bledburn estate. Anyway.' He pulled her round to his side, resting his forehead against hers. 'Landed on my feet, didn't I? Now I'm here with one of the most gorgeous women in the world and she's banged up waiting for a bail hearing.'

'I'm not one of the most gorgeous women in the world,' said Jenna, laughing. 'That's all make-up and camera angles.'

'You're the most gorgeous woman in *my* world.' He gave the pan a shake, making sure the egg was set. 'Are you sure you don't want one of these?'

'I'll do myself an egg-white special once I've had coffee.'

'How can you have an omelette without the yolk? That's just weird.'

'It's the LA way. Can't go getting fat, can I?'

'Are you fucking joking? You could do with putting a bit of meat on, girl.'

'Not if I want my career back at the end of this year.'

'What? Don't be stupid. You're saying that you're only famous because you're thin? Get lost. You're famous because you've worked flat out for it. Don't put yourself down.'

'I've worked flat out, yes, and part of that was working to make sure I had a flat stomach for TV. You can't be less than perfect in my business, Jay. A few extra pounds could finish me on *Talent Team*.'

'But don't you think that sucks? What about that dude on the team, the one who was famous in the seventies? He's about the size of this house.'

'That's different.'

'Why?'

'It *just is*.' She could feel her patience wearing as thin as the rest of her. 'Besides, I thought you liked my body. My scrawny arse doesn't seem to put you off exactly.'

'It's not scrawny.' He cupped it in both hands, as if to make sure of this. 'But I sometimes think I'd like a bigger target. When you're bent over my knee.'

She swallowed, all her indignation melting at the low, drawled words.

'That's because you're a dirty pervert,' she said.

'Guilty as charged.' He rubbed her silk kimono gown over her curves.

God, I can't be turned on again, not so soon after . . .

The thought was scattered by a kiss, which became long and slow and involved tongues and fondling.

The smoke alarm screeched and they leapt apart.

'Shit!' Jason rescued the pan and its lightly charred contents from the hob. The scent of burnt coffee joined that

of barbecued egg. 'Looks like breakfast's off. Better find another use for that table, eh?'

Keeping his hands beneath her buttocks, he jolted her up so that her legs were wrapped around his hips. She clung on about his neck, falling eagerly back into the kiss while he hefted her across the floor to the big shiny Corian-topped table in the centre of the huge room.

Before he sat her down on it, he lifted the hem of her gown clear of her bottom, so that it landed on the cold, sleek surface with no protection, causing her to squeal.

'Oh, it's cold,' she said, when he moved his lips from her mouth to her ear.

'Good,' he whispered. 'You'll want warming up then.'

She was naked beneath her robe, so it took Jason mere seconds to open his own dressing gown and introduce what lay beneath to her parted legs. He leant over her, laying her down flat between the salt cellar and the pepper pot, and eased into her, a knife into butter.

She was not exactly sore, but she felt a tingle as he pushed himself in, a reawakening that reminded her of how they had already been hard at it only an hour earlier. Nothing seemed to tire him or put him off. Sometimes she thought he would keep going all day and all night if she let him.

A fork clattered across the table as he thrust, thrust, thrust, his eyes gleaming with their purpose. She held on to his shoulders, crossed her ankles behind his back and pulled herself into him in rhythm. The pace was bruising and intense and soon they were both gasping, feeling the heat of the warm summer morning mingle with their exertions to bead sweat on their brows.

No amount of perspiration would deter Jason, though. When it came to sex, he was single-minded. There would be no deviation from his course. She would get shagged ragged and that was that.

'Feeling it, babe?' he groaned. 'Want it, do you?'

'I want it, give it to me.'

She was burning up, her throat dry, her bottom sticking to the Corian, but nothing beat the feeling of him, large and thick in her narrow channel, owning it, taking possession of her.

They came in a burst of slapping hands and pinches and growls, Jason sunk as deep as he could get inside her and straining to go still deeper, not that it was possible.

'Fuck, that took it out of me,' he panted, kissing her hard. 'But you could get it all over again.'

After all the LA sophistication and veneer, his simple animal passion was the best tonic there could be. It had revived her, made her see life in colour and depth again, something she hadn't done since the early days of her relationship with Deano Diamond. She hadn't had a bruised back or a sore bottom or a raw smart between her legs in fifteen years, but she was certainly making up for it now.

'This kitchen table is going to break my spine,' she moaned, only now realising how ill-suited it was to frantic sex. 'Next time bring a cushion down, eh?'

He withdrew slowly, grabbing a handful of kitchen roll to mop up the mess he'd made of her.

'That was a bit more spontaneous than I'd planned,' he said, sheepish now for reasons that were slowly dawning on her.

'Well, by definition,' she said, a little sharply, trying to struggle up to her elbows. 'But you mean . . .?'

'Didn't think to bring the rubbers down, babe. Is it . . . OK?'

'OK?' She sat up, wincing.

He stood against her, wrapping her in his arms, rubbing her poor back and shoulder blades with an expert touch.

'You know . . .'

'I won't get pregnant, if that's what you mean. I have the implant.' She stopped, a stray little pang piercing her from nowhere. She had been going to have it removed, a year

ago. She and Deano had discussed having children. She had felt ready. And then she realised that he was too far gone in his addictions and had given up on the idea. It still hurt, even now that they were over and she was with this phenomenon of sex and creative talent.

‘Right. But, even though I haven’t slept with anyone but Mia in seven years, well . . . There were things she wasn’t telling me, and . . . I suppose I ought to . . .’

‘Get tested?’ Jenna screwed her face up in his robe. She didn’t want to think about this. It was too horrible, too real. She’d earned a bit of holiday fantasy time. How dare the mundanities of life intrude on it like this?

‘Just to be safe,’ he said, cradling her head and stroking her hair.

‘Oh, that’s weird,’ she said, looking up at him.

‘What is?’

‘You being the responsible, sensible adult one. I thought that was my role.’

‘Why did you think that? What have you done that’s been sensible since you got here?’

She felt stung, but then she saw the justice of his words. She’d behaved like a cross between a hormonal teenager and a bad amateur detective ever since setting foot in Bledburn.

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I’ll make us an appointment. At a *private* clinic.’ They rested, lulled for a few minutes, in each other’s embrace before she spoke again. ‘Jason.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do you think it’ll change us? Being “out”? Public?’

‘It’ll be different. But we don’t have to do anything we don’t want to, or see anyone we don’t want to. We can stay tucked up here as long as we like, can’t we?’

She could hear the trace of anxiety in his words, though. He didn’t want the secret idyll to end either.

She put a hand to his cheek. It was stubbly, and the stubble was growing out into a fuzzy beard. It felt soft, the

hairs bending into her palm.

'Are you going to finish your paintings? In the attic?'

'I suppose. I thought you wanted me to sort out the garden.'

'I want you to do what you want to do.'

'Stay in bed forever then?' he said, his lips seeking hers and finding them.

The embrace was broken by the buzz of Jenna's phone. This was the phone she used for people she actually wanted to talk to - only half a dozen people were allowed access - so she sighed and fished it out of her robe pocket.

'Oh,' she said, looking at the caller display. She went out of the back kitchen doors and stood on the warmed stone of the patio, putting the phone to her ear.

'Tabitha? Hi. You've caught me at breakfast.'

'Have I? It's half past ten, you know. I've been at work for nearly three hours.'

'Well, things have been a bit intense round here lately. I've got a lot of rest to catch up on.'

'Quite.' There was a pointed pause, then Tabitha continued, 'Did you see the feature in *The Times*?'

'Oh God! Yes. Yes, I did.'

It was like rewinding the last few days, past the discovery of the bones, past Jason's release from his wrongful arrest, past all the work it had taken to get him out of prison, past Jason's desperate last stand on the parapet of the house and the police arriving at her door. She could almost see the officers walking backwards down her path, getting into their cars and reversing up the road, blue lights flashing.

And before all that . . . the article in *The Times*, which had been about to cause an almighty row between her and Jason, but was pre-empted by all the other stuff.

'I thought I'd hear from you,' said Tabitha.

'You would have done. But things got very hectic around about then. Tabitha, why did you talk to the press about him? You knew we wanted to keep things quiet.'

'I know you *said* you did, but, darling, you have the potential new star of the art world on your hands. Why would you really want to keep quiet about that? I didn't think you could possibly mean it.'

'I did mean it! And he was furious.'

'Was he? I take it the mystery artist was this chap all the fuss was about? The one you were hiding in your home?'

'Jason Watson. Yes. It was him. And we still haven't discussed this . . .'

'Well, you're going to have to. I've had the most enormous amount of interest on the back of that article. An absolute deluge. Buyers, agents, experts, all clamouring to know who he is and get access to his work. I can't fend them off much longer.'

'Oh God, really?'

'Absolutely. You must bring him down to London, darling. Everybody's dying to meet him.'

Jenna took the phone from her ear, needing to take a few breaths. Just as soon as one furore died down, it seemed that several more barged in to take its place. If it was too much for her, how on earth would Jason take it? The dream of a quiet summer spent alternately renovating the house and making love began to fade.

'Look, I'll talk to him,' she said. 'But that's all I can promise. He wasn't wild about the idea when I first broached it . . . but then, some of the reasons for that no longer exist.'

'Legal reasons,' said Tabitha, with a kind of gloating glee. 'You couldn't ask for a better launch for an artist. Really, what a story. He's famous before he's even exhibited. Marvellous.'

'I'll talk to him,' Jenna repeated. 'It'll be his decision. And please - no more press until you hear from me, or I'll be approaching another gallery.'

'Darling!' Tabitha sounded stunned. 'You wouldn't.'

'I'm serious. This isn't my client - not yet. I can't make him do anything. But I'll work on it. Anything that destroys

the delicate balance of our relationship isn't going to help, though - and that includes more publicity. So keep a lid on it.'

'I'll be silent as the grave. You can rely on me.'

'I hope I can. I'll be in touch.'

She pressed the end call button and wandered down over the patio, past the police-taped cellar opening and away from all the horrible thoughts it called to her mind. This morning, she wanted to be in the weeds, smelling their pungent, milky aroma, feeling the strengthening warmth of the sun on her bare legs and feet.

She was standing among the dandelions and cow parsley, suddenly feeling her lack of breakfast and morning coffee, when a pair of hands landed on her shoulders.

She jumped.

'I didn't hear you creeping up on me. Don't do that. This house isn't the place for surprises. It's got too many of its own.'

'Horrors, more like. Harville House of Horror. Who was that on the phone?'

She leant her head back into his chest.

'Jason, I need to talk to you.'

Chapter Two

'WHY WOULD I want to do that? Mingling with a load of poncey bastards who'll look down on me? Fuck it. No thanks.'

Jenna sighed. This was exactly the reaction she'd been expecting.

'Why would they look down on you? They'll see your work. They won't look down on *that*, believe me.'

'Then why do I have to be there at all? Just stick a few paintings up on the wall and put the wedge in my bank account when some twat with more money than sense buys 'em. Everyone's happy.'

'No, everyone isn't happy. Tabitha won't be happy and the gallery visitors won't be happy. They want to know the artist.'

'Do they 'eck. They don't want to know me. Nobody ever has done, so why would they start now?'

'Jason.' Jenna tried to keep the edge of impatience out of her voice. 'Get that chip off your shoulder and start living your life. You aren't the feral youth from the estate any more. You are a grown man with an exceptional talent, and the potential to build an international career and reputation. So stop being such a mardy arse.'

He smirked at the local epithet.

'Mardy arse yerself,' he said.

'All I'm asking,' she said, more calmly, 'is for you to come down to London and meet Tabitha. No press previews, no champagne receptions, no nothing unless you want it. Just a meeting.'

He tugged at a dandelion root, pulling it clear of the ground. Jenna watched as he gazed contemplatively at its

fluffy head then blew on it, sending the seeds afloat on the warm air.

'I've never been to London,' he said.

'What, never?' Jenna knew, of course, that Bledburn had a high proportion of people who had never left the county. Some had never left the town. It still surprised her, though.

'Never. There was a school trip once, to some gallery. The Tate, I think. But Mum couldn't afford it.' He threw the dandelion stalk aside. 'Apparently Kieran Manning set off the sprinkler system. I wish I'd seen that.'

'Well, you can go to the Tate. And every gallery in town, if you like. Don't set off the sprinklers though.'

'Could do with 'em today.' He looked up at the sky where the sun was boiling away already, only halfway up to its zenith. 'OK. I'll come to London. No guarantees, though. But I'll listen to what your mate has to say, at least.'

'That's all I ask.'

She laid her head on his shoulder and they stood together, held in each other's arms, swaying gently among the waist-high weeds, until the familiar intrusion of a helicopter sent them back indoors.

'You're wasting your time,' Jenna shouted at it from the patio door. 'The police have all gone. Go and pick on some other Z lister.'

'You aren't a Z lister,' said Jason, laughing and pulling her inside. 'You're a lot nearer the beginning of the alphabet, aren't you?'

'I don't know. All this controversy is keeping my name in the papers, but that isn't what I wanted. I wanted *peace*.'

'You should have bought a desert island instead of this place. Couldn't you do that? Go on. Buy somewhere nice and hot in the middle of the sea and I'll come and be your Robinson Crusoe. Sleep in a hammock and live on coconuts. Reckon I could handle that.'

'It's a nice thought, but . . .'

She sighed as her 'important contacts' phone rang again. This time it was the police.

Jason watched her, his head on one side, as she nodded and made non-committal noises into it. Halfway through, he got bored and started tinkering with the cafetière, making a fresh pot after the burnt offering.

'Not your mate again?'

'No, it was the police.'

He always tensed when she mentioned the police - she supposed it was hardly surprising, after what he had been through.

'It's all right, they aren't after you.'

'Good,' he said, giving her a wry smile. 'I always get that feeling, you know, that they're going to get me for something else, something I don't even know about. I can't shake it. I don't feel as if it's over yet.'

'They've got the right people this time. You're in the clear. Anyway, it wasn't about that. It was about the bones in the cellar. The forensic anthropologist had a look at them.'

'And?'

'Human, female, older than twenty but younger than forty, no obvious cause of death, probably died somewhere around the end of the nineteenth century.'

'Right.' Jason shrugged and shook his head. 'Poor cow,' he said. 'So, what are they going to do?'

'Nothing. I mean, what can they do? They can't go around looking into centuries-old cases, can they? They'll just shut up the cellar again and do . . . whatever it is they do . . . with the bones.'

'Shouldn't they have a decent burial? After being hidden down there all these years.'

'What's her name, though? How can you have a funeral for an anonymous skeleton?'

'We could try and find out,' he suggested. 'Bet Harville would know something about it. It's probably some great grandma of his.'

'No, the forensic people said she'd never given birth.'

'Probably one of their maids. Them Harvilles probably treated them like dirt and chucked their bodies into the cellar once they'd worked 'em to death.'

Jenna took some cups from the cupboard.

'I know we all love the Harvilles,' she said. 'But we shouldn't go making assumptions. I wish I did know though. Lawrence did mention something about a tragic first wife somewhere in the family tree who committed suicide. It could be her, couldn't it? I mean, the vicar would have refused to bury her in consecrated ground. Perhaps they just couldn't think of anything better to do with her.'

Jason snorted. 'They've got a bloody huge garden. Might have been better than leaving her down there with the rats.'

'True. It does smack of something that they wanted to hide. Whoever "they" might be. Oh God, I hate mysteries. I'm not sure I can cope with this one. I want to know who she is.'

'Perhaps darling Lawrence could help,' said Jason with a sniff.

'Er, I don't think he's going to have a lot to say to me, not now. Why don't we go down into the cellar again? See if there are any other clues in there.'

'Don't you think those forensic guys will have done that already?'

'No, and they aren't coming back. The body's been found to be too old for them to pursue it. I mean, we've all heard of cold cases, but this one is bloody freezing. They'll leave it to amateur detectives like us rather than waste their own resources.'

'Speak for yourself. When did I ever claim to be an amateur detective?' Jason folded his arms, apparently displeased with the entire affair.

'I'll go down by myself, then,' said Jenna, misgivings striking her as soon as she spoke the words. Did she really want to do that?

He raised his eyebrows at her but said nothing.

She swallowed. This had become a challenge.

‘Seriously,’ she said, but her voice faltered. ‘Unless . . . you want to come with me?’

He laughed. ‘No, no, sweetheart. This is your baby. I’ll be upstairs finishing off my frescoes.’

‘Right. I’ll, ah, go and get changed then. Into something I can get cobwebs all over without caring.’

She turned and marched up the stairs.

‘Hope there’s nothing worse than cobwebs,’ he called after her. ‘Maybe some tough gloves in case of rat bites.’

She almost vomited on the step but managed to keep her gorge down. It was a good point, though, and she put on her toughest jeans, thickest socks and a pair of leather driving gloves, just in case. She covered her head with a scarf to avoid getting too much dirt in her hair, and put on a dust mask, thankful for the decorating supplies she had in the house.

Jason, happily, had gone by the time she emerged from the room, dressed for combat. He would have laughed at her, she was sure.

But when she came out to the kitchen patio, she felt his absence with a pang. It would have been good to have a companion for this task. Even though the bones were gone, she couldn’t help feeling that there would be a disturbing vibe down there. It could be a murder scene, for all she knew.

Her skin crawled with dread as she crouched to tug at the iron ring in the floor. It was no longer locked, as it had been since she moved into the house. Now its darkest secret had been given up, there didn’t seem much point in keeping it secure. Jenna hadn’t given the remaining contents of the cellar much attention after the bones had made themselves so horribly evident, but she had a vague sense of lots of boxes and shelves, mainly containing paper and old books.

The slab took its time coming up, Jenna making sure she kept her spine straight and knees bent as she tugged. Jason had made it look easy, but then there was deceptive strength in that wiry frame. She thought about how impossible it was to escape from him when he had her pinned against the wall and the pleasurable memory did a little to dispel the scalp-tingling horror.

At last the paving slab eased up and Jenna was able to remove it. Seeing the black maw beneath it, she doubted herself all over again. Could she really go down into that gloom by herself? She activated the torch app on her phone, which reminded her of the time she'd done it last, going up into the attic and finding Jason.

What a moment that had been. She should have been scared then - after all, a living, breathing fugitive in your loft space was surely more frightening and definitely potentially more dangerous than a few dusty old notebooks and some mice. Yet she couldn't see it that way. Jason in the attic should have been alarming, yet it wasn't anywhere near as creepy as this subterranean vault.

It must be to do with the unknown, she decided. After all, once she had seen Jason, she knew the worst. It was the not knowing . . . but even that didn't make sense, because they'd been down there once before, when they found the bones. They'd seen the worst of the cellar too. Or had they?

She thought of the little message they had uncovered beneath the bedroom wallpaper while they were stripping it. 'Help me'. Something or someone in this house had driven somebody to scrawl those words. And what about the noises Jason said he had heard during the night? Sobbing sounds, coming from somewhere lower down, under the floors.

If an unquiet spirit haunted the house, perhaps the removal of those bones might have satisfied it. Perhaps it would all be all right now.

What are you thinking, Jenna? Ghosts, unquiet spirits. You don't believe in any of that stuff.

Perhaps this place had turned her head. Life had certainly been overwhelming since she had come back to Bledburn. She was fatally disorientated. And people thought LA was the place that led to disconnection from reality. No way. To her, it was a place of substance, almost mundane compared to this drab little ex-mining community on the borders of Nottinghamshire and South Yorkshire.

It was Bledburn that was making her go gaga, not LaLa.

She took a deep breath, shone her torch into the inky depths and located the top rung of the iron ladder set into the narrow brick chute leading to the cellar.

She lowered one foot in its hi-top Converse sneaker and waggled it around until it landed on the narrow metal. OK. She had taken the first step. Now she just had to keep on going.

She clipped her phone to her belt so that the torch continued to shine downwards and made slow, painstaking progress down the ladder. It was a matter of no more than about half a dozen rungs and she soon stood on the cellar floor, its flagstones disturbingly uneven and crunchy underfoot. She supposed it might be mouse bones or beetle shells - she didn't particularly want to check, so she shone the beam upwards, where boxes and trunks stood stacked against the slimy walls.

She tried not to focus on the spot where the bones had been found, but it was still cordoned off with police tape, so it was difficult to ignore. She edged around it, grateful for her dust mask which kept the worst of the thick, musty air from clogging her throat. She lifted one of the boxes from the top of the pile and noticed an index card inside a little gilt frame on the side:

'Harville Hall: Bills etc. 2006-2008.'

Inside appeared to be a number of photocopies and originals of paperwork, mostly dealing with finances and legal issues. It was dull enough but in good condition despite mouldering down here for so long. There were many

such boxes, and Jenna decided to look at each one. Most were, like the first one, full of official correspondence. Jenna shuddered at the thought that somebody had brought the boxes down here and walked past those bones – in absolute plain sight – in order to stack them. What did these archivists think of their resident skeleton? Had no member of the successive generations thought it might be a nice idea to remove the bones and give them a decent burial?

‘Bloody Harvilles,’ she said out loud. ‘Bad to the bone. Bad to the *bones*.’ Her little giggle at this silly piece of word play sounded deeply inappropriate and she apologised under her breath to who knew whom. And after all, she only did it to try and keep her dwindling stocks of bravado going. It was so *dark* down there, and so horrible. She could never be a subterranean dweller.

Box after box of printed matter was examined and discarded, the pile slowly diminishing until she came to very old documents. 1960s . . . 1950s . . . 1940s . . . on and on she went, occasionally taking off a lid to see inside, but never investigating much further than that. What she wanted was material dating to the time when the owner of those poor bones had died. Something must yield a clue – and if she found nothing, then she would laboriously and painstakingly sift through all these other boxes of more recent date, to find a reference, however oblique or obscure, to what must have happened here.

1930s . . . 1920s . . . 1910s . . . and now she felt her pulse quickening as she drew closer to the kind of time frame in which the death must have occurred. The final few boxes went very far back indeed, and contained the original documents relating to the building of the Hall. She picked up the oldest of the boxes, intent on taking it up with her to perform a detailed analysis of the contents. But perhaps she should get somebody from the Bledburn Museum to help – after all, she was no expert when it came to old documents.