

Only You

As the plane sped along the runway Sophie felt a piece of herself fall back into place. Closing her eyes, the adrenaline shot through her body as the plane rose; it was like waking up.

It was a bit stupid not to pre-warn the hotel. To go through the humiliation of trying to explain in broken French that she was Mademoiselle Harper; arriving to claim the Farley room; *Honeymoon suite pour une*. And have the perfectly groomed receptionist, who looked about eighteen, (what would she know about love anyway?), raise an eyebrow in a manner that suggested her train of thought went along the lines of: *oo eeze thise crazeee Scottish woman arriving in Paris for a pretend honeymoon?*

Sophie presented her with the crumpled booking confirmation and the girl's nails rattled against the keyboard and then she was handing her a key, pointing in the direction of the lift.

The lift looked too small and claustrophobic so Sophie took the stairs, her case light enough to haul behind. As she climbed the narrow staircase a painting caught her eye, the words *Only You* emblazoned above a red heart, the paint dripping like it was bleeding. A hangman was scrawled in the bottom corner; possibly by the artist? Or had it been added by a graffiti cynic, who knew trusting all of your hopes and dreams to one person was the death of it all.

Then an understanding hit her as she continued up the stairs; the statement was not directed at the lover, it was a reminder to yourself - in the end there is *only you*.

Sitting cross legged in the empty oval bathtub, Sophie scattered the fake rose petals around in a circle, taking another swig from the champagne bottle. She didn't even like champagne. He loved it so it gave her some satisfaction to down it, like she was stealing a bit of pleasure meant for him.

If they were here together they would soak in a bubble bath, laughing as he drunkenly nibbled on her ear, telling her she was beautiful. He always said her kids were going to be gorgeous. The clue should have been in the 'her', not the 'our'.

Beauty hid around every corner; in the architecture and narrow streets. Shop fronts displayed carefully crafted pastries; she bought a selection of Pain au Chocolat and fruit tarts. It had been months since food had properly caught her attention, but as she laid the bag of pastries beside her on a seat in the park, the sweet smell enticed her appetite to return. As she bit into the pastry, something suspiciously like happiness rose up inside her.

A chill blew in the morning air and she wound her scarf tighter around her neck, gazing across the vast gardens, observing the families by the pond, the old men playing chess on a bench across the way. An old couple by the trees caught her attention and she watched as the man lifted a shaky arm around the woman's back, his gesture full of affection and protection.

The man pulled his companion to him, kissing her full on the lips and she touched his cheek with a wrinkled hand. As they pulled apart and walked on, hand in hand, Sophie didn't

feel sadness at what she had lost. She felt hope that something true, something that could stand the test of time, was still waiting to be found.

They'd met in her local library. He was looking for some obscure author; Sophie was looking to fill an empty evening.

"Don't read it. Trust me; your life will be better off without it."

She was taken aback by his confidence and cheeky smile.

Her face flushed when she realised she was holding a self-help book.

"Thanks for the tip." She quickly slid it back into place.

"So I reckon we're a dying breed," he smiled.

She frowned, not understanding what he was implying.

"Library users. I thought our generation hid at home, downloading onto their kindles, reading on their iPhones or whatever."

Lovers of books, a meeting of minds. Meeting him there, in her favourite place, lulled her into an immediate sense of security and familiarity.

They laughed as they ran down the road in the rain to a late night cafe with a bag full of books to share between them, reading passages aloud over steaming cups of coffee. He was like some hero wandering into her 'everyday', giving her permission to live in a daydream, both playing out parts. They became experts at understanding what the other wanted, forgetting in return who they really were.

*

The bodice of the dress accentuated her curves, pulled in her waist, and the satin skirts fell just below her knee. A splatter of diamante caught the light as she moved to secure her curls in a clasp. She smiled sadly at her reflection.

Perfect. So you. Her Mum's words still clear in her head.

Sophie twirled slowly, watching her body turn in the mirror.

This dress had been the only thing that felt truly right, the only certainty. Trying it on in the shop that day had been a reminder of who she really was, like she was trying to bring herself back.

And when he'd accidentally seen it a week later and his face had fallen in disappointment that this was the dress she was going to wear to their wedding...everything began to unravel. Always so good at reading him, it didn't take Sophie long to figure out the realisation playing out on his face; that this would be the first of many disappointments if he stayed with her.

Sophie twirled back the other way and she was surprised that a smile played on her lips.

She walked over to the window and undid the latch, leaning across the balcony, listening to the sounds of a violin below and animated conversation in a language she still couldn't quite understand. The haunting sounds of the violin echoed along the street, beckoning to her. She decided that the dress still deserved an outing in this beautiful city.

It was early evening and the lines into Notre Dame were quietening but there were still plenty of tourists around to cast curious glances in her direction. She grinned to herself as she noted the confusion, the eyes searching for her groom, the wonder if this was some Parisian tradition; the lonely bride walking the streets in her dress.

Bloom from a cherry blossom tree swirled in the breeze, catching on her skirts as the bells of Notre Dame chimed.

As she walked along the bridge to Ile St Louis a photographer by the Seine shouted up to her.

“Madame, excusez moi, Madame!”

He waved and she hesitated, leaning on the rail.

“May I take your photograph?”

She nodded and walked around to the stairs, allowing him a full shot of her dress.

“It is only you...no groom with you?” he questioned.

She shook her head and smiled.

He nodded in understanding. “Only you.”

He clicked the button and checked the picture in the screen. “Magnifique!”

And it was.

Broadcast on The Hospital Broadcasting Service radio station 2017 after winning Runner-up in Weegie Wednesday Shorts competition