

# CROSS MY HART

CLARE CONNELLY

ASIN: B07M9C6F41

Copyright © 2020 CLARE CONNELLY

All rights reserved.

Published in Great Britain 2020

by Mills & Boon, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers 1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

This website excerpt published 2022

All rights reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. This edition is published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, locations and incidents are purely fictional and bear no relationship to any real life individuals, living or dead, or to any actual places, business establishments, locations, events or incidents. Any resemblance is entirely coincidental.

By payment of the requires fees, or downloading/accessing of this digital excerpt, you are granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right and licence to access this e-book excerpt on your personal computer, smart phone or other electronic reading device only (each a 'licensed device') and to access, display and read the text of this e-book excerpt on screen on your Licensed Device. Except to the extent any of these acts shall be permitted pursuant to any mandatory provision of applicable law but no further, no part of this e-book or its text or images may be reproduced, transmitted, distributed, translated, converted or adapted for use on another file format, communicated to the public, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

## CHAPTER ONE

**Y**OU KNOW WHAT you need to put the wedding out of your mind? That. That guy right there.'

Penny points across the restaurant and my eyes follow the direction of her finger. I presume she's not talking about the high-powered businessmen sitting one table over. After Gareth, I'm giving suits a wide berth. Suits make me sick. I look beyond them, none the wiser. A family, an older couple with greying hair and three well-dressed younger people; two of them look to be a couple, one a sibling. My gaze lingers on them for a moment and a familiar pang of sadness sparks inside of me.

I miss my family.

Swallowing to clear my suddenly thick throat, I shift my gaze onwards, skating over the figure of a man standing at the bar, his back to me, before jerking it to Penny. Every fibre of my being goes on high alert.

Nothing about this man says 'suit'.

He's wearing low-cut denims, dark, scuffed at the arse in an 'I've worn them to death' rather than a 'I paid hundreds of

bucks for them' kind of way, and a fitted white shirt that shows off the contours of a back that is muscular and sinewy. His arms are tanned, his neck thick, and beneath the stretch white cotton of the shirt I can make out the ghost of writing, running across his centre—a tattoo?

My pulse leaps, pounding faster, and there's a twisting low down in my abdomen. His hair is thick and pale, blond, close-cropped.

I want to stare at him. I want to stare at him all night, ideally as he strips his clothes from his body.

All the more reason not to. I jerk my gaze back to Penny, a sardonic smile touching my lips. 'I don't think a one-night stand is going to make me forget that my ex is getting married tomorrow.'

'I don't know,' she coos, unashamedly watching the man in a way that makes envy spurt, unwelcome, in my gut. 'I think that guy could drive Gareth out of your head for a while.'

I look down at my drink, stirring the paper straw—half-disintegrated—in clockwise circles, watching as the ice chips against the edge. 'I think this is the only way I'm going to forget.'

'To this, then,' Penny agrees, chinking her glass to mine, lifting it to her lips and throwing it back in one fell swoop. 'Another?'

I laugh, despite myself. We've been best friends since primary school, when Marcia Adams called me fat and pushed me into the tennis nets, and Penny came running over and shoved Marcia—three years older than us—so hard she fell backwards and landed in a delightfully-placed puddle. 'I can't have a big night, Pen. I've got that gazillionaire flying in tomorrow to inspect the golf course. And you know how much I need to sell it. That commission is... I need it.'

‘You don’t have to tell me how much you need it,’ she says, crossing her arms over her chest. Her anger and hatred for Gareth know no bounds.

‘I’m giving you until midnight,’ I say, ‘and then I want to be back in my own bed.’

‘It’s only six o’clock!’ She laughs.

‘Yeah, but I also need to not be hungover!’

‘Babe—’ she leans closer, pressing her forehead to mine ‘—do you trust me?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Then let me help you put that fuckwit where he belongs—that is to say nowhere. He doesn’t deserve even one minute of your attention. Got it?’

‘I know that. I’m not... I don’t still think about him.’

‘Sure you don’t.’ Penny rolls her eyes. ‘You’re doing a great job of moving on but, unfortunately for you, you still co-own the same bloody real estate agency.’

‘More to the point—why I need this sale tomorrow!’

‘Yeah, I get it.’ She sighs. ‘It’s early. Whatever happens tonight, I promise I’ll get you home by midnight. Okay?’

I bite down on my lip, nodding slowly.

‘The same again?’ She slips her slender body out of our booth, her eyes falling to my still half-full glass with disapproval.

I lift the glass and throw it back, slamming it on the table top before meeting her eyes. ‘You betcha.’

She winks her approval and then sashays away, oblivious to the way the table of businessmen watch her as she goes. But then, that’s Penny. Stunning, sexy, unselfconscious, smart, and totally uninterested in flattery and praise. She’s just happy going about her own business.

I’m not still hung up on Gareth. I couldn’t care that he’s getting married.

Okay, that’s a lie. I *care*, but that’s normal. We were

together two years—not that long in the scheme of a whole life, I suppose, but *two years*. We started a business together and were talking about moving in together, and yet he always said to me, from the first date, ‘I’m not the marrying kind’. And I accepted that, I got used to it, because I wasn’t even sure if I was the marrying kind—so why would I die on that hill?

And then we got more serious and our friends started getting married and I had this vision of our future, and suddenly it seemed strange to say we’d never get married.

Stranger still when he broke up with me. Ugh. I try to push that memory way, way back in my mind. The words he used I’ll never forget.

*‘I love you, Gracie, but just not enough. Not in the way a guy should love a woman. I’m sorry.’*

And he cried, because he’s a good person and I think he felt like absolute shit to be pulling the rug out from under me.

*‘Everyone says they want to stay friends, but I mean it, Grace. Look at what we did together.’*

He waved his hand around our office, and my stomach twisted because so much of who we were was in that place.

I agreed with him—we couldn’t let anything destroy the business our blood, sweat and tears had turned into a multi-million-dollar real estate agency specialising in high-end property. Sydney was a tight market but we’d forced our way in and never looked back. We owed it to ourselves, each other, our clients and our reputation to get over this speed bump.

That seemed a lot easier to do before he hit me with ‘part two’ of the break-up.

*‘I’ve met someone.’*

Those words! God, I’d heard them in movies and read

them in books and they're just an innocuous collection of syllables, but when they were spoken to me I felt like my ears had been jammed with crickets. Everything hummed and buzzed and suddenly the guy I'd spent two years with, who'd seemed happy and content, was a part of someone else, something else, and I was on the outside of him and that, strangely adrift, as though whatever had anchored me to my place in this life no longer existed.

'His name—' Penny pushes a drink across the table top to me '—is Jagger.' She rolls the 'r' like a tiger, and I laugh.

'Of course it is.'

'He's only in town for tonight,' she continues, sliding in beside me. 'And he'd like to meet you.'

'Oh, for God's sake.' I roll my eyes, sure now that she's making it up, and look towards the bar. But he's facing us and my heart jolts in my chest. His elbows are lifted onto the bar so that he can recline casually, and he's watching me with a curiosity that sparks flames in my blood.

My lips part involuntarily and, even though I desperately want to look away, to blink, to *anything*, it's weirdly impossible. I am staring at him and he's watching me and no one else in the bar seems to exist.

His eyes are green, with thick black lashes, and he's tanned, a deep caramel colour, as though he's spent a heap of time at the beach lately. I wonder if he's brown all over? My eyes drift downwards and, holy crap, he's got a very, very nice body. Pecs clearly defined by that white shirt, toned forearms, lean hips.

Shit.

Pants that show a promising bulge. His hands are what really grab my attention, though. I like nice hands and his are...perfect. Neat nails, long-fingered with coarse hair on the knuckles, tanned, and he wears a scuffed gold ring on his

middle finger, and some loose leather strings around his wrist. He's a sort of devil-may-care surfer kind of guy. He's very, very easy on the eyes.

Heat stains my cheeks and now I jerk my gaze back to Penny, my expression one of mutiny. 'What did you say to him?'

'That you're looking to be distracted for the night,' she grins impishly.

'Penny!' I reach for the drink, taking a gulp to cool my flaming insides. 'How do you know he's not...?'

'What?' She leans towards me conspiratorially. 'It's a one-night stand, Gracie. What do you care about, beyond the fact he's hotter than hades and undoubtedly great in bed?'

'Okay, for a start, how can you possibly know that?'

'I can tell. I'm good at this.'

'What, like some kind of sexual psychic?'

'Exactly.'

I purse my lips. 'Pen,' I sigh softly. 'He could be God's every gift to women and I still wouldn't kneejerk my way into his bed.'

'That's a shame because, like I said, he's interested.'

Against my will, my eyes drag back to him. He's finishing his drink, but his eyes are still on Penny and me. My pulse ratchets up a gear and out of nowhere I imagine him naked, that shirt thrown across some hotel room somewhere.

'I'll tell you what,' she purrs. 'I'm going to go talk to that guy.' She jacks her thumb towards a group of men further down the bar and I can guess which one she means. Silver fox at the head of the group—Penny's got a thing for older guys—always has done. Our take-it-to-the-grave secret is the fact she slept with our high school science teacher on Grad Night.

'And I'll come back in twenty minutes to check on you.'

'Pennyyyy...' I groan, shaking my head in exasperation.



‘Six months ago, the bottom dropped out of your world. Gareth fell in love with someone else while you were busy building your business and planning a future with him. He went and fucked some bargirl.’

My heart spins at this frank assessment of our break-up. ‘Yeah?’

‘So at least have a drink with the hottest guy I’ve ever seen. Take a step towards remembering who *you* are. The you you were before Gareth, the you who built a multimillion-dollar business and is smart and funny and curious and loves to meet new people. He’s from overseas; just chat to him. Have *fun*. I beg you!’

And not because she’s right, and he’s hot in a way you never see outside of Hollywood, but because she’s my best friend and has never once steered me wrong, just as I have never counselled her badly. The science teacher would never have happened if I’d known about it in advance. I trust her. I believe she’s right and somehow the timing of this, of at least opening myself up to the possibility of flirting with another guy on the eve of Gareth’s marriage, would be strangely meaningful and important and...cathartic.

She’s right. Pre-Gareth, I used to have fun, I used to flirt with guys, hook up. I’m in my twenties—why am I acting like someone’s grandma?

I expel a breath and look towards him once more. He’s turned away and if I have any doubt about whether or not I want to talk to him, the surge of disappointment to see his back answers that.

I stare at his tattooed spine with a frown on my face, but a second later he’s spun back around, two drinks in his hands, and our eyes lock and certainty locks in my chest.

‘That’s my cue,’ I say. Penny grins and I shoot her one last look of bemusement before I’m alone at the table. I have seconds to run my tongue over my teeth, making sure no

trace of the beer nuts we shared earlier remains, to wipe my hands on a napkin beneath the table, and then he's standing on the edge of the booth, his green eyes—aquamarine, up close—boring into me.

'May I?' He nods to the seat beside me and I nod, grabbing my hair and pulling it over my shoulder.

'Grace?' he prompts, passing a drink towards me.

I smile belatedly, holding a hand out towards him. Our eyes meet as his fingers curve around mine and warmth spears through me. It's a handshake, the kind of thing I do all the time, but the way he's staring at me layers an intensity over it that changes everything.

'Yeah.'

'Jagger,' he says, the name on his lips so much sexier than when Penny purred it like some kind of wild animal.

'Jagger.' I'm unable to resist the feel of his name in my mouth.

He smiles when I say it.

'American?'

'Yeah.' His grin's completely disarming. He braces an arm on the edge of the booth behind me and, even though he's not touching me, I kind of feel like he is. I feel enveloped by his warmth and nearness.

'Whereabouts?' I prompt, lifting my drink towards his in salute.

He chinks it back. 'New York.'

'Nice.'

'You ever been?'

I tilt my head to the side a little, considering. 'Once.'

'Did you like it?'

'What's not to like?'

He lifts a brow. 'The traffic. The weather. The noise. The pollution...'

'Resident problems,' I say, deliberately moving forward a

little so our knees brush under the table. I'm thrilled by the sense of power that gives me—the idea that this is all on my terms. That I know what I'm doing, where we're going.

'Not tourists?' He doesn't miss a beat.

'Nope. Not this tourist. I love the snow.'

'And you don't get a lot of that here, right?'

'Not for long, and not in Sydney.' I sip my drink thoughtfully. 'I would have loved to move to New York. I used to think I would.'

'Why didn't you?'

I pull a face. 'It's not that easy. Life...can get in the way sometimes.'

'Sure it can.'

I appraise him, my heart racing, blood pounding through my body. 'Penny says you're only here for a night?'

He nods. 'Yeah. Had meetings today and I fly out tomorrow.'

I nod slowly.

'And you live here?'

'I moved here for uni,' I agree. 'But I grew up further north.'

'How far north?' he asks with curiosity.

'A little town in Queensland. You know, the kind of place where everyone knows everything about one another, with one main street and not much to do at any time, even less when you're a teenager.'

'Sounds like heaven.' He grins.

'Yeah, it kind of does.'

'Your friend says you're looking for someone to distract you for the night,' he murmurs, taking a slug of his beer, his eyes holding mine over the bottle.

I nod slowly. 'I guess I am.'

'Why?'

I didn't expect the question, even though it makes perfect,

absolute sense. Only a monkey wouldn't ask. 'My ex—who happens to be my business partner as well—is getting married tomorrow.' Somehow, saying those words feels cathartic. So I say more. 'It was sudden. He's in love.' I spit the word with some distaste, earning a wry smile from my companion.

His teeth are so white, his face stubbled in a way that makes me imagine running my fingers over it.

'And you still love him?'

The question is a good one, one I haven't asked myself. I shake my head slowly from side to side. It feels good to admit that. 'I don't think so.'

'Then you don't believe in love?'

I gnaw on my lower lip. 'No. I mean yes, I do.'

'You sounded angry a moment ago.'

'Did I?'

He nods slowly. 'You sounded like someone who wants to fuck someone else out of their mind.'

'He's not on my mind,' I say, determined on this point. I'm not turning my first one-night stand in for ever into petty revenge sex. This wouldn't be about hurting Gareth so much as rediscovering myself, my agency, my right to think of myself as 'single', just like he did—only we were together.

'It's...symbolic,' I say finally. 'Like a way to mark the date or something.' I shrug. And then, with bald honesty, 'Also, I don't particularly like the idea of him being the last guy I slept with when he's off on his honeymoon.'

He lifts a brow at my truthfulness. 'That's valid.'

'I'm glad you think so.' I wrinkle my nose. 'I'm not sure it's not a little bit fucked up.'

Beneath the table, his hand curves over my knee. 'It's not.' Desire jolts directly up to my thighs, and higher still. Heat pulses between my legs.

'Really? Speaking from experience?'

His expression is guarded. 'You could say that.' His fingers trace a little higher, to the flesh of my thighs. I grab my breath, hold it in my lungs a second, waiting for it to infiltrate my body.

'How long were you together?'

I can hardly think straight. His fingers creep a little higher and I stare at him beseechingly. It's not late enough in the night for this—people are still having civilised conversations at nearby tables. I am beyond grateful for the tablecloth that offers some discretion, but if he moves his hand any higher I think I'm going to make some kind of noise to show exactly what he's doing to me.

He moves his body closer and the arm around the back of the booth curves over my shoulders. Holy crap, this feels good. Better than good. Ah-mazing.

His hand stops mid-thigh.

He's waiting for me to answer.

'Two years.'

He nods.

'And you broke up when?'

'Six months ago.'

He lets out a low whistle.

'So this wedding—whirlwind? Or was he with her the whole time he was seeing you?'

'No!' I shake my head, the idea sharper and harder than the truth. 'Just at the end. He met her a week before he broke up with me. Love at first sight.' Again, my words are derisive.

'Love at first sight is a juvenile concept.'

I agree with him completely. I hate that I do, that the girl who stared her sensible, conservative parents in the face and told them she'd rather be penniless and happy, chasing her dreams, than to give up on them because they seemed so unobtainable—that girl would never condemn 'love at first' as juvenile.

But he's right.

Love at first sight is a construct. Maybe love is, in general. Desire isn't though. It's real and it's flooding my limbs, bringing parts of me I didn't realise were dormant back to life.

I drop my hand to his beneath the table and I fix him with a determined stare. 'You know what?'

He moves his head closer. 'What, Grace?'

'I really—' I drag his hand higher '—really—' higher '—*really*—' I place it between my legs, at the apex of my thighs, my eyes challenging him '—don't want to talk about him.'

'No?' He moves his thumb just a tiny bit, but enough for it to brush my clit through the flimsy lace of my thong, and my breath escapes in a shuddered, tortured exhalation.

'No.' I shake my head from side to side, burying my face in his shoulder for a second. Fuck. He smells like...heaven. Sunscreen, sweat, strength. I lift a hand to his side, digging my nails into his toned hip.

I don't know anything about him besides the fact he looks like a god and smells even better. His name. His country of origin. And the fact he's blowing out of town in twenty-four hours.

It's perfect.

'What I want,' I say into his shoulder before lifting my face and forcing my eyes to meet his, 'is to get out of here. Right now.'

\*\*\*

THE NOTORIOUS HARTS are available now and you are going to *love* them.

Cross My Hart  
Burn My Hart  
Harden My Hart  
Unbreak My Hart

