

PARTY WALL

By Frances Mensah Williams

The thud of bass drums accompanied by clashing cymbals started up again.

Goaded beyond endurance, Cassie hurled her biro at the wall separating her flat from the one next door.

Wasn't it hard enough to concentrate on the essays crammed with 10F's mauling of the English language without what sounded like a steel band playing?

Since her neighbour's arrival, four painfully loud weeks ago, almost every evening had involved music blasted through their common wall. While it usually ground to a halt around 9pm, it was now almost 10 and, judging from the raised voices filtering through to her living room, there was a party going on.

Cassie sucked her teeth in irritation. The walls in their building were flimsy, it was a school night, and enough was enough!

Jumping off the couch, she tied back her long braids and marched to her front door, pausing to slip on a pair of black pumps. The party had spilled out onto the landing between their flats, and Cassie pursed her lips and edged past a couple in a passionate embrace.

The door to the flat next door was wide open and she walked straight into the entrance hall. Although the layout was exactly like

hers, between the body heat from the people crammed into the small space and the volume of the pulsating music, the flat was a world away from her neat, Ikea-furnished home.

Her indignation crushed any self-consciousness she might have felt about the contrast between the stylish party goers and her own torn jeans, crumpled T-shirt and make-up-free face. The living room was packed with couples swaying in time to the music, but with no sign of her neighbour, Cassie pushed her way through to the kitchen. He was tall and she spotted him instantly. He was leaning against the sink in conversation with a petite woman in a sexy black dress.

As Cassie approached, he looked up and she caught her breath. Although they had crossed paths a few times since he'd moved into the building, she'd barely glanced his way, restricting herself to a brief smile and a murmured hello. While it hadn't escaped her notice he was attractive, she was in recovery after the painful end of a five-year relationship and noticing any man – no matter how attractive – was not on her agenda.

But now, standing in front of him, it was impossible not

to notice his sculpted features, smooth brown skin and sensuous lips. He wore an expensive-looking blue jacket over a white vest, and his long, loose textured twists cascaded onto broad shoulders.

The woman turned to follow the man's gaze and shot Cassie a warning glare. Taken aback by the hostility, Cassie hesitated, but

before she could speak, her neighbour exclaimed, "Finally!"

Cassie stared at him blankly and the lecture she had been about to deliver lodged in her throat. He slipped past the woman and, walking up to Cassie, hugged her warmly. She stiffened, too shocked to push him away.

Taking advantage of Cassie's bewilderment, the man smiled triumphantly. "See, Lisa? I told you my girl was on her way. So, this is er..." He looked down at Cassie, his dark eyes pleading, and she sighed

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silently. It didn't take a genius to work out what was going on. Extricating herself from her neighbour's embrace, she extended her hand.

"Hi, I'm Cassie."

"Joshua, are you kidding? She's the one you're going out with?"

Trying not to take offence at the incredulity in Lisa's voice, Cassie smiled fixedly and remained silent. Without missing a beat, Joshua wrapped an arm around Cassie's shoulder.

"Yeah, gorgeous, isn't she?" he gushed.





It took every bit of Cassie's self-control not to shrug off the heavily muscled arm. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Besides, she thought sourly, the woman's undisguised disdain was now making this very personal.

"Please excuse us."

Joshua grabbed Cassie's hand and, conscious of Lisa's gaze following them, Cassie didn't resist as he steered her out of the kitchen, through the packed living room and out onto a small balcony.

Despite the melodrama, Cassie couldn't help noticing how much nicer Joshua's view was. Unlike the row of concrete garages facing her balcony, his overlooked neat green lawns illuminated by garden lights.

She turned to face him. "What the hell was all that about?"

Joshua grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, you must think me a complete idiot. The woman had me cornered, and because she's friends with one of my best mates, I was trying to let her down gently by saying my girlfriend was on the way. She didn't seem to believe me, so when I saw you coming towards me I —"

"Honestly, you're worse than my Year 10 students! Why couldn't you just tell her you weren't interested instead of resorting to silly pretences?" Cassie said sternly.

He looked so crestfallen that her lips twitched in amusement. At that, his face immediately brightened and she shook her head ruefully.

"Look, I came to ask you to turn down the music. We share a wall and —"

He cut her off with a contrite, "I know, and I'm sorry for disturbing you."

"I'm a teacher. I've got homework to mark —"

"What do you teach?"

Put off her stride by the second interruption, Cassie hesitated. I didn't come here to make friends! But Joshua's brown eyes probed hers and suddenly she felt a flutter in the region of her tummy. She drew a sharp breath and ignored the flutter. "English language and literature."

Joshua grinned, immediately setting off another flutter. "What a coincidence! I had the biggest crush on my English teacher at school."

Cassie felt the heat rushing into her face.

Was this man flirting with her? In her ripped jeans and cropped "Don't Make Me Use My Teacher Voice" T-shirt, she looked a wreck compared to Lisa and the others who could have stepped straight off a catwalk. She ducked her head to avoid his gaze and continued doggedly.

"Look, our flats are bang next to each other, and your music comes through the party wall every flipping night and —"

"Hey Josh! We're running out of wine." A red-haired man, his face flushed from the heat, poked his head through the French doors.

Joshua's expression mirrored Cassie's frustration. "The invite said bring a bottle — I should have made it two," he muttered. "Just give me a minute, mate."

Turning to Cassie, Joshua spoke quickly as if afraid of a further interruption.

"Cassie, I'm sorry about how things started out tonight, but I'm really glad you came. I've seen you around the building, but you

never seem interested in saying anything more than hello. If I'm honest, I've played my music a bit too loudly hoping you might come round."

For the second time, Cassie felt her cheeks burn. The man was just as disturbing as his loud music.

"You're a grown man. Why couldn't you start a conversation like a normal person instead of doing my head in every night?"

"You must have realised by now I'm crap at knowing what to say to women." He glanced over her shoulder and groaned. "Not again..."

When Cassie turned, Lisa was inches away, her suspicious gaze darting from Joshua to Cassie. Her stare was unnerving and Cassie was beginning to see Joshua's point. There was only one thing for it.

Cassie linked her arms behind Joshua's neck and pulled him in for a passionate kiss. When they finally broke apart, Lisa had disappeared, and they stared at each other in bemusement.

Cassie was the first to recover. Her heart thudding, she pushed away from him and made for the door.

"Wait... you're leaving?" Joshua's eyes silently begged her to stay. The flutters in her tummy were now in overdrive. Cassie smiled.

"Yeah, I forgot to bring a bottle. I'll be right back."



★ Frances Mensah Williams' new novel, *Strictly Friends*, (Lake Union £8.99) is out now