

White Lies

by C. A. Fulwell

Emilia fussed and primped, rearranging velvet cushions and her chestnut-brown hair. Damson Cottage, Emilia's nest egg, was fairytale-beautiful: oak beams and cosy luxury in the English countryside. Emilia had rented out this "*magical, romantic idyll*" and had thrived.

How much love had this house seen? How many sunset bottles of Rioja, how many giggles in the bath, blissful hours in the king-size bed? Emilia smiled softly. Why couldn't just a little of that magic be for her? Maybe, after stopping the rentals and moving back into the cottage herself, she'd find what she was missing and settle down.

Outside, there was a crunch of gravel, and the idling engine of a Jeep: *he was here*. Emilia unsuccessfully used her hair to cover her scar: a jagged, pink burn running the length of her cheek.

The knock at the door dragged her from the mirror. She opened it, not breathing for a moment. "Morning, Oliver!" An exaggerated burst of politeness which, she hoped, disguised how she felt.

Oliver, Estates Manager for the cottage rental company, was what Emilia's mum would have called a 'proper man': tall, strong-*powerful*-even, but also gentle and humble. He had salt-and-pepper hair and Cary Grant eyes. If she stopped renting out the cottage, would she ever see him again?

"Good morning, Emilia," said Oliver, stepping into the room, his voice a warm, slow roll of thunder that melted her every time he spoke.

"Thank you for the replacement guest book. I can't imagine why anyone would take it!" Emilia chuckled, blushing.

Oliver said nothing. He had nothing in his hands. Emilia shuffled her feet, then continued, "Have you got it? Is it in the car?"

Oliver looked at her in a manner unlike anything before. "It's alright, Emilia. I know."

"What do you mean?" Emilia's face was hot, her stomach fizzing.

"Last week, there was the front gate which turned out not to be broken. The week before, the remote for the television had disappeared. This time," he nodded at something over her shoulder, "it's a missing guest book which, as it happens, I can see on that shelf, turned the wrong way round."

Emilia couldn't look at him. She'd been so stupid.

"If you wanted to talk, you could have just asked. No need to make up a reason." He was closer to her now.

Emilia was barely audible. "I didn't think... Why would anybody want me with *this*?" She raised her hand to her face, turned her ruined cheek away.

Oliver raised a hand to his shirt. He opened the first three buttons, exposing angry, deep burn scars spreading across his chest and beyond. Emilia couldn't speak.

Fortunately, Oliver could, "I didn't want you to think that I only wanted this because you were... like me." He stepped closer.

Emilia's voice was a whisper, "Wanted what?"

"This."

Oliver cupped her chin in his strong hand and kissed her scar, softly. He smiled, then kissed her lips, enveloping her in his muscular arms.

Magic.