

ROSIE GREEN

A
Winter
Wonderland

★ Little Duck Pond Cafe



A WINTER WONDERLAND
Little Duck Pond Café

A sparkling, magical escape into a winter
wonderland

ROSIE GREEN

Published by Rosie Green
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(LITTLE DUCK POND CAFÉ)

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CHAPTER ONE

‘Want to be a Christmas tree!’

It was a chilly morning in November and as I drove my three-year-old to nursery, we were talking about the fancy-dress party at the end of term. I was quailing at the thought of the costume I’d have to make, and I’d been trying all week to subtly persuade Emma that she’d look so much lovelier as a fairy (I still had her wings from the year before).

‘No, Mummy,’ she said firmly from her car seat in the back. ‘Christmas tree.’

Emma was nothing if not strong-minded and I smiled to myself, feeling rather proud of her. She was adamant she wanted to be a tree, so a tree she would be. I enjoyed sewing but I knew it would take all of my creative skills and more to fashion an outfit that would pass my daughter’s inspection!

Last Christmas had been a bit of a washout, although Harry and I had both tried to make it a good one for our daughter. But this Christmas, I felt more content with my life. Harry and I seemed to be getting to a stage where we could share a space without the accompanying resentment and bitter asides. Plus, Emma and I were going to have lovely company on Christmas morning – and they only lived next door!

Milo had called out to me the other morning, as I was bundling a protesting Emma into the car (although she loved nursery, she was determined that today, she was staying at home with Luna, our Border collie).

I’d turned and Milo was standing barefoot in his doorway, wearing only his dressing gown, and I’d felt that familiar tug of desire deep inside. I’d denied my feelings for so long – scared to risk another relationship after the agony I felt following my break-up with Harry – but lately, I’d been feeling that maybe it was time to be brave . . .

‘Jaz? Mabel would like to know if you and Emma want to open Christmas presents with us on Christmas morning, before we go to my sister’s?’ He’d shrugged. ‘I thought since it

would just be the two of you, you might like a bit of company?’

I’d nodded. ‘Great idea!’ (I was grateful for his ‘softly-softly’ approach. Milo was all too aware of my fears of getting involved and he’d been incredibly patient with me.)

His suggestion that we could spend Christmas morning together had given me the lift I’d needed, and ever since then, I’d felt a little burst of happiness inside every time I thought about it.

I’d been worried that it wouldn’t be very exciting for Emma if she only had me there. Harry and Vivien were collecting her after lunch on Christmas Day and she’d be spending Boxing Day with them. But I knew my daughter would be over the moon to be going next door to open presents. She adored Milo’s ten-year-old daughter, Mabel. Plus, I rather liked her dad . . .

Since our passionate kiss of a few weeks ago, I’d felt my relationship with Milo finally moving from friendship to something more. With classic bad timing, he’d had to go away on a business trip soon after, so we hadn’t had a chance to talk about what had happened between us, but I was secretly hopeful that the festive season – which was, after all, the most romantic time of the year – could be a big help in fanning the flame into a full-on blaze.

Emma ran into nursery without a backward glance at me, and I smiled – grateful for her confidence – and ducked out. I bought a coffee at the village store and drove to the station, hopping onto the train to Guildford with just a few minutes to spare. Settling down in my window seat with a thankful sigh to sip my steaming coffee, I started making a list on my phone of the Christmas presents I was hoping to buy.

I’d ordered things for Emma online, of course, but I’d always loved the whole ritual of ‘going Christmas shopping’. I loved the sparkle of the lights and the warm glow I felt hearing all the old Christmas songs on repeat in every shop. I loved the aroma of roasting chestnuts and the spicy street food served from pop-up stalls and barrows on the high street. I loved the

Salvation Army choirs bringing such cheer in the frosty air with their traditional Christmas carols. And most of all, I loved the way people smiled at you just because it was *that* time of the year.

In Guildford, I wandered up and down the high street, soaking up the busy, festive atmosphere, then – feeling peckish – I nipped into a café and treated myself to a warm mince pie with melt-in-the-mouth crumbly shortcrust pastry and a delicious hint of Christmas spices. I sat in the window to savour it, enjoying the chance to ‘people watch’ and warming my freezing hands on a steaming mug of hot chocolate laced with cinnamon and a hint of chilli powder.

Afterwards, I bought a few stocking fillers for Emma plus a fabulous interactive ball with flashing lights for Luna. I smiled, knowing she’d be intrigued by the fact that it moved on its own. She would absolutely love chasing it around on Christmas Day! On a roll, I also spotted an ideal gift for Milo. A bit of a gadget man, he was always complaining that he made coffee and then forgot about it so it ended up cold, so I bought him a plug-in mug heater for his desk. I planned to find him something fun as well – something to make him laugh – and I felt a warm glow inside, thinking about it. We laughed a lot when we were together, and that was so important . . .

I glanced at my watch and was shocked at the time. I’d been wandering around in a dream – not like practical, sensible me at all! – but I needed to get back in time to take Luna for a walk before collecting Emma from nursery at two, so I turned and headed back to the station, not wanting to miss the Sunnybrook train.

As I hurried towards the platform, I was dodging lots of other Christmas shoppers, loaded down with bags and bundled into winter coats and scarves, just like me. Some chattered excitedly to one another, clearly filled with the festive spirit, while others looked dogged and resigned, as if the stress of the season was already becoming a bit too much to bear.

I was taking the stairs down to my platform when I heard a shout behind me, and when I turned, a young guy in a yellow puffer jacket was speeding down the stairs behind me. He was

carrying a bulky box and I panicked thinking he was going to charge right into me and knock me over with his parcel.

I got to the bottom of the stairs and flattened myself against the wall to let him past, just as a red-faced older man appeared at the top of the stairs, shouting for the guy with the box to stop. But it was clear he had no intention of obeying the command, and instead, he speeded up, missing a few steps in his haste and almost losing his footing.

I tried to avoid him as he swerved to the side, but the box caught my arm and the force of it knocked me off balance and I ended up crashing onto the tiled floor.

Feeling winded, I struggled to a sitting position and was just in time to see the runaway guy hop onto a train – *my* train – just as the guard was preparing to blow his whistle.

I was going to miss my train! I'd be late for Emma!

But just then I found myself being hauled to my feet. Someone was taking my hand and telling me to hurry or I'd miss it – and the voice was very familiar.

'Milo?' I gasped as we managed to hop onto the train together, just before the doors closed.

'Are you okay?' Milo was peering at me anxiously.

'Yes. Thank you. Oh, my bags!' I glanced back at the platform in a panic, and I saw that the angry-looking man who'd been in hot pursuit of the runaway had arrived too late to catch him.

'These bags?' smiled Milo, pointing at the carriers behind him.

'Yes!' I grabbed them gratefully and he ushered me into a carriage.

Through the window, I caught sight of the man staring furiously after our departing train, hands dug into his hair with exasperation. He was wearing black trousers and a white shirt with a name badge. It looked like a uniform, and I wondered if the young guy in the yellow jacket he'd been chasing had actually been shoplifting.

As I took a seat, I noticed him making his way along the aisle up ahead. He was making slow progress because of his cumbersome package, but eventually, he disappeared from sight. My arm was hurting from taking my weight when I fell, and I rubbed it gingerly.

‘Thank goodness you were there.’ I smiled gratefully at Milo opposite.

‘I wouldn’t normally be, but my car’s at the garage having its MOT so I used the train for the first time since the new station opened. It’s great that Sunnybrook has its own stop on the line now.’

I nodded. ‘It’s good for local business. Ellie was saying she’s definitely noticed an increase in customers since it opened, with people coming to Sunnybrook by train to shop or meet friends for coffee or whatever.’

‘She’s nervous about us launching the glamping site in March, but I think the fact we’ve now got a railway link in the village can only be good for the business.’

I smiled at him. ‘You’ll have a proper little empire by the time you’ve finished – you with your ‘Roastery’ coffee shops and Ellie with her café and baking school, plus the glamping business between you.’

‘Going into business together’s been good for both of us. Ellie’s got a strong entrepreneurial streak in her, just like me. We like being our own boss and I suppose we kind of understand each other.’ He grinned. ‘Can’t wait to get the glamping site up and running. The big Bedouin-style tent is being delivered and set up in the field tomorrow, and the two shepherd’s huts arrive the day after.’

‘Wow. Already? But you don’t open until March.’

‘Ah, but there’s a lot of work to do before then.’

‘And you’ve got the festive season in the middle of it all, of course.’ I smiled. ‘Emma is *so* excited for Christmas this year.’

He chuckled. ‘So is Mabel. She’s desperate to go to the pop-up ice rink in Buntingford.’ He paused. ‘Do you . . . fancy coming with us?’

I pretended to think about it for a moment. Then I nodded. 'That would be nice. I need to buy some new decorations for our tree. Perhaps we could go to the Christmas market in Sunnybrook as well? It's arriving at the weekend, apparently.'

'Good idea. We could take the girls out for the day – maybe Saturday? – then decorate both our trees when we get home. What do you think?'

'I think it's a wonderful idea,' I agreed, mesmerised by the dark warmth of his eyes.

'Good,' he said, and my heart skipped a beat at the softness of his tone.

Suddenly realising I'd been smiling dreamily at him for far too long, I tore my gaze away and cleared my throat. 'I mean, the girls will really enjoy it.'

'They won't be the only ones,' he murmured, and as I caught the meaning in his intense gaze, a delicious little shiver ran all the way through me.

CHAPTER TWO

A few days after my Christmas shopping trip on the Monday, the magnificent tree went up on Sunnybrook village green, signalling to all that the festive season had well and truly arrived.

I'd been so busy, I'd forgotten all about the Christmas lights switch-on ceremony, but Milo knocked on my door with Mabel that night and said they were going over to see it. Did Emma and I want to come? But Emma was drooping with tiredness, so reluctantly, I had to say no.

'I'll take some photos of the Christmas tree on Dad's phone, Jaz,' offered Mabel, who was muffled up in coat, scarf and mittens against the freezing night air. 'Then you and Emma can see what it looks like.'

'Oh, will you, now?' Milo grinned and ruffled his daughter's hair, making her squeak in protest.

'I'm always very careful, Dad,' she pointed out imperiously.

'You are, my love, you are. And you take excellent photos. Right, let's go or we'll miss the switch-on.' He smiled at me. 'We'll bring you some of those special mince pies Ellie's got on the menu. She's keeping the café open late tonight specially.'

'Don't like mince pies,' announced Emma, appearing in the doorway. Flushed and bleary-eyed from her nap, she leaned against me and I scooped her up in my arms.

'Phew, you're getting heavy,' I laughed.

Milo smiled at Emma. 'How about a Christmas gingerbread man instead?'

Emma nodded shyly.

'They're not called gingerbread men, Dad,' admonished Mabel. 'They're gingerbread *people*.'

Milo winced. 'Of course they are.' He winked at me. 'Okay, one gingerbread *person*. Will that do, Emma?'

She nods again.

‘What do you say, Emma?’ I prompted.

‘Yes, please. Thank you very much.’

We all chuckled, and I kissed her soft cheek and set her down, and we stood and waved to Milo and Mabel as they set off to walk into the village. I smiled down at my daughter, a warm glow in my heart.

I wasn’t pinning my hopes on it – not after all the recent chaos that had happened in our lives. But maybe – just *maybe* – this could turn out to be the best Christmas yet for Emma and me . . .

The following afternoon, on my way to pick up Emma from nursery, I drove over to the Little Duck Pond Café. Standing in the car park for a moment, I watched my breath emerging in little puffs in the frosty air and gazed across the green at the huge Christmas tree, admiring it in all its festive glory. It looked beautiful in daylight. How enchanting would it look when darkness fell, all lit up?

Maddy arrived at that moment, parking alongside me and bursting from the car with the high energy of a person newly engaged and in the process of planning the wedding of the century.

‘Guess what? We’re going to Paris!’ She flicked back her long chestnut hair and beamed at me, cheeks flushed with excitement.

‘For your honeymoon?’

She shook her head. ‘We’ve decided probably the Maldives for that. No, I was talking to Jack about my wedding dress and I happened to say that my dream would be to go to Paris because the women are so stylish over there. So yesterday, he told me he’d booked us a trip on the Eurostar as a surprise engagement gift.’

‘Wow. That boy spoils you.’

‘I know. Isn’t he lovely?’

‘You do realise how eye-wateringly pricey a wedding dress boutique in Paris will be?’

She snorted, folding her arms and stamping her feet against the cold. ‘We won’t be *buying* one there. I’m not that stupid. For the amount you’d pay in a Parisian dress shop, we could probably go on a month-long Caribbean cruise honeymoon. No, Mum’s got this hugely talented seamstress friend who’s going to be making the dress of my dreams.’

‘So Paris is just for inspiration?’

‘Exactly. I just want to *look* and maybe try on a few dresses and get some ideas for my own fairy-tale creation? And soak up the atmosphere of Paris at Christmas time as well, of course.’ She rubbed her hands together gleefully. ‘We’re going the week before Christmas and staying in a gorgeous hotel for the night.’

‘Lovely.’ I smiled. ‘Lucky you.’

‘Are you going in? It’s a bit bloody parky out here!’

I nodded. ‘I thought I’d grab a quick coffee before picking Emma up.’

‘Let’s go, then. I want to pick Ellie’s brains about wedding venues.’

‘Have you set a date yet?’ I asked, as we went in.

‘No, but we’re thinking winter next year. I’m currently dreaming of a castle in the snow, and a backless silk dress with a fabulous white faux fur wrap.’

I chuckled. ‘Never mind the fake fur. I should think you’ll need fake *snow* as well, if that’s what you have in mind!’

Ellie came over from behind the counter, a sparkly red and green festive bow catching her blonde hair back at one side. ‘Hi, there. Don’t tell me. You’re talking about weddings.’

Maddy pulled a face and I laughed. ‘Whatever made you think that?’

‘Planning your wedding is one of the best bits of getting engaged.’ Ellie grinned. ‘I don’t blame you for wanting to

make the most of it,' she said, as an older couple at the only occupied table got up to leave.

As she waved them off with a cheery smile, the toasty warmth of the café enveloped me and the glorious scent of Christmas spices tickled my nose – cinnamon . . . cloves . . . and I could detect a citrus aroma as well. I guessed it would be from Ellie's extra-special chocolate orange mince pies. She'd introduced them to customers the previous week – serving them dredged in icing sugar and with a dollop of whipped cream – and they were proving very popular indeed. Katja had joked the other day that she'd started making chocolate orange mince pies in her dreams in order to keep up with demand!

Ellie brought a tray of coffees over to a table by the window, and she and Maddy talked wedding venues for a while. Only vaguely tuned in, I gazed out of the window at the beautiful tree, thinking about Milo and our planned day out with the girls on Saturday. I had a bad case of the butterflies every time I thought about it.

Maddy glanced at her watch. 'Oops, better go. I'm meeting Mum to talk about wedding venues, so I need to dash.' She blew each of us a kiss and rushed out in a blast of freezing air.

'She's walking on air at the moment.' I grinned at Ellie.

'I know. I'm so glad she and Jack have finally realised they're right for each other. They dithered about making a commitment for far too long. In my opinion.'

'I don't see that "dithering" is a bad thing, though,' I pointed out. 'I mean, if you're not sure, it has to be right, doesn't it?'

'Of course. It's just that sometimes people in love just can't seem to see the wood for the trees. They say they're waiting to be certain, when all that's really happening is they're allowing ghosts from the past to hold them back.'

I pursed my lips at the rather shrewd look she gave me. 'I suppose you mean me and Milo?'

'Well, if the shoe fits . . .'

We looked at each other and started to laugh.

‘Actually, you might be surprised when you hear what I’m doing on Saturday,’ I told her primly.

‘Oh, yes?’

‘We’re taking Mabel and Emma out for the day. A special Christmas surprise. They know nothing about it. We’re going to the festive market in the village to buy decorations for our trees and then on to the pop-up skating rink in Buntingford.’

‘Ooh, and will you be decorating your Christmas trees *together*? The four of you?’ Ellie’s eyes danced with mischief.

‘I’d say that was a distinct possibility.’

‘Very cosy. And what happens later, when the kids are in bed?’

I smiled as a tell-tale blush scorched my cheeks. ‘Well, wouldn’t *you* like to know.’

She pretended to look queasy. ‘Well, probably not. It’s about time, though. It couldn’t happen to a nicer couple. You and Milo are great together.’

I smiled to myself as I shrugged on my coat and wound my scarf around my neck, preparing to meet the winter chill outside. Ellie was right. It was fear that was holding me back. I’d spent a long time denying my attraction to Milo, telling myself it was far too soon after Harry to get involved with anyone else. But then several weeks ago I’d finally given in and we’d kissed, and ever since then, my doubt about us as a couple had been ebbing away.

Perhaps Saturday night really *would* be the night when that doubt disappeared forever . . .

The door to the upstairs flat opened and Ellie’s stepdaughter, Maisie, came rushing into the café with a friend.

‘Mum, we’re just going to get some sweets from the village shop,’ she said, already on her way to the door.

‘Wait a minute! I’ll come with you.’ Ellie scraped back her chair.

‘Mum, we’ll be fine.’

‘But it’s getting dark outside.’

‘Yes, but the lights from the big Christmas tree are on now and there’s loads of people walking their dogs, aren’t there, Esme?’

Her little friend nodded earnestly. ‘We’ll run all the way and we’ll cross at the crossing.’

‘Well, all right. But I’ll be watching from the door. So go straight there and come straight back, okay?’

‘Okay!’ They disappeared in a flash and when we stepped outside, they were already on the green, walking in the direction of the high street.

‘Loads of people walking their dogs, eh?’ Ellie snorted. ‘Not a single one as far as I can see!’

I chuckled. ‘At least she’s right about the tree being lit up. Isn’t it gorgeous?’

We stood in the little café car park to watch them, Ellie stamping her feet and crossing her arms tightly against the cold. She’d dashed out after Maisie and Esme in just her sleeveless work polo shirt and tabard.

‘Your shepherd’s huts look great,’ I commented, catching sight of them on the glamping site behind the café. ‘And that beautiful Moroccan-style Bedouin tent is stunning.’

‘It’s gorgeous, isn’t it? We thought it would be great for families, it’s so spacious inside.’

I nodded. The elegant, draped outline of the tent rose out of the late afternoon gloom, looking like something from a child’s story book about far-away lands.

‘I just hope we’re ready to open by March,’ she murmured, turning back with a mother’s mild panic to watch Maisie and Esme walking away from her across the green. ‘To be honest, I can hardly believe it’s happening. I mean, Milo and I have been planning the glamping site for ages, but now that the actual accommodation has arrived, it’s all a bit scary. Thrilling at the same time, though.’

‘It probably feels scary because you have other things to think about at the moment,’ I reminded her.

‘The IVF, yes. Zak and I have been discussing when we’ll go for round two.’

‘Exciting.’

She smiled a little doubtfully, her gaze suddenly swinging over to the duck pond. Someone was sitting on the bench there. ‘Milo seems full of confidence that we’ll make a go of the glamping business. He says that with the café already being a popular and well-established business, that should give us an advantage in the early days.’

‘Milo has excellent business sense. I’m sure he’s right.’ I felt a twinge of pride for him. His chain of roastery coffee houses was growing, and he was opening one in Manchester – his first in the north of England – early next year.

Ellie shook her head in disbelief, still looking at the figure on the bench. ‘Just think. By April, ‘Glamping at the Little Duck Pond Café’ will be an actual *thing*.’ She straightened up and – craning her neck in Maisie and Esme’s direction – called to them, ‘Make sure you cross the road at the crossing with the green man, girls!’

‘We know, Mum.’ Turning, Maisie gave her mum a wave and the pair walked on, heads together, chatting.

‘They’ll be fine. Maisie’s very sensible,’ I reassured her.

‘I know. It’s other people you worry about, though, isn’t it? Take that bloke, for instance.’ She pointed at the figure sitting on the bench, dressed in what looked like a yellow jacket. ‘I’ve no idea who he is, but he’s been loitering around here for the past few days. Last night, he was sitting right there on the bench, and when I looked out of the window first thing, I thought he’d gone. But then he sat up.’

I glanced over. ‘Strange. Maybe he’s waiting for someone?’

‘All night?’

‘He might not have been there the whole night.’

She shrugged, clearly not convinced.

I sighed. ‘When you have kids, you sometimes feel like you’re living on a knife edge, don’t you? No one warns you about the gut-wrenching fear for their safety that comes with being a parent.’

‘They certainly don’t. And I know I’m probably being ridiculous. But I *hate* letting her cross that road on her own. The thing is, though, I’d be a bad mother if I *didn’t* let her have some independence.’ She shrugged.

‘You can’t win,’ I agreed. ‘And you’re right. There are some truly horrible people about.’

I glanced over at the occupant of the bench. Then I looked a little closer. The yellow jacket seemed familiar. Hadn’t I seen someone wearing one like it recently?

‘Oh.’ Something clicked. ‘I’ve seen him before. He was at the station, running away from a security guard. He had this big box . . . I assumed he’d been shoplifting.’

‘Really?’ Ellie looked at me anxiously. ‘What’s he doing just sitting there, then?’

‘No idea. He jumped on a train to get away from the guy who was after him and he – ’

‘Oh, hell.’ Ellie grabbed my arm. ‘Why is he staring over at Maisie and Esme?’

Peering through the gloom, I felt a surge of alarm myself as I watched the stranger get up from the bench and start sprinting after Maisie and Esme.

‘What the hell’s he doing, Jaz?’ But Ellie wasn’t waiting for an answer. She was already off, running across the green, and after a second, I followed her, haring along as fast as I could to catch up with her but hampered by my boot heels digging into the soggy grass.

Up ahead, the girls had nearly reached the high street, and the stranger was almost upon them. I heard him shout and both Maisie and Esme turned in his direction.

And right at that moment, I saw the runaway bus.

A double-decker, it was haring along the high street – which was busy with shoppers – travelling much too fast for the speed limit. There was something wrong. There had to be. The driver wasn't slowing down at all.

My heart lurched with horror.

Maisie and Esme hadn't seen it.

The electronic beeping of the green man reached my ears and next second, the girls were stepping out together, onto the crossing . . .

'Maisie!' bellowed a frantic Ellie, abject fear lending her voice a superhuman volume.

They turned, just as the stranger reached them. He grabbed both girls and pulled them back – a second before fifteen tons of deadly double-decker metal hurtled passed their noses.

CHAPTER THREE

I watched in shock as the bus, finally losing speed after colliding with the kerb, mounted the pavement – thankfully empty of pedestrians on this side – and bumped awkwardly onto the village green. The wheels must have met the traction of the muddy ground because mercifully, after trundling along for another few metres, the vehicle finally came to a complete stop.

My shoulders sagged with relief and a wave of nausea hit me as I thought about what could have happened. Legs shaking, I followed Ellie over to where she was hugging the girls as if she'd never let them go. Tears were escaping but she kept brushing them away with her hand, trying to smile cheerfully at Maisie and Esme. It was clear the girls had no idea what had just happened and the danger they'd been in. They were staring over at their rescuer, who was now heading back to the bench where he'd left his belongings.

'You saved their lives,' Ellie called after him. 'I just don't know what would have happened if you hadn't got there in time.'

She glanced anxiously over at the bus, where the passengers, looking dazed, were starting to disembark onto the green, including the driver. Thankfully, it didn't look as if anyone was hurt. Taking both girls firmly by the hand, Ellie hurried after the hero of the hour, who was now putting on his backpack and hefting a long canvas bag over his shoulder.

Following them over there, I peered at the young man. He was quite tall with dark hair and beneath the patchy beard, I could see he was young – no more than twenty. He was shrugging off Ellie's profuse thanks as if he'd done nothing out of the ordinary.

I smiled at him. 'You're a real hero,' I said earnestly.

But he just shook his head and wouldn't look at me, and I could tell that our outpouring of gratitude was only making him feel awkward.

‘Come over to the café for a cuppa.’ Ellie wasn’t giving up. ‘I’m Ellie and this is Jaz. And Maisie and Esme. I want to thank you properly for what you did. Have you eaten?’

He shook his head. ‘I’m okay. I don’t need help, thank you.’

The scruffy mustard-yellow puffer jacket seemed to dwarf him and he wore jeans and well-worn trainers and fingerless gloves. He looked pale beneath the straggly facial hair, and thin, as if he hadn’t eaten a proper meal in a while. The stuffed backpack looked heavy, but it was the canvas bag slung over his shoulder that jagged at my heart. Was that the contents of the big box I’d seen him with? It looked like one of those compact lightweight tents.

Was this boy living rough?

‘What’s your name?’ I asked gently.

‘Freddy,’ he mumbled. ‘My name’s Freddy.’ He glanced away, over at the high street.

‘Nice to meet you, Freddy.’ I smiled at him and Ellie renewed her efforts to entice him over to the café, saying, ‘Would you at least let me give you a hot drink? You must be freezing out here. I own the café over there and we usually have pastries and cakes left over at the end of the day. You’d be helping me out if you were to take some off my hands?’

He hesitated, looking over at the café. I sensed he was torn. He desperately wanted to leave, but the temptation of that cosy glow in the café window and the possibility of food and a hot drink was too great to turn down.

‘Okay.’ He shrugged. ‘Thank you.’

‘Excellent. Come on. Girls, I’ve got some sweets in the house you can have.’ Ellie’s mouth, as she smiled down at them, trembled a little, and I knew she was still deeply shaken by what had just happened. ‘Maisie, would you make Freddy a drink when we get back? To thank him for rescuing you and Esme?’

Maisie nodded, gazing shyly up at Freddy. ‘We’ve got lots of different coffees. Or you could have tea or hot chocolate or freshly-squeezed juice. Or there’s fizzy water and still water.’

And little boxes of juice but they're really just for the *little* kids.'

'Right.' Freddy nodded, solemnly considering the choice Maisie had presented to him. 'Tea would be nice.'

'Okay.' Maisie smiled up at him. 'Come on, Esme. You can get the cup and saucer and the spoon out, and I'll make Freddy's tea.'

They ran ahead, back to the café, and I had to say goodbye or I'd be late to pick up Emma at the nursery.

'I'll give you a call later,' I told Ellie as we parted. And when I turned a minute later, I was just in time to see Freddy opening the café door and ushering Ellie in ahead of him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Next morning, when I called in at the café after dropping Emma at nursery just before nine, I could tell that Ellie was still not quite over the events of the previous afternoon.

‘How’s things?’ I asked, walking in to find her organising the cake display.

She looked pale, as if she hadn’t slept. ‘Honestly, Jaz, I couldn’t stop shaking last night. Eventually, Zak made me slug down a whisky. I just kept thinking: *What if Freddy hadn’t been there?*’

I shook my head. ‘Don’t dwell on it. Maisie and Esme are fine. That’s all that matters.’

‘Yes, but is it? I just feel so terrible, Jaz, for suspecting that poor boy of . . . well, I don’t know *what* I thought he was going to do when he started running after Maisie and Esme. Attack them. Or *abduct* them?’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘What has the world come to when something so horrible is the first thing you imagine?’

‘I know. But for goodness’ sake, you weren’t to know the circumstances.’

‘I guess so.’

‘And if I’m honest, *I* suspected the worst of him as well when I saw he was being chased at the station. I mean, maybe he *was* shoplifting, but having met him, I’m not so sure now. He seems such a polite youngster.’

‘He is. And you know, he’s actually homeless. It honestly breaks my heart that a boy like that should be sleeping rough. I mean, I know he’s not really a *boy*. He’s eighteen. But that still seems so young to me. And when I think of how I get in such a state about my “first-world problems”, while Freddy’s . . . well, he’s trying to get by all on his own in sub-zero temperatures. No roof over his head, no regular meals, no one to tell him things will be okay. It makes me want to cry.’

The door jangled and Bertha, one of Ellie's regulars, came in. She frowned, seeing our solemn faces. 'Oh, dear. Has something happened?'

Ellie explained about the near-accident and Bertha looked shocked.

'The boy deserves a medal for what he did,' she said.

'Absolutely,' I agreed. 'Has he tried the hostels, Ellie?'

'He's homeless?' Bertha's brows rose.

Ellie nodded. 'I mentioned the hostels, Jaz. I wanted to ring around for him, but he didn't want to talk about it. And I was frightened that if I asked him too many questions, he might just get up and leave without even drinking his tea.' She sighed. 'I told him he should come back to the café whenever he's hungry and there would always be a meal waiting for him.'

'That's good, then,' said Bertha.

She shook her head sadly. 'He won't, though. I just know he won't. I offered him a shower and I said I'd put his clothes through a wash and tumble dry, but he point-blank refused. He kept saying he was fine and he didn't want to be a nuisance. From the few things he said, it sounds like he had a huge row with his dad and he walked out. I think he wants to prove he can look after himself. He spent all the money he had on that flimsy tent.' She gave an agitated sigh. 'He puts it up at night on a patch of grass behind the shops and he sleeps in all his clothes.'

'Hang on.' Bertha frowned. 'I wonder if that's the young lad I saw the other day sitting outside the Swan Hotel on the high street, playing tunes on a penny whistle.' She shook her head. 'He looked so *young*. I put a tenner in his tin.'

'You see, that's what kills me.' Ellie looked anguished. 'I walk along that high street every day for one reason or another. How come *I* never noticed him needing help?'

I shrugged. 'Maybe he wasn't there when you were.'

Ellie looked grim. ‘No, I think it’s because I walk around obsessing about my own stuff and not taking enough notice of the horrible things happening all around us. Let’s face it, when I saw him on that bench on the green, all I could think was that he was up to no good. And then he goes and saves Maisie’s and Esme’s lives!’

‘Well, join the club, love,’ said Bertha gently. ‘The world can be a terrible place. It’s perfectly natural to think the worst about strangers – especially if you’re a mother.’

She sighed. ‘Well, maybe it’s time I thought about other people instead. I mean, where will the likes of Freddy go on Christmas Day? Maybe he’s got a genuine reason for leaving home. Maybe his parents aren’t nice people. Or maybe they’re lovely and he doesn’t appreciate them. But regardless of the circumstances, there must be so many people who find themselves alone at Christmas, through no fault of their own – or even worse, out on the streets like Freddy.’

‘That’s true,’ I murmured. ‘I thank my lucky stars that I’ll be with Emma, watching her open her presents. If Emma was with Harry and Vivien, and I was on my own, my Christmas morning would probably be pretty bleak. I’d have Luna to cuddle, of course, but it would still be quite lonely.’

‘Exactly.’ Ellie looked almost on the point of tears. ‘So instead of just saying how awful it all is, I’m actually going to *do something about it*.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’ve no idea, Jaz. But I’ll think of something. That poor boy will *not* be spending this Christmas freezing to death in that flimsy tent of his.’

CHAPTER FIVE

It was Saturday and the ice rink was busy. Forecasters were predicting snow and it was certainly cold enough, I reflected, as I stood at the rail with a sleeping Emma in her pushchair, my breath billowing out like smoke in the frosty air.

Wrapped up cosily in a red snowsuit and pink and white bobble-hat, Emma was still clutching her new teddy bear, holding onto it in her sleep.

Knowing we'd be out all day, Harry had offered to take Luna. And in the end, it was agreed she'd stay with him and Vivien for the whole of the following week. (I was hoping Luna would be on her best behaviour. I suspected Vivien would send her back immediately if she dared to jump on the sofa and leave dog hairs on the expensive silk cushions!)

I dug my hands deeper in the pockets of my padded winter coat, glad of the soft tartan scarf that was keeping out the chill. My cheeks felt icy and my nose was quite possibly bright red to match the scarf. But I was having far too much fun with Emma, Milo and Mabel today to be worried about resembling my daughter's favourite reindeer, Rudolph.

We'd already been to the Christmas market in Sunnybrook, the four of us, and we'd bought twinkly lights for our trees. Emma and Mabel had been allowed to choose one special decoration each. Mabel had plumped for a beautiful fairy dressed in gossamer gold with a wand that magically lit up, but Emma had bypassed all the eye-catching glitter and flashing baubles and reached for a small teddy bear wearing a Santa hat at a jaunty angle. (Judging by the way she was refusing to be parted from it, I doubted the bear would ever make it onto our tree!)

And now we were at the pop-up ice rink on a farm in nearby Buntingford.

Mabel and Milo were skating, and Emma and I had promised to carry out the very important task of fetching hot chocolate from the nearby kiosk for when they came off the ice!

The view from the rink-side was like a scene from an old-fashioned Christmas card. People bundled in coats and scarves skated around the ice, some more experienced and striking out on their own, while others clung gingerly to the sides, and still more were having fun circling the rink in pairs or groups.

Milo and Mabel skated by, Mabel's eyes shining with excitement as she waved at me. I waved back and the special lingering smile I exchanged with Milo lifted my heart and made me feel oddly breathless. There was something about him . . . something about being with him that made me feel giddy, a feeling I hadn't experienced since my teenage years.

Recently, I'd even started to picture Milo and Mabel in our future. We had fun as a foursome – Mabel and Emma adored each other – so I supposed it was only natural to sometimes find myself thinking of us all as a little patched-together family . . .

It was late afternoon and darkness had fallen – but here at the rink, with the fairy lights twinkling in the trees surrounding the little clearing in the wood, the scene was sparkling and magical. I wasn't much given to outbursts of emotion over those 'perfect' moments in life, but on this occasion, even *I* felt a little skip of joy at how 'right' it all seemed. I wasn't skating myself – Emma was a bit too young to take to the ice – but as I watched a laughing Milo and Mabel skating around the rink hand-in-hand, I found myself wishing I could join them. What would it be like to skate with Milo? It would be fun, that's for sure. Milo could always make me laugh.

A romantic vision slipped into my head: Milo on his butt on the ice and me offering a hand to help him up, both of us laughing . . . Milo on his feet again, slipping a little so that we were suddenly nose-to nose in the frozen air, his hands grasping my waist to stop us from falling again. And then . . . a kiss so natural . . . a kiss that was long and dreamy and almost impossible to break away from . . .

At Mabel's shriek of laughter, the delicious daydream vanished. And when I looked over, Milo was lying on his back on the ice in a starfish position and Mabel was piling gleefully on top of him. He started tickling her, much to her delight, and

it was a while before they managed to struggle to a standing position again.

Then Mabel was half-skating, half-wobbling over to Emma and me, holding out her arms for balance, and asking me for her dad's phone, which I was keeping safe for him. I looked over at Milo for his approval and he grinned and stuck his thumb in the air, so I dug it out of my pocket and handed it over.

'Thank you, Jaz,' she said breathlessly, making her way back to her dad, while I held my breath, praying she'd stay upright so that both phone and small girl would remain unhurt. She made it back to him and started taking photos, and Milo obliged with a selection of comical poses that made me laugh so hard at one point, there were tears running down my cheeks.

Mabel had been taking photos on Milo's phone all day. It was something she loved to do. As she'd pointed out to me earlier, 'My dad's phone is much more clever than mine and I can make people have cat's whiskers and funny hats.'

When they eventually came off the ice, the hot chocolate with marshmallows I'd bought went down a storm. We sat at one of the little tables and even Emma was wide awake for that and she ended up with a chocolate moustache that Mabel thought was hilarious.

'Er, Emma's not the only one who looks like she's been glugging down *all* the hot chocolate,' Milo pointed out with a grin, showing Mabel her reflection. She started to giggle, at which point Emma gave a delighted chuckle and made a grab for the phone. It slid out of Milo's hand and somehow landed in the whipped cream on top of my slice of festive ginger cake.

'Lovely,' I remarked with a grin, extracting the messy phone and reaching over for a paper napkin as the girls hooted with laughter.

'Don't waste it,' said Milo, taking the phone and pretending he was going to lick it clean.

‘No, Dad! You can’t do that! You might get poisoned,’ squeaked Mabel.

‘Right. Well, we wouldn’t want that, would we?’ He grinned. ‘You might not get any Christmas presents if I was poorly.’

Mabel frowned at him. ‘Daddy, it’s *Santa* who brings us our Christmas presents.’

I exchanged a look of alarm with Milo. I hadn’t realised Mabel still ‘believed’ – or at least, didn’t want *not* to believe!

‘Of course it’s Santa, love,’ her dad said smoothly, retrieving the sticky situation. ‘But if I was in bed with a sore tummy, who would make sure your letter to Santa got sent in the post?’

Mabel’s brow furrowed as she thought about this. Then she eyed Milo doubtfully. ‘Are *you* Santa, Daddy? Because Jed at school said it was the mums and dads who buy the presents.’

‘What?’ Milo looked horrified. ‘Who *is* this Jed person? Has he got a brain at all? Jaz, help me out here. Do *you* believe in Santa?’

I nodded solemnly. ‘Of course I do.’

‘Well, so do I. And so does Emma, I reckon.’

I smiled at my daughter. ‘Who’s coming with his sleigh and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer to bring lots of presents?’

‘Santa!’ shouted Emma gleefully.

‘Exactly.’ Milo smiled at her. ‘Well said, Emma. My case is closed.’

Then Mabel leaned over to Emma and murmured confidentially, ‘You don’t have a chimney in your house, Emma, but Santa is magic and he can make himself invisible and get through the roof to bring the presents.’

Emma gave Mabel her cute gap-toothed smile. ‘Santa bring Christmas ’sesents to my house,’ she said firmly.

‘That’s right. Good girl.’ Mabel planted a kiss on Emma’s cheek, and Milo ignored the sticky mess on his phone and

snapped a photo anyway . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Later, back at Milo and Mabel's, we sat round the table in the kitchen and ate pasta Bolognese followed by apple pie and custard. (Milo brought out an old booster seat of Mabel's from years ago but Emma was absolutely adamant she wanted to sit on a 'big girl's seat'.)

'Say something beginning with "C", Emma,' said Mabel, as I wiped a big blob of dropped custard off the table.

Emma beamed across the table at Mabel. 'Something 'ginning with C.'

'No, say a *word* beginning with C.'

'Word 'ginning with C.'

Everyone laughed, including Emma. She looked so pleased with herself, my heart flipped over with love, and I thought how light-hearted and full of joy I felt, sitting around this table with people who meant so much to me. After all the hurt and devastation of Harry's betrayal, it was almost a surprise to find that I could be this happy again. It was a feeling I really wanted to hold onto.

The plan had been to decorate both our trees after tea, but peeping through at the girls curled up sleepily on the sofa watching kids' TV together – as we cleared away the dishes in the kitchen – it was evident that the Christmas decorations would have to wait for another day.

Of course, as soon as bedtime was mentioned, everyone was suddenly wide awake. But I told Mabel I had a favour to ask her. 'Emma's getting a bit bored with me reading her a bedtime story. Would you read to her tonight?'

'Great idea,' smiled Milo. 'Mabel's very good at reading. Aren't you, love?'

Mabel nodded shyly.

'Did you hear that, Emma? Mabel's going to be reading to you tonight.' I looked at Mabel. 'You don't mind?'

She shook her head. ‘No. I don’t mind. What story shall I read?’

‘What’s your favourite book, Emma?’ Milo asked her.

Emma looked at me. ‘Don’t know,’ she said shyly.

‘Yes, you do,’ I coaxed her gently. ‘It’s the one with the rabbit? What’s it called again?’

‘Poopy-head!’ she announced, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

‘Emma!’ I laughed.

‘Poopy-head?’ giggled Mabel, looking at Milo. ‘I don’t think we have that book, do we, Dad?’

Milo grinned. ‘Don’t think so.’

‘Poopy-head, poopy-head, poopy-head!’ announced Emma, thrilled to have made us all laugh.

They were still giggling as they ran upstairs to find a book, and when Milo and I followed a few minutes later, they were already in their pyjamas, tucked up in Mabel’s bed, looking at a big book with a picture of a friendly-looking lion on the front.

‘Emma’s top’s on inside out,’ I whispered to Milo as we watched them turning the pages, engrossed in the pictures. ‘But fair play to Mabel for getting her organised and into bed so quickly.’

‘She can be very bossy, my daughter,’ grinned Milo. He was so close, his breath was tickling my ear, sending delicious shivers through my entire body. ‘Fancy a drink? I’ve got a nice bottle of your favourite white in the fridge.’

Nodding, I felt a frisson of excitement, wondering what the night ahead would hold. Mabel had stayed over at ours for a sleepover a few times, although Milo had always returned next door once the girls were settled and asleep in bed. This was the first time we’d ended up at Milo’s for tea and a sleepover, and it felt different somehow; there was a tension in the air that hadn’t been there before – a sense of breathless anticipation that was churning my insides, but in a pleasurable way.

Unless I was very much mistaken, there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between us that it wouldn't only be Emma having a sleepover tonight . . .

I checked on the girls for a second time, pausing for a moment in the doorway of Mabel's bedroom, savouring the blissful silence. They were both sleeping peacefully now, curled on their sides away from each other, and Emma's thumb was tucked in her mouth. I smiled. They were clearly exhausted after such a busy and exciting day.

As for me, my heart was drumming a little faster and my cheeks felt flushed with nerves and anticipation. Pulling the door almost closed, I retreated softly and made my way downstairs.

Milo was in the kitchen, pouring the wine.

'Hey, you.' He handed me a glass, his eyes glinting with a look that made my heart skip several beats. I took it with a smile, feeling suddenly shy. Milo leaned back against the worktop, studying me. 'All quiet on the kiddies front?'

I nodded, distracted by how handsome he looked in his jeans and checked shirt. He worked out at the gym a few times a week and his body was muscled and strong, his stomach perfectly toned, and the electric blue of the shirt he was wearing enhanced the gleam in his dark eyes. He usually wore contact lenses but tonight he'd donned his black-rimmed glasses, which were actually really sexy, and I found myself imagining taking them off for him before we kissed. I was so lost in the delicious fantasy of me falling back onto the sofa and pulling Milo on top of me, that it took a second to register that he was talking.

' . . . and Emma seems to bring out Mabel's mothering instincts, don't you think?'

I snapped to attention. 'Oh, yes, I know. Bless her. The first time I went in to check on them, she was giving Emma a rather stern lecture on the importance of a good night's sleep. Apparently, it makes you grow big and strong.'

Milo laughed. ‘She listens to what I tell her, then. That’s quite alarming in a way. I’ll need to be extra-careful about the little white lies I spin sometimes.’

‘About Santa, for instance?’

He nodded. ‘I remember during one school summer holiday I was in the middle of an important phone call and she ran in to tell me the ice-cream van had arrived. So I told her that the van only played music when they’d run out of ice-cream.’

‘You absolute horror!’

‘I know. I felt terrible afterwards.’

‘Did she believe you?’

‘Well, she was only four at the time, so yes, she did.’ He grinned. ‘She rumbled me soon afterwards, though, the smarty-pants that she is, and she brings it up from time to time, usually when I’m telling her off about something.’

‘As in: *you can’t lecture me on being good because you’re a sneaky, low-down fibber!*’

‘That’s the job.’ Smiling, Milo raised his glass. ‘Shall we drink this next door?’

In the living room, I sank down onto the sofa. And after a slight hesitation, glancing at an armchair, Milo joined me, sitting down and turning slightly towards me. He was close enough for me to feel his knee grazing my thigh, and his touch stoked the fire that was burning deep inside me.

We clinked glasses and exchanged a tension-filled look that went on far longer than it would have done if we were still ‘just friends’. Hardly breaking eye contact, Milo reached round and placed his glass on the side table, then he took the glass gently from my hand and disposed of that, too.

As one, we moved swiftly together on the sofa.

He groaned softly as his lips found mine and then I was lost in a desperate longing for him that had been tormenting me ever since that last kiss. We kissed with a breathless passion, exploring each other with hands and lips, exulting in the glorious release of an all-consuming desire that had been

suppressed for far too long. He pulled me still closer so that I could feel his urgent desire . . .

In the far distance, I could hear a sound being repeated, but I was so lost in the moment, at first, I nudged it gently aside. And then a mother's instinct kicked in and I pulled away, gasping for breath. Milo, too, had heard it and was straining to listen.

‘Jaz? Jaz? *Jaz?*’

Mabel was running down the stairs now. ‘Jaz, I want to show you something,’ she was calling. And by the time she appeared in the living room, we were sitting on opposite ends of the sofa looking quite respectable, except for the fact that Milo's hair was standing up at the back.

‘What's going on, love?’ he asked, getting to his feet. ‘You're supposed to be asleep.’

‘Jaz wanted to see my photo of the Christmas tree when the lights were switched on. I forgot to show her. Can I show it to her now?’ She ran to Milo and picked up his phone from the side table.

‘Well, all right. But then back to bed, okay?’

I rose to my feet. ‘Tell you what, Mabel, why don't I come up with you and check on Emma and tuck you back into bed? And you can show me your photo then, okay?’

Mabel nodded. ‘It's a good one. Dad said it was. Come on.’

She took my hand and I looked at Milo. He was sitting back down, forearms on his thighs, watching us together, the gentlest of smiles on his face, and a glorious feeling of happiness surged through me. I squeezed Mabel's hand and smiled back at him. I'd thought I'd lost forever that lovely, warm feeling of solidarity in parenting . . . having someone by my side to share all the joys and all the challenges.

Could this be a new beginning for all of us?

Mabel ran ahead and we climbed the stairs to her bedroom. Emma had thrown off the covers and was sitting playing with her new teddy, but when she saw us, she threw the toy down

and started jumping up and down on the bed. Mabel got to the bed before me, putting the phone on the bedside table. She took hold of Emma's hands to steady her as she jumped around.

'You have to be careful you don't fall off the bed,' she instructed, sounding for all the world like a disapproving big sister. Then before I could stop her, she was up on the bed herself, bouncing along with Emma and giggling.

'Hey, you two. Come on. Time to settle down.' I steered them both under the covers. 'Mabel's going to show me her photo of the big Christmas tree. Do you want to see it as well, Emma?'

Emma nodded and I grabbed the phone and sat on the bed as they snuggled down under the duvet together.

'I'll find it.' Mabel reached for the phone and located the photo with breath-taking ease. She held it up to show me. 'Isn't it nice? I told Dad I wanted *our* tree to look like that 'cept it's not as big.'

'It's very pretty,' I agreed. 'I'm sure we could make your tree look as sparkly as that.'

'Will you and Emma help us decorate it?'

I smiled at Emma, who was curled up and struggling to keep her eyes open. 'We'd love to. Wouldn't we, Emma?'

Emma gave an enormous yawn instead of a reply, which made Mabel and I laugh.

'I'll give your dad his phone back, shall I?' Taking it, I slipped it into my jeans pocket and tucked the girls in. Emma was already drifting off, and when I whispered, 'Night night, sleep tight,' I received only a mumble from a sleepy Mabel.

Smiling, I pulled the door almost closed and made my way downstairs, fishing the phone out to look at the tree again. But somehow, in my pocket, the tree had vanished, to be replaced by another photo. It was another one of Mabel's shots of the switch-on ceremony, and Milo was in it this time. I did a double-take. He was posing with Mabel so someone else must have taken this photograph.

Not thinking, I clicked onto the next photo, and my smile froze in surprise.

It was Milo again, but no Mabel this time. Instead, he was smiling down at a woman I didn't recognise. She was very pretty. Small and slim in jeans and boots, her hair was blonde and curly, and she was wearing a white parka with silver grey fur around the hood.

Mabel must have switched to video mode by mistake when she took this one.

As I watched the mini film, Milo grasped the woman around the waist and she reached up on her tip-toes and planted a kiss on his mouth . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Are they okay?’

Milo was lounging on the sofa, drinking wine, but he put the glass down when I appeared. Nodding, I crossed the room to sit down beside him.

‘All tucked up and fast asleep,’ I said lightly, although my smile felt a little wooden and there was the subtlest of gaps between us on the sofa that wasn’t there before.

‘Great.’ He looked at me, his eyes flickering with doubt for a second, and I guessed he’d noticed the gap. Smiling, he shuffled closer and looped an arm around me, murmuring, ‘Where were we?’

A shiver ran through me at his touch, as it always did, and after only a second’s hesitation, I found myself giving in to those impossible-to-resist chocolate-brown eyes and that beautiful mouth. As I kissed him again, the image of his encounter with the woman in the photo kept nudging its way into my mind, but I managed to brush it aside. Yes, they were kissing. But there were kisses of all different sorts, weren’t there? It might have been a kiss from a friend. She might be his *cousin*, for all I knew! A kiss didn’t have to be romantic . . .

Yes, but would I kiss my cousin on the lips? Or a male friend?

I probably wouldn’t, but everyone was different . . .

Distracted by my intrusive thoughts, I heard movement upstairs and pulled away, cocking my ear to the ceiling.

‘Just Mabel in the bathroom,’ murmured Milo, his arms still warm around me. ‘She glugs down loads of water right before bed, which of course leads to the inevitable consequence.’

‘Right.’ I settled back in his arms, resting my head on his shoulder and a little yawn escaped.

‘Tired?’

‘I am a bit. It’s been a busy day, what with one thing and another.’

Milo yawned himself. ‘I wonder why yawning is so infectious?’

‘I actually know the answer to that.’

‘Yeah?’ He chuckled close to my ear and kissed my temple. ‘Go on, then. Enlighten me.’

‘Apparently it’s a sign of empathy for others. So if you see a person yawn, you’re likely to yawn as well in response. Especially . . .’

‘Especially?’

‘Especially if it’s someone you’re close to.’

‘Interesting,’ he said, after a tiny pause.

I looked up at him and he was smiling knowingly at me, and I could tell he was thinking about how close we were tonight.

‘More wine?’ He pointed at my glass.

‘Actually, tea would be nice. I’ll make it.’ I sprang to my feet.

‘I didn’t have you down as a lightweight,’ he joked, following me into the kitchen.

I laughed. ‘No, I’m just quite tired and I think if I drink more wine, I might end up snoring on your shoulder.’

‘Interesting image.’

‘I know. Not a pretty sight.’

‘I’ll be the judge of that.’ Folding his arms, he leaned back against the worktop, and I could feel his eyes burning into me as I filled the kettle. It made me clumsy and I turned the tap too much and splashed water over my arm.

Milo passed me a tea towel. ‘I think I’ll join you. Not too much milk in mine, though.’

I flashed him a tight little smile as I mopped the droplets, still unable to shake the image of the small blonde woman,

reaching up to him for a kiss. They'd looked so comfortable together.

'Are you okay?' Milo frowned. 'You seem . . . quiet.'

'Yes, yes, I'm fine.'

'Sure?'

I sighed. If Milo was dating other women, it was nothing to do with me. We weren't officially a couple, after all. But why hadn't he mentioned her to me?

Probably because they'd just bumped into each other by accident. I was being ridiculous. There was probably a completely innocent explanation for that kiss. I'd blown it out of all proportion. So I shrugged and said, 'You . . . told me it was just you and Mabel at the switch-on the other night?'

He nodded, looking puzzled.

'Right. Well, Mabel was showing me the photos she took and I happened to see one of you with a . . . well, with someone I didn't recognise. You looked quite close so I guess she must be a friend. I just wondered why you didn't mention her to me, that's all.'

I shrugged as if I wasn't bothered one way or another, but I knew my face was giving me away. I felt hot with embarrassment and Milo was going to think I was paranoid or a bunny boiler, which I really wasn't.

'Oh.' He frowned. 'Well, I actually never thought to mention her. She's an old friend and she's been through a rough time lately, so when she phoned, I suggested we meet up at the switch-on. If you'd been there with Emma, you'd have met her.'

'Right.' I nodded breezily. 'You honestly don't need to explain. I just . . . as I said, I just wondered why you hadn't mentioned her, that's all. But hey, now I know.' I smiled broadly at him, as if it was actually nothing at all.

'She's an old friend from uni, actually. You'd like her.'

'I'm sure I would,' I said brightly, concentrating on making the tea, while my heart sank at the words, *old friend from uni*.

‘I’ve offered her a job, actually.’

‘A job?’

‘Yes, in the Sunnybrook Roastery. We’re really busy over in the café, with Christmas and everything, and I’ve been recruiting extra staff. She phoned this morning to say she’d really like to work for me.’

‘That’s great.’

‘Actually, that reminds me. I need to be up early tomorrow because I’ve got a staff induction to do and I haven’t prepared for it.’

‘Right.’ I nodded. ‘So is it best if I . . . head home? So that you can do your preparation now instead of rushing in the morning?’

‘No, no, it’s fine. Stay. Please.’ He slipped his arms around me and kissed my nose. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t mention her before. I honestly didn’t think.’

‘It’s absolutely fine.’

‘Is it, though?’

‘Yes, honestly. I mean, I just had a bit of a wobble because . . . well, Harry kept saying he and Vivien were *just old uni mates* – and look how *that* turned out!’ I grinned sheepishly.

He groaned. ‘Oh, hell. I’d forgotten about that. Well, look, this is *nothing* like that, okay? Nothing at all. We really are just old friends. But . . . well, I can totally understand if you’d rather go home just now. I’ll look after Emma and bring her back round first thing?’

‘It’s okay. I’ll collect her early. You’ll be busy.’

‘Okay. Whatever you like.’

We parted at the door with a quick kiss.

‘Sorry . . . I thought I was over Harry, and I am. It’s just . . .’

‘I know. You don’t have to explain.’

‘Can we pick up where we left off another time instead?’

‘Of course we can. Now, go and get some sleep. You look as if you need it.’ He grinned. ‘And I don’t mean that the way it sounds. You look gorgeous to me. You always do.’

‘You’re not wearing your glasses, but thank you,’ I joked softly. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow. Bright and early.’

‘I look forward to it,’ he murmured.

The words were like a caress and I felt my body respond, and I cursed myself for ruining the night with my stupid suspicions. I blamed Harry. It was all his fault. If he hadn’t cheated on me the way he did – totally destroying my trust in men in the process – Milo and I would probably be in a healthy, happy relationship by now.

Would I *ever* get to a place of strength where I could forget the past and move with Emma into a confident, joyful future?

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘. . . and the whole thing will be called “A Winter Wonderland”.’ Ellie, leaning over the café counter, beamed around at us. ‘So . . . what do you think?’

‘I think it’s an amazing idea.’ I leaned over and grabbed Emma, who’d escaped from her seat next to me and was now singing her version of Jingle Bells while attempting to climb – via a chair – onto the empty table next to us. Getting up, I lifted her back into her seat. ‘Be a good girl and sit nicely. Have your drink. We won’t be long.’ I held out her box of juice and she took it eagerly.

To be fair to Emma, she’d been astonishingly patient up till now, sitting quietly while the grown-ups chatted about boring stuff, but I could tell we’d almost reached our limit! She took a slurp through her straw from the almost-empty juice box and giggled at the noise it made, which made everyone chuckle.

‘You’ve been so well-behaved, Emma,’ said Ellie. ‘I think a gingerbread Santa might be in order.’ She looked at me. ‘If Mum says it’s okay?’

I smiled. ‘It’s fine. Thanks, Ellie.’

With Emma quiet now – munching on her biscuit and endeavouring to remove Santa’s chocolate chip eyes, nose and mouth and getting all chocolatey in the process – we went back to discussing A Winter Wonderland.

‘I have to say, I think it’s a fabulous idea.’ Fen’s eyes shone at what Ellie had just described to us. ‘The villagers are going to love it.’

Katja nodded. ‘People have had it really tough over the past year. It’ll be such a lift for the whole community.’

‘I’m smiling already just imagining it.’ Primrose pointed at her big smile which did indeed seem to stretch from ear to ear. ‘The fair itself will be so lovely and Christmassy. Plus the money we raise is going to help so many people who might otherwise be dreading Christmas.’

Fen nodded. ‘I *love* the idea of a Christmas lunch for all who want to come along on the Big Day. And presents wrapped up for the children!’ She crossed her hands over her heart, looking quite emotional.

‘It won’t be cheap, though. And it’ll have to be all hands on deck,’ pointed out Maddy, ever the realist.

‘Well, *I’m* happy to do a shift,’ Fen said firmly. ‘Rob can look after Lottie and Liam for a few hours.’ She grinned. ‘He’s much better at changing the twins’ nappies and singing to them than I am.’

‘But there’s not much time, though.’ Maddy still looked wary. ‘I mean, it all sounds great. A Christmas fair with stalls selling lots of lovely festive produce and a big raffle and games for the kids with prizes to win and maybe a bouncy castle. But what if the weather’s terrible on the day?’

‘Two days,’ Ellie reminded her. ‘It would have to be held over a whole weekend to make the kind of profit I’d like, so we can afford the Christmas meal and presents, and hopefully have some money left to donate to charity.’

Maddy shrugged. ‘Even more risky. When have we ever been able to rely on blue skies in December two days in a row? Plus you’d have to get council permission if you wanted to hold an event on the village green.’

‘Who said anything about the village green?’ Ellie gave her a mysterious look.

‘Are you thinking of the village hall?’ asked Katja. ‘But it’ll be booked already this close to Christmas, won’t it?’

Ellie smiled. ‘Actually, we have the perfect location already set up. I’ve chatted to Milo and he’s in total agreement. Our big glamping tent and the shepherd’s huts are just sitting there in that field, not being used, and they won’t actually *be* in use until March at the earliest. So . . . we’ll stage the fair over on the glamping site.’

A murmur of surprised approval followed this announcement.

‘I’ve seen inside the huge Bedouin-style tent and it’s gorgeous,’ said Fen. ‘Loads of space inside.’

Ellie nodded. ‘It sleeps up to ten – we’re thinking it’ll be great for families and hen parties – so yes, lots of room to maybe stage our own Christmas bakes sale in there? We’ll need a proper marquee as well, but I’ve been phoning round the local companies to see if they might donate one, since the event is for charity. In return for some good publicity of their own, of course.’

‘The hog roast guy will pitch up in his van with a serving hatch,’ pointed out Primrose. ‘And the stall holders will be well-used to coping with the elements at the weekly market.’

‘Exactly.’ Ellie nodded. ‘So I don’t think we should let the possibility of a bit of inclement weather put us off. And who knows? If we’re lucky, it might be a beautifully calm weekend with blue skies!’

‘And just a gentle sprinkling of icing-sugar snow,’ grinned Maddy. ‘Actually, I’ve just had an idea. What about fake snow? I mean, if we don’t have the real thing by then?’

‘Ooh, nice.’ Fen nodded.

Ellie laughed. ‘Let’s not get too carried away. I mean, we want to *raise* money, not spend it all.’

‘When are you thinking of holding the event?’ I asked.

‘Probably the Saturday and Sunday before the Christmas weekend.’

‘Sounds good,’ I said. ‘Everyone will be in a really Christmassy mood by then and keen to buy last-minute gifts and stocking fillers. There’s a lovely woman at the market who makes gorgeous wreaths for all seasons. Her Hallowe’en ones were fabulous. I’m sure she’d be eager to sell her Christmas wreaths at your event and give a percentage of her profits towards the cause.’

Ellie nodded. ‘She’s exactly the sort of person I’m hoping will jump on board. I think most people will be keen to help out, especially at this time of the year. And hopefully, the whole village will benefit in one way or another.’

‘Will Santa come?’ piped up the small person sitting next to me, nibbling round the edges of her gingerbread Santa.

We all looked at Emma and then at each other.

Ellie grinned. ‘Emma, that’s a fabulous idea! Of course we should invite Santa along.’

‘It would look great on the posters,’ said Maddy. ‘Who *wouldn’t* want to bring their kids along to meet him?’

‘Santa busy, Mummy.’ Emma looked up at me doubtfully. ‘Santa makes ’sesents with the elves.’

I put my arm round her and squeezed. ‘That’s true. He is very busy at Christmas-time. But Santa is a very kind man. I’m sure Ellie will be able to persuade him to come along and help out.’

I winked at Ellie over Emma’s head, and she nodded and said, ‘Leave it with me. I might have a lot of persuading to do. But you’d have to be Scrooge not to want to help such a fantastic cause.’

‘I can think of a fair few Scrooges around these parts,’ muttered Maddy. ‘Good luck with that, Ellie.’

‘What’s ‘rooges?’ asked Emma.

‘Well, Scrooge is a horrible man who hates everybody and hates Christmas most of all,’ said Maddy.

‘Don’t like ‘rooge,’ frowned Emma, shaking her head. ‘Want to go now, Mummy.’

After our meeting, everyone dispersed and, needing to buy milk, I walked with Emma in her pushchair over to the high street with Ellie and Fen.

‘So how’s life looking with twins?’ I grinned at Fen. ‘I can’t imagine much has changed?’ I joked.

Fen snorted with laughter. ‘No. Just *everything!*’

‘Trouble times two,’ I murmured. ‘Sheesh. I didn’t know I was born, having just one.’

‘Fen’s got a ready-made family, though,’ remarked Ellie with a smile. ‘There’s something to be said, surely, from getting the action over in one fell swoop.’

‘Except it’s not that simple.’ Fen grinned.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Rob wants more kids.’

My eyes widened. ‘*More?* Crikey, I hope he’s prepared to wait a few months. To let Mum recover from having the equivalent of not just one camel pulled through the eye of a needle, but two!’

She laughed. ‘He’s completely besotted with those twins. I think it’s postpartum glow. Let’s face it, Rob went through every other pregnancy symptom with me, including morning sickness and a bad back. But I’m hoping once he’s had a few more months of broken sleep, he might change his mind about us attempting to challenge the record set by the Radford family.’

‘I haven’t watched that for a while. How many children do they have now? At the last count?’ Ellie asked.

I grinned. ‘Twenty-two, I think.’

‘Shiver me timbers, I’ve come over all faint just thinking about that,’ muttered Fen, and we chuckled at her horrified expression.

Ellie checked her watch, looking a little distracted. ‘I just need to . . .’ She pointed at an alleyway between two shops.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked, puzzled.

She drew a package out of her bag.

‘What’s that?’

‘I . . . well, I take Freddy a sandwich and some cake every day. He sets up his tent round the back here, once all the shops have closed for the day.’ She shrugged. ‘I’d like to give him more but I get the feeling I’m already treading a dangerous line giving him *this* much.’ She held up the bag. ‘I don’t think his pride would allow him to take money for pizza.’

‘That’s so lovely of you.’

Ellie shook her head. ‘Really, it’s the least I can do. Freddy *saved their lives*. I can’t get it out of my head. That double-decker bus bearing down on them just as the girls were about to step onto the crossing.’ She shuddered at the memory.

‘What actually caused it?’ I asked. ‘The runaway bus, I mean. Did you find out?’

‘Yes. It was on the local news. The brakes failed, apparently.’

‘Shall we come with you?’ Fen asked, looking worriedly along the dark alleyway.

‘No, no. Thanks. But Freddy’s quite shy. He won’t appreciate a gathering turning up.’

‘Wait a sec. Isn’t that him coming out of Carlo’s restaurant?’

We peered over and sure enough, it was Freddy in his distinctive yellow puffer jacket. As we watched, he walked along and paused outside the village store, then he threw his belongings on the pavement and sat down, removing the tin whistle from his backpack.

‘That’s his tent bag he’s sitting on,’ said Ellie worriedly. ‘He must be freezing.’

‘That man on the ground,’ said Emma, pointing. She turned in her pushchair to look up at me. ‘He fall down, Mummy.’

I blew out my breath in despair. How to explain homelessness to a three-year-old?

But thankfully, I didn’t have to because at that moment Emma was distracted by Rob, Fen’s husband, drawing up in his car to collect her, little Lottie and Liam both sleeping peacefully in their baby seats in the back.

Rob waved at us and Fen grinned as she slid into the passenger seat. ‘Bit of luck we can transfer them straight into their cots when we get home and they’ll sleep through the night. Well, until five in the morning, anyway.’

Smiling encouragingly, we crossed our fingers and waved the little family off.

‘I can help with “A Winter Wonderland”, you know. Whatever you need me to do.’ I smiled sheepishly at Ellie. ‘I’ve got plenty of time on my hands when Emma’s at nursery, now that my temporary tour guide job at Brambleberry Manor has finished, and until I find that elusive new dream job.’

‘That’s good to know. Thanks, Jaz. It’s going to be quite an operation. I’m going to ask Maddy to design an eye-catching poster. She’s good at stuff like that. But I’m going to need a lot of help getting stall-holders rallied and decorations put up, and then of course there’s all the baking of mince pies and Christmas cakes to sell at the fair.’

I nodded. ‘As I said, anything you need me to do.’

She smiled wryly. ‘My hardest task is going to be persuading Zak that he looks really cool with a jungle of white facial hair and sporting a red Santa suit.’

I laughed. ‘Good luck with that one! Do you think he’ll do it?’

She rubbed her nose thoughtfully. ‘Not sure. He can be quite shy about things like that. But hopefully he can be persuaded. It’s all for a good cause, after all. I’ll need to hire a Santa suit, though, which could be quite expensive.’

I hesitated, a question on my mind. ‘Any news about the next round of IVF?’

‘Yes. It’s going to be in January.’

‘Are you sure you should be taking on all this extra work, along with the glamping business? Shouldn’t you be relaxing in preparation?’

She shook her head firmly. ‘I thought relaxing when we were away in Silverbells last month would be a good thing to do. But I ended up having too much time on my hands and dwelling on everything that could possibly go wrong. And anyway, I think Milo’s got someone in mind to help us with the glamping stuff. Rory?’

I glanced at her in surprise. ‘He never mentioned that, but hey, that’s great.’

She nodded. ‘More hands to the pump, so to speak.’

‘And I guess it’s all quite a good distraction for you.’

‘Exactly. I’m going to have so much to do, I won’t have time to worry about the IVF.’ She smiled. ‘And I love Christmas so organising the festive event will be hard work, but it should be really good fun as well.’

‘I think you need to soften Zak up with a bit of TLC before you broach the subject of Santa.’

She laughed. ‘You read my mind. Steak and chips and his favourite red wine tonight, I think!’

We were about to go our separate ways when Ellie suddenly turned serious. ‘So how was yesterday?’

My heart sank. If my best friend was expecting some progress in the most talked about *non*-romance in Sunnybrook, she was going to be very much disappointed! I was wishing now that I hadn’t told her about my plans with Milo and Mabel doing Christmassy things. Worse, I’d even hinted to her that I’d thought romance might be on the cards.

‘It was . . . lovely. Well, until it wasn’t,’ I replied with a bright smile.

‘Oh, no. What happened?’

‘Well, we were having a great time and then Mabel showed me some photos – and one of them was of Milo kissing a mystery woman, and when I asked him who she was, he said she was *just an old university friend*.’

‘Right?’ She was looking at me quizzically, waiting for the punchline, I supposed.

I shrugged. ‘An *old uni friend*?’

‘Yes, I know. But I don’t understand. Milo did go to uni, didn’t he?’

I stared at her helplessly. She’d clearly forgotten all about the web of lies Harry spun, so he could carry on shagging his

delectable ‘old uni friend’ Vivien!

I watched her face as the penny dropped and she realised. ‘Oh, Harry and Vivien?’ She squeezed my arm. ‘Hmm, I see what you mean.’

‘Yes. It doesn’t bode well, really, does it?’

She frowned, thinking about it. Then she said, ‘I can see why you might be worried, but it would be a big mistake to assume Milo has the capacity for deception that Harry clearly has. They’re completely different people. Milo’s great and I know he really likes you. We can all see that. So please don’t write him off without getting to the bottom of who this woman is, okay?’

I swallowed. ‘I know. I’m just paranoid, I think.’

‘Well, it’s hardly surprising after what you’ve been through with the break-up and everything. It’s really hard to trust when something like that happens to you. But what if you and Milo are perfect for each other and you ruin it by being suspicious of something that hasn’t even happened?’

I gave a groan of anguish. ‘You’re right, I know. I really like him. I mean, *really* like him. And it’s all perfectly logical, what you’re saying. Before the break-up with Harry, I’d have thought exactly the same myself. But these days, I just feel so . . . weak and uncertain. Not like me at all.’

She nodded in sympathy. ‘I guess you just have to be brave. Give Milo a chance. Invite him over for dinner and have a proper chat, without the girls around, and find out how he really feels about you? It could turn out to be the best thing you ever do.’

I nodded. ‘I suppose we’ve never really talked properly about how we feel about each other. I’ve always dodged the subject whenever he’s tried to bring it up.’

‘There you are, then.’ She smiled. ‘You need to talk honestly, Jaz. You can’t afford to let this chance for happiness slip through your fingers. You might never get another one.’

I stared at her in mock horror. ‘Crikey, talk about the prophet of doom. So if I don’t get with Milo, I’m likely to end

my days as a sad old spinster of this parish?’

She laughed. ‘There are worse fates. Sometimes I think it must be lovely to be a free spirit with zero responsibilities. Say you fancied moving to a cottage by the sea? You could just up-sticks and be living your dream by the following week.’

I grinned. ‘In theory. But you’d never want that. Not without Zak and Maisie.’

‘That’s true.’ She glanced over at Freddy and held up the food package in her hand. ‘Right, I’m going to give him this.’

‘Okay. See you soon.’

Before we parted, she cocked her head on one side and gave me a motherly smile. ‘Sort things out with Milo before it’s too late, eh?’

CHAPTER NINE

As I stood in a queue at the village store, I thought about what Ellie had said.

Sort things out with Milo before it's too late.

She was right. And there was no time like the present, I decided, so – before I had second thoughts and chickened out – I texted Milo and invited him over that evening. I'd remembered him saying that Mabel was going to be staying at her aunt's, and Harry was collecting Emma and she was spending tonight with him and Vivien – so Milo and I would have the house all to ourselves. An excited little shiver ran along my spine at the thought.

He replied straight away, saying he was on his way home. He'd bring a bottle and see me later.

Thinking of Ellie and her steak and red wine, I dashed to the car and drove to the supermarket, where I spent far too much on delicious food and wine. It was a good investment, I told myself happily, as I scooped a creamy, family-sized tiramisu off the shelf and into my trolley. Milo was also a red wine man, and I spent a ridiculous amount of time dithering over a classy New Zealand red that promised an exquisite bouquet with a hint of pencil-shavings, and an Australian wine full of ripe plums with a whacky label. In the end, I went for the ripe plums – but only because I glanced at my watch and realised I had all of fifteen minutes to dive home with Emma and pack her stuff before Harry arrived to collect her . . .

Back home, I whizzed around, putting the groceries away and seeing to Emma. Then Harry arrived and whisked her away, and I rushed upstairs to have a shower and get myself ready for Milo coming round. I knew he was in because his car had been in the drive when I arrived home with Emma, but I was guessing he'd give me a while to get sorted out before he came on over with his bottle of wine.

My stomach was churning with a mix of nerves and excitement at the prospect of the evening ahead, and the resulting sparkle in my eyes and flush to my cheeks seemed to

be working quite nicely in my favour. Dressed in jeans and my most flattering top, I did a little twirl in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom, then I laughed at myself for behaving so out of character. I'd always thought of myself as a practical sort of person . . . a realist with a tendency to be overly cynical. But tonight, I was acting like a teenager going on a date with a boy she'd fancied forever!

A car door slammed and I peered out, expecting it to be my neighbour on the other side coming home from work.

But it wasn't. It was someone I recognised – the woman with curly blonde hair from Mabel's photo – and she was hurrying up Milo's driveway.

As I ducked back behind the curtain, not wanting to be seen spying on her, I heard Milo's voice – surprisingly loud in the still of the night – and next second, she disappeared inside and I heard the heavy clunk as the front door closed after them.

I stood there for a while, wondering whether to start the food, not knowing when Milo would be coming over. Had he been expecting company? He certainly hadn't said so. But maybe she was only popping in for a moment to talk about something at work.

I decided to delay starting dinner. Milo could help me in the kitchen when he eventually arrived. I'd always really enjoyed it when Harry and I cooked together in the evenings, talking about our day and setting the world to rights . . .

I busied myself setting the table, one ear out for any sounds from next door and crossing to the window every time I heard an engine noise outside. But nearly an hour later, her car was still there, parked in the road outside Milo's house.

And then my phone rang.

My heart was sinking but I managed a cheery tone. 'Hi, Milo. How's things?'

'Jaz . . . listen, can we do dinner another time? It's just that something's come up. My old uni friend has just turned up unexpectedly.'

‘Oh, right. Yes, of course. No worries.’

‘I feel bad. I’ll cook *you* dinner next time, okay?’

‘Hey, is this just an excuse to get out of having to eat my food?’ I joked.

But he didn’t laugh. I don’t think he even heard me say it. He seemed to be carrying on a conversation with his friend at the same time, although I couldn’t hear what she was saying.

‘Right,’ I said at last. ‘See you, then, Milo. Have a good evening.’

‘Yes, okay,’ he said vaguely. ‘Thanks.’ And he ended the call.

I flumped down on the sofa feeling utterly deflated. So basically, I’d been ditched tonight in favour of his ‘old uni friend’. I knew I was being petty, but I’d been so looking forward to spending some quality time with him. He must have realised that my invitation this evening meant I was trying to make up for the previous night, when I’d allowed my suspicions to ruin things between us. Foolishly, I’d thought he’d be looking forward to it as much as I was . . . coming over and picking up where we’d left off.

But he’d cancelled tonight with barely a smidgeon of regret in his voice.

It was almost as if he couldn’t wait to get off the phone.

I wanted very much not to care. But the rest of the evening was a kind of study in self-torture. I practically wore a channel in the carpet between the sofa and the window, getting up so often to see if her car had gone yet.

In the end, around ten o’clock, I gave up, switched off the TV and went upstairs to bed. But even then, I found I was straining to hear any sounds next door. I thought I heard her once – a high-pitched cute laugh – but I told myself to stop being so ridiculous. I was reading far too much into her visit.

I switched off my phone to stop myself checking for a message from Milo that probably wouldn’t come. Then I

pulled the duvet over my ears and closed my eyes.

By the morning, chances were the car would be gone and I'd be wondering what on earth I'd been so worried about . . .

CHAPTER TEN

In the morning, I was woken by voices.

Slipping out of bed, I crossed to the window and peered out. Milo and his friend were standing together by her car. They were chatting in low voices, which was annoying because I really wanted to hear what they were saying. All I had was the *tone*, which seemed from here to be quite intense.

Watching them, heads together, a chill ran through me as I remembered another time . . . unexpectedly coming across Harry sitting close to Vivien on the bench by the duck pond. I'd had a funny feeling then that something wasn't quite right. And studying Milo now, from behind my bedroom curtain, my instinct wasn't just telling me things weren't quite right. It was yelling at me to flee the area immediately and never look back!

I leaned wearily against the wall, while making sure to stay hidden from view.

So she'd stayed over, then.

It wasn't exactly a surprise. Milo and I weren't together, and she was an attractive woman. Also, I'd kept him at arm's length for so long. I could hardly blame him for being open to romance elsewhere.

At last, after their never-ending conversation, Milo opened her car door for her and she slid into the driver's seat. She left the door open as they continued their chat, then she smiled up at him and he reached for her hand, holding it in his for a moment before she adjusted her position, settling into her seat. She gave him a little wave and he shut the door carefully, then he stood at the gate absently stroking his chin as he watched her drive away. Turning, he glanced up at my bedroom window and I ducked further back, hoping he hadn't seen me watching them. A few seconds later, I heard the dull thud of his front door closing.

A minute later, as I was heading for the shower, the doorbell rang and I froze. It had to be Milo and sure enough, when I

peered out, he was standing at my door.

He was probably feeling guilty about last night. But did I really want to speak to him right now and listen to his excuses about why he chose to spend the evening with someone else instead of me?

Not really!

So I marched to the bathroom, and Milo obviously got the message because he didn't ring the bell a second time. When I emerged from the shower, I switched on my phone to find a message from him, sent five minutes earlier.

Sorry about last night. Speak later?

I threw the phone on the bed and went to get my hair dryer, managing to bash my toe against the leg of the bed on the way.

It hurt a lot and tears pricked at my eyes. Sinking down on the bed, I felt weirdly emotional. But it was my throbbing toe that was the problem. Nothing else . . .

I was just putting my coat on to head to the shops when the doorbell rang.

My heart sank. Instinct was telling me it was Milo again, but I still wasn't in the mood to speak to him. I'd had a restless night and the bags under my eyes were more like suitcases. Not that I was bothered about him seeing me looking exhausted. He'd caught me looking worse on other occasions and it hadn't seemed to put him off.

Except now, of course, he had Cute Blondie to compare me with!

I stood in the kitchen, hoping he'd go away. But then the letterbox rattled and he called through to me.

'Jaz? Are you okay in there? I've been phoning and texting and I'm starting to get worried.'

I gritted my teeth but stayed where I was. Surely he'd get the hint . . .

'Right, I'm coming in, okay?'

What? Oh, hell, I'd forgotten we swapped keys in case of emergencies!

Next second, I heard the key in the lock and the front door being pushed open.

Aaargh!

Panicking, my brain went into overdrive. How to explain away the fact that I'd been deliberately ignoring his calls and texts? I plastered on a smile and walked into the hall, just as he crossed the threshold.

'Hi! Sorry, I was on the phone.'

'Oh.' He looked surprised but relieved at the same time. 'I'm just glad you're okay. I was getting worried.'

'Well, there was no need.' I beamed at him. 'As you can see, I'm perfectly all right.'

'Was it an important phone call?'

'Sorry?'

'You were on the phone?'

'Oh. Yes.' I swallowed. 'Yes, it was, actually. I've been . . . applying for jobs, as you know, and I just got word that I've been invited for interview.'

'That's great, Jaz! What's the job?'

'Erm . . .'

My eyes landed on a glossy leaflet that had been pushed through the door. 'PR for a vegan sausage company,' I blurted out.

'Right.' He nodded. 'You're not vegan, though, are you?'

I frowned. 'No. Does that matter?'

He shrugged. 'I guess not. When's the interview?'

I glanced at my watch. 'Ooh, in half an hour, so I'd better get a shift on.' I grabbed my keys and my bag and made for the door, desperate to escape his questioning.

'You're going to the interview in jeans and a sweatshirt?'

I felt my face redden. ‘Yes. It’s . . . well, it’s quite a relaxed, laid-back sort of company. They don’t stand on ceremony apparently.’

‘Right.’ He looked a little surprised, as well he might, considering I’d just said the first thing that came into my head!

‘Anyway, better go.’ I held the door open pointedly and he walked out.

‘Good luck!’ he called after me as I belted to my car. ‘Tell them the one about the butcher who cried when he saw the sausage. He feared the wurst.’

I gave him a sheepish grin as I dived into the car, my cheeks growing warmer by the second. I’d never been great at telling fibs. My face gave me away every time. I reversed speedily up the driveway and just managed to miss taking a wing off on the gatepost . . .

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I dashed along the high street to the post office, my cheeks still burning after my confrontation with Milo. It was nice of him to worry about me and I felt bad for having lied to him. *An interview with a vegan sausage company!* What would I say to him when they inevitably turned me down? That the ‘banger’ of a job hadn’t quite matched up to my vision?

In spite of everything, I grinned at the thought of telling Milo that. He was very fond of puns.

I sighed. Had I made a huge mountain out of a molehill about last night? Maybe I’d jumped to entirely the wrong conclusions. Because when I thought about it now, seeing them standing chatting beside her car, they hadn’t actually *looked* like a pair of lovers parting regretfully after a night of unbridled bliss. They’d clearly had a lot to talk about and it had all looked quite intense. But they hadn’t kissed goodbye, which surely they would have if they were in the first delirious throes of a new romance.

I shook my head in frustration.

What the hell was *wrong* with me these days?

Why couldn’t I get back to being the reasonably confident, self-assured, practical person I’d always been in the past? I was so full of doubt these days – about myself and the future. Ellie would say that it was understandable following a break-up, especially when there was a child involved, but she’d also say that time was a great healer.

Well, I just wished Father Time would do his bloody job and get me back to normal! Whatever ‘normal’ was. Because I hated not feeling in control of my emotions . . .

Later that afternoon, driving back from nursery with Emma, I was sure that Milo would still be at work. I wasn’t ready to face him after the vegan sausage fiasco, so my heart sank into my boots when I turned into our street and his car was there.

I bundled Emma into the house, hoping he hadn't heard us returning. It would be just like the thing if he came to enquire about how the job interview went! (Would I have to wax lyrical about vegan sausages, of which I knew nothing?)

Sure enough, we'd only been in the house ten minutes when the doorbell rang. I couldn't ignore him any longer so I went to answer it.

'Jaz, hi.' Milo ran a hand through his hair, looking a little uncomfortable. 'Erm, how did the interview go?'

'Oh, the job wasn't for me.' I brushed my hand in the air, hoping that would be that.

'Look . . .' He stopped, as if he was trying to find the right words to tell me something, and I felt my heart lurch. This was it. He was going to explain that he'd started a relationship with someone else . . .

I forced a smile, hoping I'd be able to hide my feelings. 'What is it?'

'Well . . . I just wanted to explain about my friend.'

'Oh. Well, there's nothing to explain, is there?' I said airily. 'She's an old university mate.'

'Yes. Aurora.' He glanced down at his feet.

I registered the name. *Aurora*. (Of course she'd *have* to be called something ethereally beautiful. She couldn't possibly just be a Madge, a Midge or a Mo!)

Milo looked up. 'The thing is . . . well, she's in a bad situation and she needs my help.'

'Really? That's awful.' I was expecting him to carry on and explain further. But he just shrugged and looked at me. 'I mean, it's not awful that she needs your help,' I rushed on to fill the awkward pause. 'It's awful that she's in a . . . bad situation.'

He nodded. 'She'll fit in well with the Roastery team, though. She gets on with everybody. She's always been super-organised and really good with people.'

‘That’s great. So it’s all working out for her.’

I was feeling rather ashamed of having been so cross with him for not coming over the previous night. If his friend was in trouble, it was just like Milo to want to help her out in any way he could. And from the way he was talking about her, it certainly didn’t seem as if there was anything romantic between them. More ‘friends and workmates’.

‘Where does she come from?’ I asked.

‘Well, she grew up not too far from here but then she moved away when she went to uni – which was where we met.’

I nodded. ‘She must be really grateful to you for giving her a job. I hope she’s settling in okay.’

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘I think she’ll be fine once she gets to know people.’

‘Well, you’re welcome to bring her round here,’ I said rashly, feeling vaguely ridiculous now for having been so suspicious.

‘Yeah?’ He looked pleased. ‘That’s great. You’ll like her, I’m sure.’

I nodded.

‘Everyone does. Like her, I mean.’

‘Right. Excellent.’

‘People tend to assume she’s a bit of an airhead because she’s so petite and pretty and *blonde*.’ He grinned, shaking his head at the cliché. ‘But she’s actually really intelligent. She’s got a degree in molecular biology.’

My smile stiffened.

Oh, for frigging hell’s sake, of course she had. Was there no end to this woman’s superwoman qualities?

‘Wow. How amazing,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘She is. Although her recent run of bad luck has left her feeling quite anxious and vulnerable, so I’ve said she can stay with me for as long as she needs to.’

‘Stay with you?’

‘Yes. She was intending going back last night but I told her it was ridiculous spending money on a B&B when she could stay at my place.’

‘Yes. Yes, of course. Ridiculous,’ I said hastily, while processing this latest bombshell.

‘I thought she’d say no. Pride and all that. But she actually agreed straight away.’

I’ll bet she did!

‘I was quite surprised. But glad. It’s hard moving to a new place where you know very few people, isn’t it?’

I took a stab at nodding in sympathy. But there must have been something in my face that let the cat out of the bag because he narrowed his eyes at me.

‘You do know she’s just a friend? Nothing more?’

‘Of course.’

‘You don’t sound sure.’

‘No, I am.’

‘Really?’

I sighed. ‘Well . . . I mean, maybe that’s what *you* think. That you’re just friends. But she might have other ideas?’ I shrugged. ‘That’s all I’m saying.’

‘But she doesn’t,’ he said bluntly.

‘How do you know?’

‘I just do. We’re friends and I’m helping her out. That’s all.’

‘And yet she instantly agreed to move in with you?’

‘Yes . . . but she’s only working at Roastery for the Christmas season. Her plans are up in the air after that. She might not even want to stick around in Sunnybrook.’

‘Right.’ I can’t seem to help the note of cynicism in my tone. And I can tell it’s starting to irritate Milo by the look on his face.

‘Look, Jaz, I’m helping her now but once she’s back on her feet, I’ll have all the time in the world to spend with you and Emma.’

I raised my eyebrows at this comment, not quite sure how to take it. It felt slightly patronising to me, as if Milo was doing us a big favour, spending time with us. And it struck me suddenly that opening presents together on Christmas morning was probably off the festive menu now. Even if we still did it, it would hardly be the same with someone else in the mix.

‘And obviously she’ll be going to her parents’ for Christmas,’ he was saying, ‘so we can still do the present-opening thing,’ he said, as if he could read my mind. He shrugged, as if he wasn’t sure I’d still want to do that.

‘You don’t think I’m jealous, do you?’ I snapped, although inside I was feeling hugely relieved that our Christmas morning plans wouldn’t, after all, be affected.

Milo’s dark eyes danced with humour. ‘Actually, I was rather hoping you might be.’

His comment had the effect of totally disarming me, and in spite of everything, I laughed.

A car drew up and we both looked over. It was Aurora, and she was scrabbling in the back seat and bringing out some bags of shopping. Seeing Milo talking to me, she gave me a stiff little smile, locked the car and walked rather tentatively up my driveway.

I smiled at her. ‘Hi. Pleased to meet you.’ She smiled back, more warmly this time.

‘Hi. It’s Jaz, isn’t it? I’m going to be living here now that this lovely man has taken pity on me.’ She looked shyly up at Milo and then back at me. ‘So we’ll probably be bumping into each other quite a lot.’

‘Yes. Of course. And you’re going to be working at Roastery for the Christmas season.’ I gave her a cheery smile, thinking, *it’s only for a few weekss. She’ll probably be gone by January.*

‘Oh, I’m going to be sticking around way beyond Christmas. Milo’s asked me to help with the glamping business and I decided today that I’d like to take him up on it.’ She smiled at him. ‘If that’s okay?’

‘Of course.’ Milo nodded eagerly.

A dim memory of something Ellie told me flitted through my mind . . . about Clara’s boyfriend, Rory, offering to help out with the glamping business.

‘Anyway, I’ll take these bags in,’ she was saying. ‘But it’s . . . lovely to meet such a good friend of Milo’s. I really should introduce myself properly.’ She held out her hand and we shook.

‘My name’s Aurora. But you can call me Rori.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

After she'd gone, I frowned at Milo. 'Why didn't you tell me she was going to be working for you in the glamping business as well?'

'I didn't know for sure that she would be.' He shrugged awkwardly. 'And anyway, I didn't think you'd be interested.'

'Not interested? We're friends, aren't we? And that tends to be the kind of thing you tell your friends.'

He sighed. 'Well . . . I suppose I was worried you'd read something into it.'

'Like what?'

He shuffled his feet, looking uncomfortable. 'Like there was something going on between us. Which there isn't, by the way.'

I gave a bitter laugh. 'If there was nothing going on, you'd have told me straight away without any awkwardness, surely?' I shrugged. 'How do I know you're telling me the truth if you keep things from me?'

'Look, I know your faith in men is probably at an all-time low, but we're really not all the same,' he said wearily. 'And you're . . . I don't know . . . so suspicious all the time. I didn't want to give you any reason to worry. About us.' He shrugged. 'I guess I went about it the wrong way.'

'Yes, you did,' I snapped. 'For goodness' sake, I'm not the super-sensitive emotional disaster you seem to think I am.'

He looked at me but didn't reply, and his expression – whether he meant it to or not – told me that he very much doubted my declaration. (I doubted the truth of it as well, but that wasn't the point.)

'Look, Jaz, can we please just get past this?' he said bleakly. 'I'm helping Rori. Full stop. She's a friend and I'm not turning my back on her just because there's a chance I might be upsetting *you*.'

‘I wouldn’t expect you to.’

‘I know you wouldn’t. I just . . .’ He flung his arm out. ‘I feel as if I’m battling against the tide here. You don’t trust me, Jaz. That’s the bottom line.’

My throat felt suddenly choked because he was right. ‘No, I don’t trust you, if you want the truth. I don’t think I can trust a man with my heart ever again. But it’s nothing personal.’

‘Nothing personal?’ He laughed incredulously. ‘It feels *extremely* personal to me.’

‘Yes, well, it’s not meant to be.’

‘Look, I know you’re scared. But I’ve been biding my time for so long, waiting for you to make your mind up.’ With a growl of frustration, he dragged both hands through his hair. ‘Surely you must realise by now that the very last thing I’m going to do is hurt you?’

‘But you can’t *say* that,’ I wailed.

He stared at me uncomprehendingly. ‘I just did.’

I shook my head. ‘You can’t make promises of fidelity because you don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. I mean, I’m sure *Harry* never meant to cheat on me, but he *did* . . .’

‘Harry.’ He blew out his breath. ‘Am I to be forever tarred with the same brush as your ex? Because honestly, if that’s true, Jaz, I might as well throw in the towel now.’

‘Well, maybe you should,’ I snapped, suddenly feeling as if I was struggling to breathe. Panic was surging up inside me at the thought of losing Milo, but at the same time, I felt as raw and vulnerable as a new-born lamb, unable to trust my *own* feelings, let alone Milo’s. Tears pricked my eyes. ‘I mean, I’d hate you to hang around waiting for me to come to my senses and then find you’ve missed out on dozens of *other* opportunities for a relationship. With someone much less screwed-up or needy than I am!’

‘You’re not needy. Or screwed-up,’ he said gently, seeing the tears. ‘You just . . . well, you don’t want to be burned

twice, which as I keep saying, I understand.'

'But you don't. Not really. And why should you? You've probably never been cheated on in your life.'

He snorted. 'Don't you believe it.'

'Well, okay, but it obviously hasn't affected you the way it's affected me. And the thing is, there doesn't seem to be anything I can do about it.' I broke off, biting my lower lip which had started to tremble. 'So maybe . . .'

'Maybe what?' he demanded impatiently, searching my eyes.

My hackles rose at the clipped nature of his tone. And so did my chin. 'Maybe we should just stay friends,' I told him coolly.

'Friends.' Milo's shoulders sank and he nodded slowly at me for a moment, as if all the fight had suddenly gone out of him. 'Okay. Well, if that's what you want.' His mouth was set in a hard line of resignation.

'It really is,' I said as firmly as I could, desperate to get him off the doorstep and close the door before I broke down and sobbed hysterically and made a *total* fool of myself.

'Right, well . . .'

He backed away with the saddest look on his face, while I clenched my teeth and gripped my hands together to stop my lip from trembling. 'I'll be seeing you, then, Jaz.'

He walked slowly away and seconds later, I heard his front door click shut.

Leaning back against my own door, I let the tears of despair and frustration trickle unchecked down my cheeks. I was an emotional mess. And I'd done it now. Milo's resigned expression had told me everything I needed to know. He didn't want friendship, so for the sake of his sanity, he was giving up on me.

And the worst thing of all?

I really couldn't blame him.

Rori.

I lay on the sofa and stared up at the ceiling.

Ellie had told me Milo's potential new assistant was Rory and I'd just assumed it was Clara's boyfriend. But it wasn't. It was Rori with an 'i' – and as well as doing Christmas shifts in Roastery, she was going to be working closely with Milo and Ellie on the glamping project.

So just when I was starting to think that Milo and I might actually belong together, and that I could trust him with my heart, life had thrown me a curve ball in the shape of an attractive young woman with curly blonde hair and a lovely smile. A woman who smiled adoringly up at Milo as if she'd been in love with him for years – and maybe she had.

Old uni friends who were going to be living together.

It was enough to set my post-break-up emotional and psychological recovery back by a decade. Well, maybe not a whole ten years, but nine at least. That was how it felt right now, anyway. The worst thing was, if I'd been brave enough, I could have learned from the situation and grown stronger because of it. But I'd told Milo I didn't trust him . . . that I could probably never trust him . . .

Warm tears trickled down into my hair.

I might be over Harry but I definitely wasn't back to being the fairly strong, 'together' person I was before I met him. I needed to give myself more time to recover from the split because in my current state, my insecurities spelled disaster for any future relationship.

I couldn't expect Milo to wait around for me while I sorted my head out. Hadn't he made his own feelings quite clear on that subject?

I'll be seeing you, then, Jaz.

That had to be one of the saddest sentences ever . . .

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Over the following few days, I did everything I could to avoid Milo.

It wasn't that I was frightened to face him. It was that to my despair, I was already missing him and Mabel more than I thought I would, and trying to explain to Emma why we weren't seeing them any longer was already proving to be difficult. So I decided that the only way to move on was to just stay out of their way. On the principle of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Not an easy task when we lived right next door to each other, but I was hopeful. Because allowing my mind to linger on Milo and Mabel, and what might have been, was counterproductive to my healing. That way was signposted 'despair'.

So during the day, when Emma was at nursery, I threw myself into helping Ellie with her Christmas project over at the glamping site. The funny thing was, I knew that Ellie was doing exactly the same – putting all her energy into setting up A Winter Wonderland, which meant she had less time to dwell on their next round of IVF treatment. There was a pair of us!

Ellie had finally found a local company willing to donate the use of one of their marquees for the weekend of the event. She was over the moon about it, especially as her aim was to keep the costs down setting up the event, so that as much as possible of the money raised would be able to go to the cause: Christmas lunch for anyone vulnerable or alone or in difficulties of any kind during what could be the loneliest time of the year. She also wanted to give a donation to Food Share, a discounted food club that Harlyn ran in the village for those in need. A hard winter ahead would be tough for so many local families.

I knew she needed an abundance of Christmassy glitter in the form of eye-catching decorations – including baubles and tinsel for the tree that had been donated by the local Christmas tree farm and was destined for inside the big marquee. So I started scouring the charity shops in Sunnybrook and further afield to collect as much as I could.

I was on the lookout for more tree decorations when I entered Buntingford's only charity shop one morning the following week. But what I found in there was so much more exciting than baubles. In fact, I gasped out loud when I saw it, and the tall, white-haired woman in charge behind the desk looked up, peering at me over her purple-rimmed glasses.

'It's just what we need,' I explained, reaching into the large plastic bag and stroking the red velvety fabric. 'My friend was going to hire a Father Christmas costume but this looks as if it'll be perfect. It's got the beard and the hat and gloves. Oh, and a cape as well.'

The woman, who was called Joan according to her badge, bustled over with an anxious frown. 'It's not in pristine condition, I'm afraid.'

'It is a bit scruffy,' I agreed, rubbing at a muddy mark on the white trim of the hat. 'But I'm sure a washing machine cycle would sort that out.'

She looked doubtful. 'Someone seems to have had a little accident with it, though.' Taking out the contents of the bag, she located the main costume which on first glance looked amazing with its trim of white fur and gleaming golden buttons. But when Joan turned it round, I saw the burn mark on the back.

'Oh, what a shame.' I picked up the velvety trousers and studied them thoughtfully. 'There's loads of material in these, though, and they've got fairly big hems. I'm sure there'd be enough for a patch to cover the singed bit on the back of the costume.'

'Do you sew?' asked Joan.

Smiling, I nodded. 'I used to love sewing. But then I had a baby.'

'Ah!' She laughed. 'Well, I'm sure you could patch it up. The damaged area will be hidden by the long cape, anyway, so the patch wouldn't even have to be perfect.'

'I'll take it.' I smiled at her, feeling more cheerful than I had in days. Glancing at the ticket attached to it, my eyebrows shot

up. ‘Cheap at the price as well!’ I gave her an extra fiver, knowing that this precious acquisition would mean lots more money in our charity fund. It was such a luxurious Santa suit. Zak was going to look amazing once I’d fixed it up a bit.

‘It’s roomy enough to fit a pillow inside, to get that proper Santa’s belly jiggle!’ smiled Joan, as she pushed everything back into the plastic bag and handed it over to me.

‘Brilliant! Thank you so much.’ I explained about A Winter Wonderland and her eyes lit up.

‘Do you have a poster I could put up in the window?’

I nodded. ‘I’m told the posters will be ready tomorrow, so I can pop back and bring you one?’

‘Ooh, yes, and I’ll bring my two granddaughters along if Santa’s going to be there.’ She smiled, her grey eyes twinkling. ‘I’m sure Grandma will have a good time, too, what with all the other festive goodies you’ve been telling me about. I’m just a big kid at heart, really. Especially at Christmas time.’

‘Aren’t we all?’ Laughing, I pushed open the door and held up the bag containing the Santa suit. ‘Thanks for this! See you soon.’

Back in Sunnybrook, I was still smiling after my encounter with Joan and my amazing find. The beautiful Santa outfit was stowed away in my back-pack and I was planning to go straight over to the café to give it to Ellie. I had a feeling she’d be delighted.

But when I drove into Sunnybrook, I could see that the little café car park was chock-a-block with customers, so instead of risking not being able to park there, I pulled into a space on the high street. Then I set off across the green with my treasure.

Halfway over, my eye caught a lone figure sitting on the bench by the duck pond. I recognised the yellow coat.

Freddy.

He was sitting at an angle, staring out over the trees beyond the duck pond, and he hadn't seen me. I slowed down, thinking. Then I doubled back to the high street and called in at the village store, where I bought a coffee-to-go and one of their famous freshly-baked cheese and onion pasties. The packet was warm in my hands as I picked up sachets of sugar and a stirrer, and the mouth-watering aroma tickled my nose. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten today.

Setting off across the green towards the bench, I was wondering what to say to Freddy. He was clearly in a bad place and it would be so much easier to just smile at him and walk on by, but I couldn't do that. To be fair, I probably would if he was a total stranger. But he wasn't. He was a polite, personable youngster who'd saved Maisie and Esme from a catastrophe that didn't bear thinking about, and my heart went out to him.

But Ellie said he was proud and wouldn't welcome charity . . .

I sat down on the other end of the bench with a sigh and plonked the pasty and the coffee down beside me. Folding my arms, I stared gloomily over the duck pond, totally ignoring Freddy.

I could sense him looking over at me briefly, but I continued to stare into space and the silence between us lengthened. I was actually thinking about Milo and Rori. I'd tried so hard not to spy on them over the past couple of days, but my ears seemed to be super-alert to the sound of every car engine, and I'd never before spent so much time 'checking the weather' from my kitchen window. I felt ashamed of myself for lurking behind curtains but I couldn't seem to help myself.

Love was an absolute bitch, I'd found myself concluding yesterday. And then I'd caught myself and stopped.

Love?

Surely I wasn't *in love* with Milo? I mean, how could I be? Two passionate kisses spread out over months didn't make a relationship, and surely you had to be firmly attached to someone to declare yourself in love?

I'd sunk down despairingly at the kitchen table, my head in my hands.

The feelings I was experiencing certainly *felt* like love. I was missing Milo horribly. I missed his silly jokes and his smile and the happy way he made me feel when we were just doing ordinary, day-to-day things with the girls. And feverish daydreams about his lips crushing mine kept forcing their way into my consciousness, however much I tried to put them firmly from my mind.

But Milo deserved someone better than me. He deserved someone who trusted him one hundred per cent the whole time – not someone suspicious and jealous and flaky who didn't even trust *herself* half the time, never mind putting her faith in a man she really liked.

(Or possibly loved.)

'Life can be cruel, don't you think?' I turned to Freddy, and he glanced at me uneasily.

I gave a heavy sigh. 'I mean, you do your best to be a normal human being, whatever "normal" is. But there's always that little nagging voice in the back of your mind telling you that you actually fall way short of "normal".'

I glanced across at him. He'd crossed his arms and sunk further down on the bench, and he was staring furiously at the duck pond, probably pretending he hadn't heard me.

'I swear it sometimes seems as though everyone around you is happy and you're the only one who's floundering,' I went on. 'Everyone else has got their act together, achieving important things, and you still feel like a useless novice at this thing called life, wishing you knew what the hell you should do next.'

There was still no reply and I sank further down on the bench myself, realising I wasn't just saying these things for Freddy's benefit. I actually meant them. I was adrift on a terrifying ocean and I literally had no idea what to do next. Since realising I might be in love with Milo, my head had been in a complete spin . . .

‘The thing is.’ I cleared my throat. ‘There’s this person who I like *a lot*. He’s my next-door neighbour, actually. But I’m terrified to tell him how I really feel in case it all ends in disaster. And meanwhile, there’s a chance he might fall for someone else. Bummer, eh?’

I looked over at Freddy and at last, he turned his head.

‘Does he like you?’

I smiled sadly. ‘He *more* than liked me. I think. But he’s got fed up with me now.’

‘Why?’

‘Because . . . I guess because my fears were getting in the way.’ With a shiver, I dug my hands deeper into my pockets.

It was freezing! How could Freddy exist out here in the middle of winter? What was so bad at home that he’d felt he had no choice but to walk out?

‘Fear of what?’ he asked.

I stared at the frozen surface of the duck pond. ‘Um . . . well, giving my heart away to someone to have it trampled on? Again?’

‘You’ve been hurt before?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘But you survived it, right? The break-up?’

I turned in surprise. ‘I suppose I did, yes.’

‘So even if this new relationship didn’t work out, what’s the worst that can happen? I mean, you’ve proved you won’t die.’

I laughed. ‘I won’t die. That’s true. I like your logic.’

‘Isn’t love worth taking a chance on?’

‘Maybe.’

‘I mean, that’s what they say in all the corny films.’

‘I suppose they do.’ I paused. ‘Have you ever been in love?’

He snorted. ‘Yes. But apparently she wasn’t good enough.’

‘Who said that?’

‘My parents. Well, my dad. He thinks I’m too immature to make good decisions.’

‘Really?’ My heart jagged at the matter-of-fact way he said it.

He shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’m used to being a disappointment. They’ve got my brother so they won’t be missing me.’ He paused. ‘Graeme’s studying to be a doctor.’ There was a note of pride in his voice.

‘Right. He’s older, then?’

‘Five years older. He’s twenty-three.’

‘But you’ve got years to decide what you really want to do. You’re only eighteen.’

He scowled at my implication that he was just a baby. ‘I’m old *enough*.’

‘Of course you are.’

‘Old enough to know my own mind.’

I nodded. Then I glanced at the coffee and the pasty lying on the bench between us. Taking the lid off the cup, I made a face. ‘Ugh. I can’t face this coffee after all. My stomach is churning. I don’t suppose you could drink it? I hate waste.’

He looked at the coffee, leaning slightly towards it and breathing in the warm Christmassy scents.

‘You don’t have to,’ I said. ‘I could just pour it away.’

‘No!’ He reached for the cup with a speed that twisted my heart. His fingers looked frozen in the fingerless gloves. I handed the coffee over. ‘Thanks. Shame to waste it,’ he said gruffly with a hint of a smile.

‘I’ve got sugar,’ I said. ‘If you want it?’

‘Go on, then.’ He placed the cup very carefully on the bench and tried to open a sachet of sugar with his frozen fingers but was clearly having difficulty.

‘Can I?’ I offered.

‘No, it’s fine.’

He renewed his efforts but the sachet tore and sugar scattered over the grass. So I opened the other one and he took it with a grudging smile. We lapsed into silence and I watched him out of the corner of my eye as he stirred in the sugar and then wrapped his hands around the cup and drank it like that.

‘It was so quick-thinking what you did the other day at the crossing,’ I said at last.

He shrugged. ‘I saw the bus and I just did what anyone would have done. It was nothing.’

I gasped. ‘It was very definitely not *nothing*! You saved those little girls’ lives. And as for Ellie, you’ll be her knight in shining armour forever.’

‘I’m glad they’re okay,’ he mumbled, shifting in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with the hero label.

‘You should let Ellie help you a bit more.’

‘She gives me food every day.’

‘Yes, but I think she’d really like to do more.’

He shook his head firmly. ‘I don’t need anyone’s help. I’m fine on my own.’

‘But everyone needs people who care . . . to support them.’

‘Not me. People always let you down in the end. It’s much better to be your own boss.’

‘How have they let you down?’ I asked gently, assuming he was talking about his parents.

He was silent for a long time, just staring moodily at the trees in the distance, and I thought for a moment that he wasn’t going to reply.

At last, he said, ‘They’ve cut me off because I refuse to do what they want me to do.’

‘What do they want you to do?’

‘Go to university. Study law. Become a barrister. *Do them proud.*’ He shook his head in disgust. ‘Dad told my girlfriend

she wasn't welcome at the house any longer because I wasn't mature enough to be in a relationship with anyone. We had a big row and I walked out.'

'What about your mum?' I asked in horror.

'She was crying but she always takes his side. He never listens to what I want to do. And the thing is, I know *exactly* what I want to do.'

He turned to me, his eyes glowing, his face transformed.

'I'm going to be a chef.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Wow. Really? That’s great.’

Freddy shrugged. ‘It’s not so easy, though, getting a job. Especially when you look like you’re homeless. Which I suppose I am since I left.’

‘Where have you come from?’ I asked. ‘I mean, where do your parents live?’

‘On the south coast. When I left, I got the train to Guildford. I had this idea that I’d get a job in a restaurant kitchen and stay in a youth hostel or something. But . . .’ He trailed off.

‘It didn’t work out that way?’ I prompted gently.

He shook his head. ‘I bought a tent with my savings so I’d have somewhere to sleep, but then I ran into my grandad. He’s a warehouse manager and he happened to be standing outside the store chatting to someone when I walked past. He saw me and I had to make a run for it.’

‘Oh!’ I pictured the older man running after Freddy down the escalator at the station. ‘That was your *grandad*?’

He looked at me, puzzled.

‘I saw you at the train station in Guildford. You rushed past me down the escalator with your big box and hopped on the Sunnybrook train. I got on after you and I saw the man – your grandad – trying to catch up with you.’

‘I gave him the slip.’ He sighed, looking so sad, I wanted to reach over and give him a hug. ‘I should have talked to him. I love my grandad. He’s . . . sort of my hero. But I knew if I stopped, he’d only try to persuade me to go back home. And I’m not doing that. So I shouted that I was fine and I ran off. I knew I couldn’t stay in Guildford after that, so I jumped on the first train I saw. And I ended up here.’

‘I saw you coming out of Carlo’s on the high street the other day. Were you enquiring about a job there as well?’

‘Yep. But it was the same old story. Nothing doing.’ He shrugged. ‘The thing is, I’d do *anything*. I’d peel potatoes all day. Clear tables and stack the dishwasher. Anything. I’d even work for free if they fed me. Just to get a start somewhere.’ He looked down at his clothes. ‘I’ve tried to clean myself up, but I guess people take one look at me and think: *Scruffy teenager. We can’t trust him.*

‘But that’s how Ellie can help you,’ I said eagerly. ‘She offered to let you use her washing machine, didn’t she? So why don’t you take her up on it?’

He shook his head.

‘But why not? She really wants to help you. In fact, *I* want to help you! Why don’t we go back to my house and while I put your clothes through the wash and tumble-dry, I could rustle you up a hot meal? How does spicy chicken pasta sound?’

To my alarm, he stood up, hoisting on his back pack.

‘Thank you, but as I said, I don’t need help,’ he said politely, walking away. ‘I don’t need anyone telling me what I should or shouldn’t be doing.’

‘But I’m not. Really I’m not,’ I protested helplessly, springing to my feet and running after him. ‘Will you take this cheese and onion pasty at least?’ I waved the packet.

But he was striding away now, much too fast for me. He turned once and waved. Then, as I watched in dismay, he sprinted across the road and disappeared from view along a side street.

Despondently, I pulled the pasty out of the bag and took a large bite. It was delicious and my empty stomach agreed with me. I ate the rest of it slowly as I made my way across the green to the café.

I could have kicked myself, though. In my effort to help Freddy, I’d pushed him too far.

This was a person – no more than a boy, really – who, despite his youth, was strong-minded enough to have worked out what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. He loved cooking. He was going to be a chef. There was no question in his mind. But his father clearly had other ideas for his younger son’s future, and they’d had a dramatic falling out.

I felt a prickle of resentment at a parent who would want to stifle their child’s ambition like that. I hoped that when Emma grew up, I’d support her in anything she wanted to do. But what if she dropped out of education at sixteen and decided to join a commune? Would I be so supportive then? I only had Freddy’s side of the story. Perhaps his dad was only doing what he thought was best for his son. I knew from experience that it felt like a back-breaking responsibility sometimes, trying to do the right thing for your child . . . to give them the right guidance in life . . .

The café, when I walked in, was really busy. Spotting Fen rocking her twins in their pram as she chatted to Lottie, who she named her little girl after, I waved.

‘Jaz!’ beamed Fen. ‘Come and join us. I’ll get you a coffee.’

‘No, it’s fine. I’ll get it.’

‘No, I insist.’ Fen stood up and – leaning closer – murmured, ‘I’ve got an ulterior motive. My arm’s getting tired and I need the loo. Can you rock the pram for a bit?’ She grinned sheepishly. ‘I’m really enjoying having adult conversation and I don’t want the twins to wake up yet.’

‘Hey, no problem.’ I smiled at Lottie and changed places with Fen so there was barely a break in the rocking motion.

Liam, in traditional blue, was sleeping with his arms thrown over his head, looking impossibly cute. Little Lottie, in a white Babygro with a pink rabbit appliquéd onto it, had her thumb in her mouth, and as I gazed down at her cherubic face, she suddenly opened her eyes and gazed glassily at the ceiling. Then she rubbed at her face, as if she had an itchy nose, and I exchanged a tense smile with the adult Lottie.

Was she waking up?

But then her little body relaxed, her eyes drooped closed and – tucking her thumb back in her mouth – she fell asleep again.

With Fen at the counter chatting to Ellie (she waved and when I held up my Santa suit bag, indicating I had something for her, she looked intrigued), I then had a chance to ask Lottie how things were going with her boyfriend, Liam. Their romance was fairly new.

‘I’m still working at the hotel in Bournemouth but we’re managing to see each other most weekends.’ She smiled, her cheeks positively glowing at the mention of him. ‘I’ve got a few days off at the moment and I’m meeting him later, after his lunchtime radio show.’

‘Fantastic! And how’s the bed and breakfast place shaping up? Will your Mum be up and running for the start of the spring season?’

She grinned. ‘Oh, yes. At least, if my brother has anything to do with it, she will. Honestly, I never realised what a workaholic Dylan could be.’

After a troubled period growing up, Lottie and Dylan had only recently found their mum again. She and her partner, Roy, had decided to renovate the old family home and turn it into a guesthouse, and Dylan had thrown himself into helping with the project.

I smiled at Lottie. ‘It’s all worked out amazingly, hasn’t it?’

‘Touch wood.’ She nodded happily and reached over to tap a nearby wooden picture frame. ‘And I love that Liam and I have a special connection to these two little rascals,’ she added, gazing fondly at the sleeping babies. ‘Our namesakes.’

‘Well, if it hadn’t been for you two coming by at the right time, goodness knows where Fen would have given birth! Probably in a field.’

She laughed. ‘I know. Thank goodness we were there when she went into labour.’

Fen dropped into the seat beside me. ‘Ellie says she’ll bring your coffee over.’

‘Great. Thanks. Look, what do you think of this?’ I pulled out the red velvety Santa hat with its luxurious white trim and pom-pom. ‘Picked it up in a charity shop for a few quid. The whole suit, cape and everything.’

‘What a find!’ enthused Ellie, appearing behind me with my latte. She checked the counter for customers then quickly pulled a chair over, sat down and ran her fingers over the fabric. ‘It’s such good quality. I can’t believe you got this from a charity shop. Well done, you. We won’t have to hire one, after all.’

‘That’s what I thought. I need to stitch a patch on the back but it should look great on Zak. If he tries it on, we can experiment with a cushion for a belly, and I can do alterations if need be.’

Ellie made a face. ‘Actually, I’m still trying to persuade Zak that he’d make the most perfect Father Christmas. Honestly, the list of bribes is nobody’s business.’ Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

‘Not sure we need to know about that,’ laughed Lottie.

‘That sounds a lot raunchier than it actually is,’ Ellie admitted. ‘Actually, I’ve said I’ll take the bins out and bath Maisie-Moo for a month.’

I grinned at her. ‘Really? I’d go for the more romantic jobs, so to speak. Much more fun than shampooing the dog!’

She chuckled. ‘I might need to try that next.’

I took a sip of the hot coffee. ‘I’ve just seen Freddy sitting on the bench but I think I frightened him off.’

‘Oh. How?’

‘By trying too hard to help.’ I shrugged ruefully. ‘I couldn’t help it. He brings out my maternal instincts.’

Ellie nodded. ‘I know what you mean. He’s a lovely boy but he’s . . . so *infuriating* in his single-mindedness. I told him he was welcome to stay in one of our shepherd’s huts during the winter. I mean, they’re just sitting there doing nothing and we

won't need them until spring. It would be perfect for him. Heated and really cosy.'

'But he won't?' asked Lottie.

Ellie shook her head. 'Too proud, I think.'

'It's also because of things at home,' I said. 'I don't think he likes people making decisions for him. His parents . . . well, his dad in particular . . . they want him to get a degree and become a barrister but it's clear that's the very last thing on Freddy's radar. He's actually set his heart on being a chef.'

'Well, I hope he realises his dream,' said Fen. 'I expect he will, eventually. He seems like a determined character.'

I nodded. 'He is. Very determined.'

We lapsed into silence for a moment and I drank my coffee. Then Ellie said, 'Erm, I'm going to need volunteers to help decorate the exterior of the marquee tent for A Winter Wonderland. Anyone good with heights? Climbing ladders?' She grinned at us in turn.

Fen shivered. 'I'm no good on ladders. I get dizzy.'

'Last time I climbed a ladder, it was an old wooden one and the rung broke,' confessed Lottie. 'My leg went right through and I got stuck. It's sort of put me off ladders forever?'

'Yeah, I'm not great with heights,' said Ellie.

'I'll do it,' I offered. 'What do you need?'

'Fairy lights strung over the entrance? Would you mind, Jaz? It's just that Zak's really busy editing his latest book and I've already asked him to do so much.'

'Of course I don't mind.'

'Also, you know I've rented some stalls for inside the marquee? Well, they delivered them yesterday and just dumped the sections in the middle of the tent. Apparently, we have to put them together ourselves. And all this while making a costume for Maisie's school Christmas play, working full-time in the café and keeping the house running smoothly.' Groaning, she ran her hands through her hair. 'Honestly, why

did I ever think this Winter Wonderland thing was a good idea? I must have been mad!’

‘Hey, don’t worry.’ I laid a reassuring hand on her arm. ‘You’ve got all of us to help.’

Lottie nodded. ‘We’ll make it happen.’

‘Actually, I think I might have an idea,’ muttered Fen, staring into space.

‘Idea?’ asked Ellie.

Smiling, Fen tapped the side of her nose with an air of mystery. ‘Leave it with me. It might not work. But if it does, it might kill two birds with one stone.’

I was about to demand she tell us what she had planned. But then baby Lottie stirred in her pram, swiftly followed by her brother. So then the focus switched to Fen rummaging in her massive baby bag for the two bottles of milk that were the key to peace reigning once more . . .

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘Want to see *Mabel!*’ Emma threw her doll across the kitchen in frustration.

It slammed into a pile of dirty dishes, sending several crashing into the sink. Luna, who hated sudden loud noises, went and hid under the table.

Sighing, I patted her soothingly and went to inspect the damage. My favourite mug lay in pieces, but it wasn’t Emma’s fault. She just couldn’t understand why she wasn’t able to invite Mabel over to play like she used to. She’d seen her arriving back at Milo’s – after Mabel had spent a few days at her aunt’s – but I’d used the excuse of being too busy in the house to invite Mabel over. To be fair to Emma, it wasn’t the first time I’d had to say no, and now she was red-faced and breaking her heart, sobbing inconsolably.

I sank down at the table in despair. Frankly, I didn’t blame her for being so upset.

But what on earth could I do about it? I didn’t even know if Milo was speaking to me these days. I could hardly go round and gaily suggest the girls get together for a sleepover, could I? As if things were the same as they used to be. Because they very definitely weren’t.

We’d been deliberately avoiding one another ever since our icy parting the week before.

I was now more acutely aware of the comings and goings next door than ever – mainly because the last thing I needed was a repeat of Sunday morning, when I’d taken Emma out to the car at exactly the same time as Milo and Rori were emerging from his house, laughing at some hilarious joke of his.

They were smartly dressed and it was just after twelve, so I decided they were probably off out for lunch somewhere. Rori looked slim and gorgeous in heels, a white ruffle-necked blouse just visible above the collar of her elegant camel coat.

Next to her, dressed in old jeans and hoodie, I probably looked as if I'd just spent the morning mucking out horses.

Pretending I hadn't noticed them, I hurried Emma into the car so fast, she squeaked in protest. But I knew Milo would have seen us, and as I drove away, my cheeks felt as red and scorched as a couple of flame-grilled steaks. It took me ages to stop trembling. And after that, I always made doubly sure that the coast was clear, and that we had everything we needed for a speedy getaway.

Once, Emma got in the car and we realised she'd forgotten her favourite doll, Sadie, which she took everywhere with her. Naturally, she wanted me to go back in the house to get her and normally, I would have. But turning round, I caught sight of Milo looking out of his kitchen window, so I told her no, and found myself promising to buy Sadie a new outfit at the shops in order to try and pacify her.

As I sat there in the kitchen with my broken mug and Emma wailing in my ear, I knew I had to face the inevitable.

It wasn't fair on Emma. And it was ridiculous, all this ducking and diving to avoid him. So in spite of feeling as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking-chairs, I'd have to go next door. I knew Milo would say yes if I invited Mabel over for her tea. He might be fed up with me but he certainly wasn't the type to hold a grudge, and I knew he wouldn't want our falling-out to interfere with our daughters' friendship. Milo was lovely like that. He was always fair and he was one of the kindest people I'd ever met in my life . . . but my stupid insecurities had ruined everything.

Stop it!

Stop torturing yourself!

I'd sworn I wasn't going to think about Milo, but that was impossible – and not just because he happened to live next door . . .

With a frantically beating heart, I bundled Emma into her coat and we went next door and rang the bell. I was really

hoping Rori wouldn't answer, but of course it was that kind of a day, and Sod's Law was very much in play.

She looked surprised to see us, but then her face smoothed into a slightly nervous smile. 'Hi! How are you?'

'We're fine, thank you.' I smiled back.

'Come in.'

'Oh, no, it's okay. I just . . . could I have a quick word with Milo?'

'Of course. I'll go and get him.' She paused and smiled at Emma. 'Shall I bring Mabel as well?'

Beside me, Emma nodded, and Rori said, 'Mabel's told me all about you, Emma.' She looked back at me. 'I'll just go and get them.'

'Okay. Thanks.'

Why did Rori have to be so nice?

I waited, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, and then Milo appeared, Mabel running ahead of him. My heart twisted at the sight of him. 'Hi. I hope you don't mind us calling round.'

'Of course not,' he said flatly, as if it went without saying.

'Right. It's just that . . . Emma's been missing Mabel, so I wondered if she'd like to come over for tea some time?' I paused. 'Actually, I've been missing Mabel, too.'

I forced myself to look into his eyes and for a moment, the world seemed to stand still. Could he read my thoughts? If so, he'd know how much I'd been missing him as well . . .

But I'd been holding my breath with nerves and I started to cough, which rather ruined the moment. Milo arranged his face into a smile and looked down at Mabel.

'What do you think, Kiddo? Fancy going over for tea with Jaz and Emma?'

'Yes. Can I, Dad?'

‘Of course you can. When do you want her?’ He smiled at me and my heart skipped a beat.

‘Tomorrow? Or today? I mean, come over now, Mabel, if you’d like to?’

Mabel nodded eagerly.

‘Great.’ I smiled down at my daughter, who seemed suddenly overcome with shyness at the sight of her ‘big girl’ idol. ‘Isn’t that great, Emma?’

She nodded and I said briskly, ‘Right. Let’s go, girls.’ I risked another look at Milo. ‘What time shall I bring Mabel back?’

‘Whenever you like. I might not be in, but Rori will be.’

‘Okay.’

‘Okay. Great. See you, Jaz.’

‘Yes. See you.’

My heart felt heavy as I followed the girls. They ran ahead giggling and Mabel was already talking to Emma in her amusing ‘teacher’s voice’, saying she was going to set up a toy shop, and Emma and Luna could be the customers coming into the shop to buy something for a present. Emma, of course, was happy to do anything Mabel told her to do.

I smiled, my daughter’s happiness lifting me a little. But there was a chill in my heart, thinking about my exchange with Milo. It had been so impersonal and devoid of emotion.

Even when we’d locked eyes, his had seemed cold and bleak, and I’d had no idea what he was thinking . . .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A few days later, I arrived at the site of A Winter Wonderland to find that lots of progress had been made in decorating the marquee, bringing a lovely festive feel to the glamping site.

Ellie was already there. She'd phoned the night before and said she needed to get the tree decorated in the morning, and would I like to help? So I'd got up early and gone straight over there.

'Hi! What do you think?' Ellie stood back and we admired the tree.

'It's gorgeous. But I thought you said you needed my help?'

She grinned. 'I couldn't sleep what with everything that's going on, so as I was up with the lark, I thought I'd just get on with the tree. But . . . could you have a look at the Santa suit and make some adjustments to it if they're needed?'

'Of course. In the café?'

She nodded then smiled at someone over my shoulder. 'Freddy? Could you bring the big box of fairy lights over from the baking school store room and start hanging them inside the tent? There's a ladder there as well.'

I turned round in surprise just as Freddy said, 'No problem.' He made a thumbs-up sign and disappeared off on his mission.

'He's helping you now?'

Ellie grinned. 'Yes. In exchange for board and lodgings.'

'In one of the shepherd's huts?'

'Yup. It was Fen's idea and I don't know why I didn't think of it. But it's obvious, really.' She smiled fondly. 'Freddy hates the thought of charity, but payment in kind for doing all the lifting and carrying and climbing ladders to get this event up and running is apparently acceptable.'

'That's brilliant.'

'I know. I feel so much better knowing he has somewhere warm and safe to sleep at night. I just wish I could contact his

mum and reassure her he's okay. Because whatever's happened at home, if she's a half-decent mother, she must be beside herself with worry. Freddy says he texted her and his girlfriend when he left to let them know he's all right, but that wouldn't be enough for me. I'd want to know *exactly* where my child was – ' She stopped and frowned. 'Oh, hang on. He hasn't got the key for the baking school store.' She patted her pocket and drew it out. 'I'll go and catch him up. Back in a minute.'

I walked after her, to the entrance of the tent. Spotting Zak emerging from the back door of the café dressed as Father Christmas, I called out to Ellie, who was hurrying across the grass. 'I'll go and get on with the Santa suit, shall I?' I'd brought my sewing kit, just in case.

'What, now?' called Ellie.

'Might as well! I'll go in the back door.' I watched as Zak took a few deep breaths of the frosty air, twanged his white beard and patted his belly, before retreating back inside.

'Jaz? Jaz, wait! It's not actually Zak . . .'

It took a few seconds to register what she'd said, and when I turned around, she was deep in conversation with Freddy, who'd obviously returned for the key.

Did she mean it wasn't Zak in the Santa suit?

But if it wasn't, who on earth *was* it?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I found 'Santa' in Ellie's office, checking his reflection in a mirror on the wall.

He turned towards me, his face almost completely concealed by the luxuriant white beard, and for one wild second, I thought it was Milo.

But as I moved nearer, my heart jumping crazily, I realised it wasn't him at all. Milo's pupils were much darker. Although these eyes were definitely familiar.

And then the eyes in question crinkled into a smile, Santa pulled off his beard and all was revealed.

'Harry?'

I stared at him. 'What the hell, Harry? I thought you were Zak.'

He grinned. 'Zak very sensibly decided he wasn't up to the job so he took it upon himself to find a replacement.'

'And that's you?'

He shrugged. 'What's Christmas if not peace and goodwill to all men? Including helping Zak out of a tight spot.'

I laughed, still trying to get my head around Harry as Santa Claus. 'How very self-sacrificing of you.'

'Er, not exactly.' He rubbed his nose sheepishly. 'The truth is we went out for a swift pint that turned into several and I agreed to it through a beer haze.'

'Right. That makes more sense. And now you can't back out.' I shook my head in despair. 'I've never known anyone get themselves into such awkward situations as you. Why do you *never* stop to think before you leap into something?'

Like for instance telling me about your affair with Vivien, instead of bumbling along hoping no one would get hurt and leaving me to find out for myself!

‘Apparently not,’ he said ruefully, my dig clearly not lost on him.

I laughed again, feeling an unexpected burst of happiness.

Before, a dig of mine levelled at Harry would have been full of venom and I’d have been feeling sick at the memory of his horrible deception.

But no longer, apparently.

Right at that moment, my only emotion was amusement and pity. As in: *Poor Harry. He really doesn’t help himself at times!*

‘That suit looks about twenty sizes too big for you,’ I pointed out. ‘Or maybe eighteen.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

I grinned. ‘Well, you’ve been putting on a bit of weight recently. Must be all those butter-laden *cordon bleu* suppers in Viv’s glorious kitchen.’ (I might be ‘over it’, but I certainly wasn’t immune to a bit of bear poking where Harry was concerned. He totally deserved it, after all.)

He gave me another sheepish look that said *touché*.

From what I’d gathered, Vivien considered herself a rather superior cook and was always rustling up extravagant dinners that Harry’s stomach couldn’t always cope with. (He seemed to eat digestion tablets like Smarties these days.)

Grinning, I studied the outfit, pulling at the loose fabric over his stomach. ‘There’s a surprising amount of room in there. But Santa needs to be plump and jolly. So we need padding. A big cushion either strapped to a belt round your waist or sewn inside the actual suit.’

‘Could you do that?’

‘Why are you asking me *that?*’ I said tartly. ‘You *know* I can sew.’

‘Of course I do.’ He grinned. ‘Who could forget the show-stopping fairy costume you made for Emma for the nursery fancy-dress party last year?’

‘It was rather good, wasn’t it?’ I said, in spite of everything feeling pleased that he remembered.

‘How’s this year’s Christmas tree costume shaping up? Emma never stops talking about how she’s going to have the best outfit at the party.’

‘Really?’ I grimaced. ‘It’s not that great, actually. It just looks like she’s wearing a green dress with coloured circles sewn on it, and I still haven’t figured out how to put a star on her head.’

Harry studied me with an oddly affectionate look on his face. ‘You’ll get it right,’ he murmured. ‘You always do.’

‘Do I?’ I looked at him askance. What was going on? Was he *complimenting* me? We’d spent so much time recently trying to score points over one another, I’d almost forgotten that there was a time when we actually rather liked each other . . .

But he just shrugged and said, ‘Anyway, about this ridiculous costume I’m wearing? Can you make it so I look like the sophisticated Harrods Father Christmas instead of some terrible bargain basement excuse for a Santa?’

I gave a snort. ‘I’m not *that* clever with a needle and thread. But okay, I’ll give it a go.’

‘When do you want me?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘I can’t stop now. I’ve got a job in Buntingford.’

‘Erm . . . well, you’ll be collecting Emma from nursery tomorrow, so why don’t you bring her over to the house and we’ll see what we can do.’ I pulled at the flappy stomach again. ‘I have to say, I can’t wait to see you as the Big Man himself. Although . . . hang on, what about Emma?’

‘What about her?’

‘Well, she can’t know it’s *you* under the Santa outfit, can she?’

‘Oh, hell. That’s a point.’

‘Imagine the things she’d be telling the kids at nursery.’

‘My daddy is *Santa!*’ He attempted Emma’s high-pitched voice in a show-off tone and I laughed.

‘She’d have lots of instant friends, though.’

‘That’s true.’

‘So . . . I guess that’s not a good idea, then? Fitting you for your costume while Emma’s in the house.’

‘How about I come round one night after she’s asleep?’

‘Okay.’ I nodded, thinking how great it was that we could be friends like this.

He grinned. ‘I could hide in the cupboard under the stairs if we hear her coming down for a drink.’

‘Sounds like a plan. And in the meantime, do you want to take that costume off and I’ll put it through a wash? It looks as if Santa’s been rolling around in the mud in it with Rudolph and all his merry reindeer.’

‘Smells like it as well.’

He got out of the costume and presented it to me in the plastic bag it arrived in, and I took it with a grimace and said it better not wreck my washing machine.

‘What about tomorrow night for the fitting, then?’ he asked. ‘Or the next?’

I gave him a sideways look. ‘Don’t you have to check with Vivien first?’

He looked away sheepishly. ‘She’s . . . leaving tomorrow. On a pre-Christmas jaunt to London with a group of friends she’s known since schooldays.’

‘Ah. Right. Lucky Vivien.’

‘They do it every year. Classy hotel, going to the shows, Christmas shopping . . .’

‘Nice.’ I tried but failed to keep the sarcasm from my voice.

He shrugged awkwardly. ‘Yeah, so pick your evening.’

‘Okay. Well, I think I *might* be free tomorrow night,’ I said, knowing full well my diary for the foreseeable was so blank,

there was tumbleweed blowing across it.

He nodded. ‘Tomorrow it is, then. How about I bring something for tea and we pick Emma up from nursery together? We could do the fitting after she’s gone to bed.’

I was about to say no, he could pick her up himself. But then I thought about Emma . . . how delighted she would be to see both of us waiting for her outside the nursery at home-time. It did irk me that it was only because Vivien was away that Harry was suggesting this – but I set my irritation aside and said, ‘Yes. Okay. But if you’re bringing tea, make it something healthy? I’m trying to get her to like green veg.’

‘Pizza with spinach?’

I grinned. ‘Don’t you dare.’

‘Oh, come on. When do we ever have a chance to have tea together, the three of us?’

I looked at him warily. Was he saying in a roundabout way that he missed being a family? Well, that was rich! But on the other hand, I supposed it would be good for Emma to see her parents getting along for once and enjoying a meal together. So I bit back a sarcastic retort, gave him a tight little smile and said, ‘Okay. Pizza it is.’

As I walked away with the Santa suit, I felt like I was chalking up a victory.

Harry and I were joined forever because of Emma but I’d long worried that it would always be awkward between us. But it seemed that with the help of Father Christmas, we were managing to move to a different phase in our relationship.

I certainly wasn’t at the stage of inviting him and Vivien round for a cosy supper, but with the passage of time, such an idea no longer seemed so preposterous...

It was cold enough for snow as I waited outside the nursery with Harry and Luna on her lead the following afternoon, and I was wearing my flat brown fleece-lined boots, which Harry always used to tease me about. He’d grin at them and ask

where I'd left my herd of cows. They were the opposite of cat-walk stylish but I loved them and I didn't care if they made me look like Old Macdonald from Emma's book about farms.

I supposed in a way I'd worn the boots deliberately, to show Harry I wasn't bothered in the slightest what I looked like . . . and I certainly wasn't dressing up just because I was in his company.

Harry, on the other hand, was looking a bit too smart for the nursery gates.

He was wearing a new marl-grey coat that looked like it might be cashmere, with a knitted scarf and matching gloves in the exact same grey with subtle orange stripes. The crowning glory was, quite literally, a bobble hat to match the gloves and scarf, with a designer label prominently displayed over his forehead.

It was clearly Vivien's influence because the Harry I knew was always happiest in jeans and a sweatshirt. What had happened to his much-loved black puffer jacket that he'd brought out every winter without fail? Consigned to the charity shop by Vivien, presumably, along with all the other garments she disapproved of. (What was it about Vivien that turned me into Jaz the Superbitch?)

I could tell, when she ran out, that Emma was over the moon to see us both standing there. Luna was ecstatic, licking Emma's face and making her giggle when she bent to make a fuss of the dog. She then made a thing of taking both of our hands and walking between us all the way to Harry's car with a touchingly smug look on her face. Her mummy and daddy were together again and my heart squeezed with love for her.

In the car on the way home, Harry did the 'knock-knock' joke thing that Emma was so fond of. It was one she hadn't heard and she thought it was hilarious.

'Emma? Knock-knock.'

'Who's there?'

'You.'

'You who?'

‘Yooh-hoo! Is anyone at home?’

She burst into peals of laughter. ‘Do it again! Do it again!’

We did it multiple times, and it made her crease up with laughter just as much on each occasion. Then she turned to me. ‘Mummy, knock-knock.’

We were still chortling when we arrived home. I took Harry’s shopping inside while he got Emma out of the car and took her upstairs to wash her hands for tea. I could hear her chattering away to him and giggling, and as I popped the pizza in the oven, I felt an ache in my heart, remembering the good times.

What had happened to Harry and me? We were so happy once upon a time. Was it my fault that when Emma was born, I was so engrossed in this amazing and miraculous little person that I forgot to care about Harry as well? But surely that happened in most new families? And they didn’t all end up having affairs and breaking up as a consequence.

No, it most definitely *wasn't* my fault!

And anyway, there was no point getting sentimental over what used to be. The fact was, I was no longer in love with Harry, so feeling guilty that Emma didn’t have her parents living together was ridiculous. I glanced out of the window for the umpteenth time since we got back. Milo’s car was on the drive, but there was no sign of Rori.

We ate pizza doing more silly knock-knock jokes and then Harry insisted on having both chocolate and strawberry ice cream for dessert, with a chopped up chocolate bar on top, which delighted Emma no end. They then played a crazy game of Kerplunk which made Emma jump up and down, and shriek with laughter.

In between bouts of clearing up the kitchen, I watched them from the door with a fond smile. I really despaired of ever getting Emma to sleep tonight after all this excitement, but all the same, I was reluctant to insist they calm things down. Let Emma enjoy having her daddy here.

And then, when I thought things couldn't possibly get any more riotous, Emma suddenly looked out of the window and yelled, 'Mummy, it's snowing!'

She ran to the window and sure enough it was. There was already a good covering on the lawn, so it must have been snowing for quite a while. We'd been too busy to notice.

'Make a snowman, Daddy! Make a snowman!' Emma danced around the living room, her eyes bright and her cheeks rosy-red, then she ran back to the window and clapped her hands excitedly. 'Make a snowman!'

Harry and I exchanged a weary smile. 'She'll never sleep tonight,' I pointed out, although the last thing I wanted to do was to spoil her fun. It didn't snow that often, after all.

'Go see Mabel, Mummy?' Emma begged. 'Please? Mabel likes snowmen.'

I grinned at Harry. 'I don't think we're going to get the suit fitted tonight, do you?'

'What's a suit?' Emma asked me, ever inquisitive.

'Oh, it's just some trousers Daddy wants me to sew.'

'But can I make a snowman, Mummy? Can I? With Mabel?'

Harry, grinning, got up. 'I'd probably better go and let you get on with it?'

I nodded, relieved. It would be a bit awkward if I pitched up at Milo's door to ask if Mabel could come out, with Harry there as well. And my heart was already beating a little bit faster at the thought of seeing Milo again.

So we waved Harry off, and I bundled Emma into her coat and gloves and did the same myself. Then we hunted out some spades and a carrot for a nose. I doubted very much if we'd get to the carrot stage. There really wasn't *that* much snow. But Emma was insisting.

I opened the front door, only to realise that Rori had arrived back. Her car was now parked behind Harry's on the drive,

and she was just going inside, so I quickly stepped back into the shadows until I heard the door clunk shut.

‘Come on, Mummy!’ Emma took my hand and pulled me over the step and onto the smooth blanket of snow beyond the door. It was gaspingly cold, the air was still, and snowflakes were drifting lazily down. It was a magical sight. I took a deep breath and we walked round to Milo’s house.

His kitchen blind was still up, despite the fact that it was getting dark, and it looked so cosy in there. He was making pasta, pouring it into the pan. (Definitely enough for two.)

Then, as I tried not to look, I saw Rori burst into the kitchen and say something to him. He turned right round and laughed. She ran over, slipping her hands around his waist and smiling cheekily up at him. Then she reached up on tip-toe and kissed him on the mouth, and he kissed her right back.

It wasn’t a ‘friends’ kiss. It was more of a lingering, romantic kiss, and my heart sank into my sensible boots as Emma pulled me over to the front door. My legs were shaky with shock and I almost slipped on a patch of ice by the door, only just saving myself from landing on my bottom.

‘Ring the bell, Mummy!’ Emma said, impatient to see Mabel.

So I did. And as I waited, knowing I was interrupting . . . *something* . . . I felt queasy with sadness. Were Milo and Rori a couple now?

It certainly looked like it . . .

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It seemed a suspiciously long time before Milo came to the door, although maybe that was my imagination working overtime.

But he eventually came and I said hello and gave him a frosty smile.

‘Jaz.’ His eyes widened as he looked past my shoulder. ‘It’s snowing!’

‘Yes. That’s why we’re here. We’re going to make a snowman and Emma wondered if Mabel would like to help.’

He grinned at me and turned, calling for Mabel.

She came running out of the living room, whooping with excitement because she’d heard what I said about making a snowman. ‘Can I, Dad? Can I go out in the snow with Emma and Jaz?’

‘Well, I suppose your bath can wait.’ He ruffled her hair and pulled her coat and scarf off a peg in the hallway. Mabel stood patiently while Milo bent and wrapped her up snugly, although I could tell she was desperate to escape into the garden.

‘Are you coming out as well, Dad?’ Her eyes were gleaming, and just for a second, hope soared in my chest.

‘Rori could help as well,’ she added, and my foolish heart sank into my boots.

Milo frowned. ‘Rori and I have . . . things to do.’ He looked at me and gave an apologetic shrug. Then he looked away, as if he was uncomfortable, and smiled down at his daughter. ‘If Jaz doesn’t mind, I’m sure you’ll have a better time without me.’

‘I need my spade,’ said Mabel.

‘It’s in the shed. I’ll get it.’ Milo reached for his own coat and we all trooped after him, round the side of the house to the back garden where the snow had gathered in abundance on the lawn.

‘The best way is to start with a snowball,’ I told the girls, while Milo went to the shed. ‘Then you keep rolling it in the snow until it gets bigger and bigger. Watch.’ I bent and demonstrated and Mabel watched fascinated, then started rolling her own snowball.

‘This is yours, Emma,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you help me roll it?’

Milo joined us with Mabel’s red spade. He nodded approvingly. ‘You don’t really need this, do you? Good action, Mabel! You’ll have a Santa made in no time at that rate.’

‘Make Santa in *my* garden as well!’ announced Emma.

‘Of course we will.’ I smiled down at her. ‘Once we’ve finished this one.’

Milo cleared his throat. ‘Right, well, I’ll leave you to it, Jaz, if that’s okay?’

‘Absolutely.’ Feeling ridiculously disappointed, I turned away and bent to help Emma. It was clear Milo had far better things to do inside. With Rori . . .

Two (quite small) snowmen made, I managed to lure the girls and Luna back into the warmth of the house by tempting them with hot chocolate and marshmallows, and a bacon rasher doggy treat respectively. Mabel and Emma had been running around having a snowball fight in our back garden, much to Luna’s delight. They were laughing and shrieking so much that at one point, Milo came to his upstairs window to watch.

He saw me glance up and waved, and I waved coolly back.

After seeing him and Rori getting up close and personal in the kitchen, I was feeling even more frosty towards him than ‘Smelly Poo’ the snowman (a name chosen by Emma for *her* snowman, which of course had had both girls in fits of giggles.)

Back indoors, we shed our coats, and while the tired pair watched *Frozen* on TV, Luna snuggled next to Emma on the sofa, I made the hot chocolate. They came and sat at the

kitchen table to drink it, and Mabel started testing Emma's counting abilities, using the marshmallows.

Smiling at them fondly, I moved away from the table as my phone started ringing.

Maybe it was Milo, wanting to collect Mabel? There was hot chocolate left in the pan that I supposed I could heat up for him . . .

But it wasn't Milo.

'Harry?'

'Hi, Jaz. Listen, I was just wondering if Emma would like to go to the pantomime?'

'Oh. Well, I'm sure she would, yes. I think she's old enough to appreciate it now.'

'Right. Well, I'll get tickets, shall I?'

'Okay.'

'I'll do it now so I can hopefully get three seats together.'

'Does Vivien like pantomimes?'

There was a silence. Then Harry said, 'Actually, I meant the three of *us*. I thought you might like to come as well?'

'Oh.' I was completely taken aback. On the one hand, I really loved pantomimes, and I had done ever since I was a little girl. It would be fun to relive childhood memories. But did I really want to go to the panto *with Harry*?

'What do you think?' he asked. 'I could get tickets for tomorrow's matinee.'

'Emma's at nursery.'

'We could pick her up from there and go straight to the panto.'

I hesitated. Emma would actually love it if we took her to the panto together. And thinking about it, I really didn't want to miss out and let Harry have all the fun! So I found myself saying, 'Yes. Why not? That would be good.'

Later, after I'd taken Mabel home and put Emma to bed, I trailed into the living room and sank down on the sofa. It wasn't even eight o'clock yet – the hours until my own bedtime stretched endlessly ahead – but there was nothing on TV that gripped me enough to hold my attention.

Instead, I found my thoughts drifting inevitably to Milo and Rori and feeling thoroughly gloomy.

And then bizarrely, there was a knock on the door and the peace was shattered by a group of carol singers. They launched into an energetic rendition of Ding Dong Merrily On High and I sat there, stunned, as they screeched their way through the octaves, wondering if they'd ever actually listened to themselves. Maybe it was my bad mood, but they really did sound like a bunch of cats having a scrap.

When the noise finally stopped, I peered through the curtains and saw them walking over the road. Milo was putting his bin out, and as he came back up his drive, I caught his eye and he made a terrified face and covered his ears.

In spite of everything, I started to laugh. As I retreated to the sofa, I was feeling more upbeat. If those carol singers came round again, I'd definitely open the door next time . . .

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was panto day and I was getting ready upstairs.

‘Mummy!’ Emma’s deafeningly loud shriek came from the direction of her bedroom. ‘Mummy, mummy, come here! *Quickly!*’

Bashing my shin on the bed I was making to get to her, I ran onto the landing, my heart racing. I felt sick as I burst into her room. ‘What, Emma? What is it?’

She was standing on her bed by the window, cheeks red with excitement, pointing at something outside. ‘*Look!*’

Relieved she didn’t seem to have hurt herself, I ran over.

‘It’s *him*.’ She turned to look at me in wide-eyed wonder as the doorbell rang. ‘Santa’s come to our house.’

I looked out of the window and sure enough, there he was. Father Christmas himself. Larger than life and posing like a body-builder, presumably to make me laugh when I opened the door.

My heart sank.

Good grief, Harry! Why the hell would you turn up at the house dressed like that?

Then I remembered telling him that Emma would be at nursery and he’d said we’d collect her from there and go straight to the panto.

But the nursery had called me first thing this morning to say that due to a power cut, they’d be closed today. So Emma was at home.

But I hadn’t told Harry!

And now Emma was running out of her room and heading for the stairs, shouting, ‘Wait, Santa! I coming down! Don’t go away!’

Groaning, I hared after her. ‘Emma, wait! You can’t see Santa. Not just now, anyway.’ I managed to catch her, grabbing her and sitting down with her on the top step.

‘But why?’ She looked so disappointed. ‘He come to see us.’

‘I know, love. But you see, well . . . the thing is . . .’ I was thinking so rapidly, I was surprised there wasn’t smoke emerging from my ears. I took a deep, calming breath and smiled at her. ‘Santa’s come to see me. And do you know why?’

She shook her head, gazing at me with her big, wide, innocent eyes.

‘It’s so he can find out whether or not you’ve been a good girl this past year. And luckily, I’ll be able to tell him that you have!’

‘Santa comes to people’s houses?’ She looked puzzled.

‘He does. Sometimes.’ I grimaced inwardly as Harry rang the bell several times, clearly getting impatient waiting. ‘But the thing is, he only comes to see the mums and dads *before* Christmas. But when I tell him how good you’ve been, he’ll be back here on Christmas Eve.’

‘With his sleigh and lots of ’sesents?’

‘Absolutely.’

She nodded, apparently satisfied with this.

I led her back into her bedroom and lifted her onto the bed. ‘Will you stay here while I go and speak to Santa?’

She nodded.

‘Promise?’

‘I promise, Mummy.’

‘Okay. Back in a minute.’

Harry now seemed to be playing a tune on the doorbell. And as I ran downstairs, I heard the letterbox open, and he shouted, ‘Jaz?’

‘Is that Daddy?’ called Emma, sounding puzzled.

I pulled open the door, shushing Harry urgently, although it was clearly too late.

‘No, it’s Santa!’ I called back desperately, opening my eyes meaningfully at Harry (his smiling face had fallen when he heard Emma’s voice). ‘But . . . your daddy will be here soon to take us to the pantomime, okay?’

‘I’ll get out of this lot in the car,’ hissed Harry. He gave a nervous glance up at Emma’s window and dashed off, and I heaved a sigh of relief, closed the door and went back upstairs.

Emma was still sitting on her bed where I’d left her.

I tensed, expecting more questions about Santa sounding like Daddy. But all she said was, ‘When can we go to the pantsonime?’

The ‘pantsonime’ turned out to good fun – for both children and grown-ups. There was a lot of adult innuendo, as always, and the kids were really getting into it – shouting at the ‘baddies’ even when they weren’t supposed to.

We queued for ice-creams in the interval and Emma chatted excitedly to the person who served us – a cheery, dark-haired woman called Rachel, according to the badge she was wearing.

‘I saw Santa. He knockded on our door,’ Emma told her.

Rachel’s eyes opened wide. ‘Did he? Wow. That’s amazing. You’re a very lucky girl. Not many people get to see Santa in person.’

Emma smiled, looking rather smug. ‘He talks like my daddy,’ she said in a confiding tone.

I exchanged a quick eyebrow-raise with Rachel, who managed to keep a straight face.

‘Well, that’s probably because Santa’s a lovely man, just like your daddy,’ she said, looking over at Harry as he joined us.

I shrugged my shoulders but I was smiling. I could think of other words to describe Harry, but hey ho. It was Christmas!

The funniest bit of the panto came in the second half. A group of actors dressed as reindeer came on, pulling the sleigh and searching for Santa, who'd somehow vanished in a dramatic puff of smoke and a bang that made the entire theatre jump. At which point Emma started pointing and shouting ecstatically, '*Rhubarb!* Mummy, mummy, it's *Rhubarb!* Look!'

People were turning around and laughing, and Harry was also creasing up in his seat on the other side of Emma. It took me a few more puzzled seconds to work out that our daughter, who had trouble saying 'Rudolph', was flagging up the fact that she'd just spotted her favourite Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer . . .

On the way home in the car, she fell asleep, tired after all the excitement.

Harry came in and I put the kettle on to make his usual strong cuppa, brewing one for myself as well. Then we made pasta and cheese together for Emma, although we agreed it was debatable whether she'd actually still be awake to eat it by the time it was ready.

Smiling, we watched our daughter from the door, and my heart swelled with love. Her eyelids were drooping sleepily as she sat on the sofa watching kids TV, and I was glad I'd agreed to take her to the panto with Harry. It had been such good fun . . .

'What a great afternoon,' murmured Harry, and I realised he was thinking the same as me. 'It was just like the old days. You, me and Emma. The three of us against the world.'

'It was nice,' I agreed coolly, although to my surprise, my throat felt a little choked.

'It could be like that again, you know,' Harry said. 'If you would just forgive me.'

'I *have* forgiven you.' Irritated, I turned to look at him. 'Just about.'

'Well, then . . .?'

‘It’s not as easy as that, Harry.’ I frowned. ‘Things have moved on. You’re with Vivien now, remember?’

‘I know. But it doesn’t mean that what *we* had is lost forever, does it?’

My head swam in confusion. What the hell was he trying to say? ‘Look, we’re her parents and that will never change.’ I shrugged. ‘And if we can be friends as well, I certainly won’t be complaining.’

Harry nodded slowly. ‘Friends. Okay. I never thought we’d actually get there, so that’s a good start.’

I pasted on a smile and walked briskly back into the kitchen to rescue the pasta from boiling dry.

A good start?

What on earth did he mean by that? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY

The following evening, with Emma having tea with one of her little friends from nursery, Harry and I finally managed to get together for a suit fitting.

It felt a little surreal, kneeling at Santa's feet, pinning up the hem of his trousers while chatting to him about whether or not to have turkey for Christmas lunch.

'It can be so *dry*. I thought maybe we might have roast beef and Yorkshire puddings this year instead,' I said with a straight face, slyly provoking him. 'Just for a change.'

'*What?* Wash your mouth out, Jaz Winters!' Harry's explosive reaction was entirely expected. He liked things done the traditional way over the festive season. 'You can't *not* have turkey on Christmas *Day*.'

'Well, we can, actually. Now that *you're* not here.' I grinned up at him.

I was expecting him to laugh but his face fell. 'You know . . . I'm going to really miss seeing Emma on Christmas morning, opening her presents.' He shrugged. 'We had such a great time that first year, didn't we? I mean, not just the opening of presents. The whole thing was pretty bloody brilliant.'

'We had some good times,' I conceded, my heart lurching uneasily, as inevitably, I found myself thinking back to the Christmases when we'd been happy together. And as I did so, I accidentally jabbed myself with a pin.

Sucking on my bleeding finger, I glared up at Harry, feeling unaccountably cross with him. 'So you miss being woken up at four in the morning and having to spring immediately into action? And spending all day in the kitchen peeling Brussels sprouts for your family? Not to mention having to *eat* the Brussels sprouts.'

Harry looked put out. 'Is that how you remember our Christmases? Because I don't. For me, they were honestly . . . the best of times. Especially after Emma arrived.'

‘They had their moments,’ I said grudgingly. Because actually, he was right.

It used to be so exciting, going shopping with Harry as the nights drew in and fairy lights were gleaming everywhere . . . having fun choosing gifts for our family. And then later, after Emma was born, buying presents for her . . . and arguing amiably over what she’d like best . . . buying special decorations for the tree to make her eyes light up with amazement.

‘You know, I *could* still come over on Christmas morning and open presents with you both?’

‘You *think*? Don’t you need an invitation first?’

Harry sighed dejectedly. ‘I thought we were past all the bitterness, Jaz. I hoped we were.’

‘What if I already have plans?’ I snapped.

‘Have you?’

I thought of Milo and the deep freeze which now occupied the space between our houses – and which had nothing at all to do with the layer of crisp snow that was now covering our lawns and driveways.

‘Probably not. But that’s not the point, Harry. What about Vivien? She’s hardly going to like it if you bugger off on Christmas morning to come and see *us*, is she? I’d be bloody furious if I were her. I thought her parents were coming over for breakfast and you were having Buck’s Fizz and smoked salmon?’

I surprised myself, siding with Vivien, who’d been my arch-enemy. But really, Harry was so bloody thoughtless at times!

I heard a car draw up outside and my eyes went to the window as usual. Was it Milo returning from work?

‘Are you expecting someone?’ asked Harry. ‘That must be the fifteenth time you’ve looked up when you heard a car.’

‘What?’ I felt my cheeks redden. ‘No, no. I . . . suppose I’m just nosy, that’s all.’

I could feel him studying me but I couldn't look at him, and I was glad to have my pinning to concentrate on with a bowed head.

'I guess you and Milo have become really good friends, living right next door to each other,' commented Harry. 'Emma's always talking about him and Mabel.'

'Oh, yes,' I said, through a mouthful of pins. 'She absolutely adores Mabel.'

There's a pause. Then Harry says, 'And what about you? Do you adore them?'

'Me?' I looked up at him, flustered. 'Well, we all get on well although I think "adore" is a bit strong. But it's good having neighbours you can call on for a chat and a cuppa . . . take in parcels . . . that kind of thing,' I blagged, hoping my reply had satisfied his curiosity. It was a lie, of course. Milo and I were far from being jolly, friendly neighbours popping in on one another for coffee!

'Right.' He nodded thoughtfully, and the ensuing silence felt a bit unnerving.

'Anyway, as I was saying.' I smiled up at him. 'I can't imagine Vivien allowing you to visit us on your own on Christmas morning.'

'You're right,' he conceded with a sigh. 'It probably wouldn't work.'

Thankfully, he seemed to have dropped the questioning about Milo, and I was able to breathe freely once more. 'Why sound so fed up?' I asked. 'Vivien's plan sounds idyllic to me. Buck's Fizz and smoked salmon. You'll have a lovely time.'

Harry's laugh had an edge to it. 'A lovely time? Well, by five in the morning, Viv will be out of bed and rushing around to make sure the place is like a showhouse with not a speck of dust in sight. And if I don't get up with her and polish the front doorknob until it gleams and attend to all the other jobs on her list, I'll feel really guilty and she won't be talking to me.' He grinned. 'Oh, yes, and we'll be making the breakfast blinis

from scratch because they're apparently so much better when they're made fresh, on the day.'

'Well . . . they probably are.' *Oh, hell, was Viv really that much of a control freak? Poor Harry!*

He paused. Then he said softly, 'There's a lot to be said for opening presents in your pyjamas and lounging around in front of the telly and eating chocolates all day.'

I grinned. 'Yes, there is. And that's exactly what I'm going to be doing with Emma.'

'Lucky buggers.' He smiled sadly.

'Oh, shut up, Harry!' I said impatiently, feeling seriously annoyed at him. 'Honestly, you'd think you were really hard done by! I bet Viv will give you some amazing gifts and cook up a Christmas feast to die for. And Emma will be with you in the evening and on Boxing Day. So for goodness' sake stop complaining!'

'Sorry. And yes, I know. Vivien's brilliant and I don't deserve her.'

'Is she having a good time in London?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

I pursed my lips and got on with pinning the other trouser leg. Was Harry starting to have second thoughts about his relationship with Viv? It certainly sounded like it. Maybe the honeymoon period was wearing off for them? Unless it was just the romance of the Christmas season making Harry come over all sentimental.

Well, I really hoped that was what it was.

Because the very *last* thing I needed was Harry deciding he'd made a mistake and wanted to come back . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Christmas was fast approaching now. The big weekend – when all of Ellie’s festive planning would come to fruition with *A Winter Wonderland* – was only a few days away, and I knew she’d been completely overwhelmed by just how much support and offers of help she’d received from the people of Sunnybrook and beyond.

Everything seemed to be slotting into place for a fabulous Christmas fund-raiser.

But then, a couple of days before the festivities were due to begin, I pitched up at the café to find Ellie in a state of panic. She’d placed a huge order with a company in London in preparation for baking the hundreds of mince pies, cute Christmas tree cupcakes and all the festive gingerbread people we’d need. But the carrier company had phoned that morning to tell her that the van had broken down just outside the capital, and they were stuck there, with no idea when or if they’d manage to get the order to Ellie that day.

I gazed at her, appalled. ‘But we need to start baking first thing tomorrow. I was planning to be at the baking school really early.’

Ellie nodded. ‘And I’m so grateful, Jaz. Everyone’s coming in, but if there’s nothing for us to bake with, we’re absolutely scuppered.’

‘Have you got no supplies whatsoever?’

‘Well, nowhere near enough to make the cakes and biscuits we’ll need to meet the demand I’m expecting.’

‘What about the guys who deliver your normal weekly order? Could they not collect the delivery and bring it over?’

She shook her head in despair. ‘I’ve already phoned them and they were really apologetic, but their schedules are already packed with festive orders. I phoned a few other carriers but the story is the same everywhere. It’s the busiest time of the year.’

I groaned. ‘That’s so frustrating. So the order is just sitting there, somewhere near London, but there’s no way of actually getting it here.’

Ellie sank down into a seat and ran her hands through her hair in agitation, making it fluff out at all angles. ‘I think I’m going to have to drive up to London myself and collect it. If I take Zak’s car, it should all fit in if I pack the back seat to the roof as well.’

‘I could come with you, if you like, and help you load up?’

She smiled. ‘Thanks, Jaz. It’s lovely of you to offer. Zak said he’d help, even though his deadline for the publishers is later on today. But the problem is, it’s going to take me the best part of today, and I’ve still got *so much to do*. Also, Zak’s car obviously isn’t refrigerated and I’d be worried that some of the goods we’ve ordered might spoil.’ She gazed at me, looking totally defeated. ‘Imagine if I gave people food poisoning, Jaz. Just in time for Christmas.’

‘I’m sure that wouldn’t happen.’

‘I know, but you can never be too careful in this business. What if someone got sick after eating some fresh cream and they found out that our mode of transport hadn’t complied with food safety standards? They could sue and I’d lose my business.’

We stared at each other helplessly.

But an idea had started to form in my mind. ‘So really, what you need is a refrigerated van and a driver?’

Ellie nodded wearily.

‘I *might* have an idea,’ I said slowly. ‘I’m sure Milo sometimes uses a van like that for his Roastery business. I’ve seen it parked outside his house a few times. But I think he just rents it when he needs it.’

Ellie’s eyes lit up. ‘I never thought to ask Milo for help. You think he might be able to get our delivery?’

I looked at her warily. ‘I mean, he might not be able to do anything, but it would do no harm to find out, would it?’

‘Absolutely! And if he can’t help, we’ll just have to think again.’ She smiled wearily. ‘Thanks, Jaz.’

‘Hey, no problem. We can’t have A Winter Wonderland without mince pies and other assorted Christmas goodies.’

‘It *would* be a bit sad.’ She looked anxiously at her watch as if she really needed to be somewhere else.

‘Look, I’ll phone Milo now and ask the question, okay? And in the meantime, you can be getting on with whatever you need to do?’

‘Oh, would you?’ She grasped my arm and squeezed, tears of relief pricking her eyes. ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you, Jaz! I need to drive around putting more of Maddy’s posters up. And I need to ring round my list of stall holders with all the details for Saturday and Sunday. That in itself is going to take hours . . .’

‘Right. Go, go, go!’ I shoed her away and pulled out my phone.

As it rang, I was fervently hoping that Milo would somehow be able to help us. Because if not, A Winter Wonderland might well turn out to be the turkey absolutely *no one* wanted to find on their table on Christmas Day!

‘Jaz? Are you okay?’

Milo sounded worried when he answered my call. I guess he was surprised to hear from me after the long days of radio silence between us. He must be thinking something was wrong, and he was right. There *was* something wrong. But it wasn’t anything to do with me or Emma, and I suddenly felt guilty for asking him for help.

I said I was fine and explained the situation, and as it turned out, he couldn’t have been more willing to help. He said he’d call his contact who rented out refrigerated vehicles and see if he could get the use of one, hopefully today, but if not, maybe very early in the morning.

My heart was hammering with hope, he was being so lovely. I'd been missing him so much. Was it possible he'd been missing me, too?

'I'll phone my guy and phone you back, okay?'

'Okay.'

He ended the call abruptly, which meant all my eager questions about Mabel and their plans for the Christmas holidays had to stay frustratingly in my head.

Ten minutes later, he phoned back. 'Right, we've got a van for this afternoon but we need to get it back to the depot by five-thirty tonight. If you want to drive, I'm happy to come along and help you transfer the goods from van to van.'

'Oh. Thank you. That would be great.' I was a little taken aback. I'd never driven a van before. Would it be the same as a car?

'Have you driven a van before?'

'Er, no.'

'I could drive if you like,' he offered, and my shoulders relaxed in relief.

'Would you?'

'Yeah, no problem. I've driven vans on many occasions so it's probably a no-brainer, especially with the traffic around London at this time of year.'

'Thank you, Milo. It's so lovely of you to help like this.' I hesitated. 'There's definitely a drink or two in it for you!'

'Right. Whatever,' he said curtly. 'Ellie's putting an awful lot into this event for a really good cause, so of course I want to help her.'

'Of course,' I echoed feebly, feeling the air squeeze out of my balloon of hope.

He was making the point that it was Ellie he was helping, not me . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Milo pulled up in the refrigerated van outside the house soon after midday.

Ready and waiting, with my instructions from Ellie, I waved at him from the window and ran straight out. She'd printed out a list of all the baking items she'd ordered so I could check them off as we transferred them into the hired van.

After a brief *how-are-you-I'm-fine-thanks-how-are-you*, we lapsed into silence as Milo drove, concentrating on getting to grips with the alien van and its quirks.

The broken-down van had been towed to a garage and I saw it as soon as Milo drove in. We parked up next to it and signalled to the driver, who was sitting reading a newspaper. He hopped out, introducing himself as John, then he unloaded our pallet and we helped him transfer the multiple boxes and cartons into our van.

'Bit of a bummer, breaking down, mate,' Milo sympathised.

He grinned. 'Yeah, it's going to be a long day. Assuming they can get this thing back on the road today' – he nodded at the van – 'I might get my deliveries finished by midnight!'

I grimaced. 'At least you won't have to deliver to the café.'

'That's true. That should shave an hour or so at least off my route,' he said, sounding remarkably cheerful considering how his day was going.

All the goods stored safely in the van, we said goodbye to John – he was off to find a shop and a snack to keep himself going while he waited – and we hit the road again.

It felt more relaxed as we headed back to Sunnybrook. We'd rescued the situation for Ellie and we could breathe again. But we kept our conversation to Mabel and Emma, who'd been having loads of fun together over the past few days, playing in the snow. Mabel had been over to our house for her tea last week, and it had felt almost like old times. Almost. But not

really. Because Milo and I were still being frosty with one another.

Today, though, sitting close together in the van, with sappy songs playing on Heart Radio, the chemistry between us seemed to be sizzling just as much as it ever did. From my end, anyway. With Rick Astley ironically declaring he was never going to run around or desert me, the music seemed almost designed for our journey. And when the Style Council came on and the passionate strains of ‘You’re the Best Thing’ began, I stared at the road ahead, an emotional upheaval going on inside me that made me want to wail like a baby.

I kept taking swift glances at Milo’s hands on the steering wheel as he powered the vehicle along at speed and remembering how it felt when those strong fingers had stroked my cheek just before he kissed me. Worse, I was experiencing an almost irresistible urge to lay my hand on his muscled thigh in the navy jeans – so much so that I felt I had to keep my hands locked together in my lap, just in case the desire overtook me and wiped out all logical thought, and he realised how pathetic I was . . .

By the time we finally drove into Sunnybrook and parked outside the café, which had closed for the day, I was a bit of an emotional wreck, to say the least.

I’d been texting Ellie on the journey back, and when I buzzed her flat, I thought she’d come straight down. But instead, she asked me to come up. I signalled to Milo in the van that I’d just be a minute, and ran up the stairs to the flat.

When she opened the door, the aroma of something deliciously spicy and aromatic assailed my nostrils, reminding me that it was a long time since I’d eaten anything.

‘Ooh, something smells good.’

‘You’ll never guess who’s cooking us a meal tonight,’ she murmured, ushering me in.

‘Er . . . Jamie Oliver?’

She grinned. ‘No, even more surprising than that, actually.’

‘So who?’

‘Freddy, would you believe.’

We stopped outside the kitchen. ‘Freddy?’ I whispered. ‘Wow, that’s definitely progress. I’m amazed you got him to stay in your place long enough to make *toast*, never mind cook dinner!’

She nodded in agreement. ‘I’ve tasted the curry he’s making. It’s absolutely heavenly. The boy’s got talent in spades.’

‘Really? He did tell me he wanted to be a chef.’

‘I think Maisie’s got a bit of a crush on him.’

I chuckled. ‘He’s a lovely boy. She’s got good taste.’

‘I’d like to invite you and Milo to eat with us, after what you’ve done for me this afternoon. But I’m not sure there’ll be enough,’ she said, her hand on the kitchen door handle. ‘And it’s kind of Freddy’s night?’

‘Of course. We don’t want to crowd him and scare him off again.’

I smiled at the sound of Maisie hooting with laughter. ‘Sounds like there’s a party going on in there.’

Ellie opened the kitchen door and there was Freddy stirring a pan at the hob and showing Maisie a spice in a jar. He’d tied a towel around his waist as a makeshift apron, and Maisie – his little *sous chef* – was wearing a tea towel. ‘It’s called cardamom,’ he was saying, ‘and it has a peppery and kind of lemony taste.’

‘Ooh, I like lemons,’ said Maisie, gazing up at him and clearly hanging on his every word. ‘Specially lemon drizzle cake.’

Freddy nodded. ‘That’s my favourite cake.’ He’d shaved the straggly beard off, I noticed.

‘It’s my favourite as well,’ said Maisie.

I exchanged a grin with Ellie and we backed out and left them to it.

‘I’ll just get my coat and let Zak know what’s happening, and I’ll come down,’ she said. ‘He’s in the bedroom finishing off his edits.’

‘It’s a shame you don’t have an office.’

‘I know. The flat’s far too small, really. But we’re not giving up on finding a bigger place. With the IVF coming up, you never know. We might need another bedroom.’ She glanced at me sheepishly. ‘I can dream, anyway.’

‘Hey, it’s going to happen for you.’ I squeezed her arm. ‘It’s just taking a little while, that’s all. But you’ll get there.’

‘I hope so, Jaz. Right, come on, let’s get this stuff unloaded and then you and Milo can get home at last. I’m buying you both dinner in a posh restaurant, by the way, to show my gratitude.’

‘Oh, no,’ I said, in a mild panic. ‘You don’t need to do that. Just pay for the petrol and the van hire.’

‘Well, obviously I’m going to do that. But I want to treat you both as well.’

‘Honestly, there’s no need.’

‘You haven’t fallen out, have you?’ She glanced back at me as we went down the stairs.

‘No! I mean, not really.’ I sighed. ‘It’s my stupid insecurities again. I can’t seem to get it into my head that Milo won’t do a Harry on me. I mean, there’s no way of predicting the future, obviously. But Freddy made a good point when I told him I was worried because I’d been through a bad break-up.’

‘What did he say?’

‘You didn’t die, did you?’

Ellie chuckled. ‘He’s a wise one, that’s for sure. And he’s right. You just need to be brave.’

‘I know,’ I said ruefully. ‘And I think I might have made the biggest mistake ever, pushing Milo away. But hey-ho.’ I shrugged uselessly.

‘If it’s meant to be . . .’

Outside, we hopped in the van, sitting beside Milo on the front seat, and he drove us round to the baking school. On the way, Ellie thanked Milo profusely for saving her bacon, then she looked at me and groaned. ‘I haven’t told you about the latest disaster, have I?’

‘No.’ I glanced at her in alarm. ‘What’s happened?’

She sighed. ‘The hog roast man has gone down with a raging flu virus and won’t be able to make it at the weekend. He sounded terrible on the phone.’

‘Oh, no! Who could you could get instead?’

‘No one,’ she said gloomily. ‘The thing is, it’s far too –’

‘Near Christmas,’ we all said, finishing the sentence together.

‘That’s a real shame,’ said Milo. ‘People will want hot food at an event like that. Not everyone likes mince pies.’ He glanced over at Ellie. ‘I don’t suppose you could rustle something up yourself in the café?’

She nodded. ‘I thought about that. But I’m not confident enough to cook myself, and the people I’ve persuaded to help out already have loads of other things to do. You know, like manning the cake stall and organising the kids’ games and taking the entry money for visits to Santa. I’m not sure there’s anyone else I can rope in.’

Milo parked next to the baking school door and switched off the engine. ‘I’d help you myself but I’m needed at Roastery. It’s going to be ridiculously busy at the weekend.’

‘Of course,’ murmured Ellie, and she and I got out of the van.

‘You know,’ I said thoughtfully in the sudden silence, ‘There is *someone* who I think might be persuaded to cook up a storm in the café kitchen at the weekend. Possibly with a mini *sous chef* to help out.’

Ellie looked at me, puzzled. Then her face lit up.

And as one, we chorused, ‘Freddy!’

We unloaded the van swiftly so that Milo could drive it back to the depot in time.

As the last box was safely delivered into the baking school, leaving Anita and Ellie busily unpacking the contents into cupboards and fridges, I was preparing myself for Milo to leave with just a curt goodbye. So I was surprised when, feeling a light touch on my shoulder, I turned to find him standing there, a serious look on his face.

‘Jaz . . . I . . . could I have a word?’ He indicated outside.

‘Of course.’ I followed him, puzzled.

Out at the van, he reached under his seat and pulled out a Christmas presentation bag holding a bottle of champagne.

‘For me?’ I asked without thinking.

He smiled. ‘No. Well, sort of. My mate at the van hire gave it to me. A corporate gift for all his regular clients.’ He shrugged a little awkwardly. ‘You mentioned buying me a drink, so I thought . . . maybe I could come over some time, you could pop that open and we could do a Christmas toast?’

‘Oh.’ I gazed at him in surprise, my heart beating crazily. ‘Yes, that would be lovely.’ I could feel my cheeks flushing warmly with pleasure as I cradled the bottle. Looking at the label, my eyes widened. ‘Bollinger. Wow.’ I laughed nervously. ‘Are you sure you want to waste such an expensive champagne on me?’

‘How would it be a waste?’ He frowned. ‘I can’t think of anyone I’d *rather* share it with.’

Rendered speechless by this comment, I just stood there, blinking at him.

He shrugged, shuffling his feet a little. ‘I mean, I probably wouldn’t have got it if I hadn’t gone to the depot today, so really, you deserve it more than me.’

Ah, right. I came down from the stars with a thump. So it's not that I'm particularly special to Milo; it's just that he feels he *ought* to share it with me.

On the other hand, he didn't have to, did he?

He could have kept the champagne to himself and shared it with Rori.

I looked at him, feeling confused – but happy that I'd at least be spending some time with him. Yes, I felt a pang of envy and heartache every time I thought of Rori running into the kitchen, wrapping her arms around him and kissing him. But regardless of that, the fact was, I'd been missing Milo so much. I'd missed talking to him . . . laughing with him . . . I'd missed his smile and his kindness. Even 'friends' would be better than the awkward way it had been between us lately. It was something I'd been gradually realising during our time in the deep freeze. I didn't want to cut Milo out of my life just because we weren't together romantically.

I held up the bottle with a smile. 'Right, well, I'll get it in the fridge so it's nice and chilled.'

'Great. Better go or I won't get this van back in time.'

He waved and ducked into the driver's seat, just as I called, 'So when do you want to come over?' But he clearly didn't hear me because next second, the engine started up and he roared off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was the following day and our tree was finally going up.

‘Christmas tree, Christmas tree,’ sang Emma. ‘Christmas tree!’

I stared up the loft ladder as she danced around the hallway then launched into her own version of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. She was beside herself with excitement that at last, we were going to be decorating our tree.

Harry’s head appeared at the hatch. ‘Can I pass this down to you?’

‘Of course.’ I climbed a little way up the ladder and gingerly took the weight of the box full of decorations, which was surprisingly heavy. The tree in its box was already lying beside the ladder.

I’d been putting this off for ages (and feeling bad for Emma) because I’d been clinging to the hope that we’d be decorating our tree with Milo and Mabel, as we’d originally planned. But as the days had passed by, I’d begun to realise that this was unlikely to happen. So that afternoon, when Harry had dropped Emma off and suggested we should put the tree up before he left, I’d agreed, much to the delight of our daughter.

I couldn’t delay the task any longer. We were on a countdown to Christmas Day now, and Harry could make himself useful for once by getting the tree down from the loft!

Putting the tree up turned out to be great fun. For the first time since our day out with Milo and Mabel at the Christmas market and the skating rink, I felt a twinge of pre-Christmas excitement. I’d made a sausage casserole and baked potatoes which, coincidentally, was Harry’s favourite. So it felt natural, after we’d tidied away all the boxes, to invite him to stay for dinner. Especially as he was going home to an empty house, with Vivien still away in London with her friends.

Emma was over the moon her daddy was staying to eat, of course, and it was just a lovely cosy, festive atmosphere as I

served up the food. *The Grinch* was on the TV in the background and Emma was singing the Christmas song she'd learned at nursery. Harry was pretending he didn't know it and deliberately singing the wrong words, which made Emma collapse in fits of giggles every time. I was laughing, too, and when Harry suggested a glass of wine, it seemed like a good idea.

But then I pointed out that he was driving.

He shrugged. 'There's a bus. I could leave the car and come back for it tomorrow.'

I turned and gave him a look. It seemed an awful bother, just for a glass of wine. But maybe with Vivien away, he didn't fancy returning to an empty house.

He looked fondly at Emma. 'I'm having a nice time.'

I grinned. To be fair, so was I. And so was Emma. 'Go on, then. I think there's a bottle in the fridge.'

'Excellent.' Grinning, he got up, ruffling Emma's hair on the way.

A minute later, hearing the sound of a cork popping, I spun round in confusion. '*Champagne?*'

Harry looked taken aback at my expression. 'Sorry, Jaz. It was the only bottle in the fridge?'

'Yes, but it's . . .' I trailed off in dismay.

He looked at the label and grimaced. 'Bollinger. Oh, hell. Sorry, I didn't realise. Were you keeping it for something special?'

'Well, I . . . no, no, it's absolutely fine,' I blustered, not wanting to mention its provenance. I was sure Harry thought there was something going on between Milo and me, which there very definitely wasn't. But I didn't want to give him more fuel for his suspicions by admitting we'd planned to drink it together.

'I'll buy you another one,' he promised with a sheepish look. 'Sorry, when you said it was in the fridge, I just thought . . . and I didn't even look at the label.'

‘Honestly, Harry, it’s fine. Forget it and just pour.’ It was no big deal. I could replace the Bollinger at the shops the next day.

‘Okay. Are the glasses still . . .?’

‘Yes. Where they always are.’

So the champagne fizzed and sparkled deliciously, and I poured Emma some orange juice, and we all raised our glasses (and plastic beaker) to a happy Christmas.

I went to the window on the pretext of pulling the blind, but really to check if Milo and Rori were home. I’d go to the supermarket first thing next day and buy another bottle of that champagne . . .

Getting Emma to bed after all the evening’s excitement was a task and a half. But having downed two glasses of (very good) champagne and with Harry on hand to help bath our daughter and read bedtime stories, it felt like fun rather than the chore it sometimes was.

Emma was still high as a kite and thought it the most hilarious game ever to splash the bath water in time to the Christmas song she was singing, with the result that Harry and I ended up laughing but soaked. I was exhausted by the time we finally went downstairs, after no less than three stories (one from me and two from Harry, while I tidied up and tackled the flooding chaos in the bathroom.)

‘She’s a character, our daughter,’ grinned Harry, settling into the armchair.

I flopped back on the sofa. ‘You’re right there. I blame you for her wild streak.’

‘Me? Why?’ He pretended to look aggrieved.

‘You encourage her in her silliness. Not that it’s a bad thing.’

‘Of course it’s not. Better to stay childlike in spirit, I reckon. Be spontaneous. Life’s much more fun that way.’

‘Hmm.’ I levelled a glare at him, unable to help myself.

‘What?’

‘Well, there’s a time for fun and there’s a time to behave responsibly.’

He frowned. ‘I know she made a mess in the bathroom, but so what? I was having a great time.’

‘And so was I.’

‘So what are you talking about? Behaving responsibly?’ His face fell. ‘Oh. We’re back to that, are we?’

‘Back to what?’ I said irritably.

‘Back to the break-up.’ He sighed. ‘Look, Jaz, the fact is, I really wish it hadn’t happened. But it did. And there’s nothing I can do about it now.’ His shoulders slumped and he stared at me miserably. Then he gave a sort of despairing grunt and raked his hands through his hair. ‘If I could, I’d turn the clock back in a second. You must know that. The only reason I’m not begging to come back is that I know full well what your response would be.’

I stared at him, my head spinning crazily at his astonishing confession.

I’d had no inkling that Harry felt as strongly as *this*. But maybe it was the alcohol talking. Sure, I’d got the impression that things weren’t brilliant with him and Vivien, but I’d never for one moment imagined that Harry was having regrets about moving out and our relationship ending . . .

He smiled sadly. ‘I know you too well, Jaz. You’d tell me to take a running jump. Because you would, wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes, of course I would!’ My heart was beating uncomfortably fast. I was actually starting to feel angry at him. ‘Harry, you can’t for a moment imagine I’d let you back into our lives on a permanent basis? After all the hurt and confusion you caused Emma when you left?’ I shook my head. ‘And me as well, obviously.’

He was silent for a long time after that, head in his hands, just staring at the carpet – a total contrast to the fun dad of

earlier, telling jokes and making Emma giggle hysterically.

I almost felt sorry for him.

Almost . . .

I stood up and pasted on a smile. ‘Let’s have another drink,’ I said, to break the awful tension that had sprung up between us. ‘Since you’re getting the bus home, you might as well.’

He shrugged. ‘Might as well. Just to save you from yourself, of course.’

‘Of course.’ I shook my head at him, flicking my eyes to the ceiling.

‘Nothing to do with the fact that I’d kill for another glass of that *excellent* champagne.’

I gave him a grudging smile as I took his glass. The tension between us had eased. Harry had always been good at making things better with humour.

So we drank more champagne and my head swam pleasantly with the alcohol, and we talked about Emma because that was the best (and safest) topic. The lights glowed on the Christmas tree and I felt so cosy, curled up in the corner of the sofa, with Emma sleeping safely upstairs.

Harry regretted leaving us, I kept thinking woozily as we talked. *He actually regretted it*. If I’d known that earlier, maybe my confidence wouldn’t have taken such a bashing. But I wasn’t exactly in a fit state to decide how I really felt about Harry’s confession. I’d drunk far too much to think logically. I wasn’t used to it these days – not that I was objecting to the lovely, relaxed way the champagne was making me feel . . . the way it seemed to be magically blurring the cruel, sharp edges of life . . .

‘There’s a tiny bit left?’ said Harry, reaching for the bottle. Grinning, he got up and came over, pouring the last drops into my glass. Then he dropped down onto the sofa beside me.

‘It was good between us, wasn’t it?’ He smiled in a rather forlorn way.

‘It was very good,’ I agreed, slurring slightly. ‘Until it wasn’t.’

He sighed. ‘You know, I’m actually serious . . . if you ever do want to try again . . .?’

‘Stop it, Harry.’

‘Sorry, sorry. I think it’s the drink talking.’

‘It is. It must be. But there’s been far too much water under the bridge,’ I said, finding the last phrase hard to say and having to make two stabs at it.

Harry laughed softly. ‘Jaz Winters, you’re drunk.’

I yawned and leaned against him. ‘I think I am.’

‘I should go. You look as if you’re about to fall asleep.’

‘You should go,’ I agreed, thinking he was probably right.

‘Whatever happens between us, we’ll always be friends, though,’ he said gruffly. ‘Won’t we?’

I nodded sleepily, and when he put his arm around me and kissed my hair, it felt fine. If I could be friends with Harry, it would make life so much simpler. I was feeling so warm and safe and relaxed, I could feel myself drifting off, my head resting on Harry’s shoulder. All that champagne had made me *so sleepy* . . .

The doorbell shrilled into the silence.

I flinched and opened my eyes, disorientated for a second. Then I caught a movement beyond the window and at once, I was wide awake.

There, standing in the shadows, with a view through the open curtains, was Milo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

‘Who’s that?’ asked Harry, glancing towards the front door.

I quickly entangled myself from my cosy nook next to him and stood up. ‘It’s . . . Milo.’

‘Right.’ Harry shot me a slightly suspicious look. ‘Were you expecting him?’

‘No. Not really.’ It wasn’t a lie. My arrangement with Milo had been loose. *I’ll come round sometime and we’ll drink a toast to Christmas*, he’d said. But I hadn’t thought he’d come round *tonight!*

‘I’ll go and check on Emma,’ Harry called as I went to the door. My cheeks were hot – from the champagne and the sheer awkwardness of Milo catching me cosied up on the sofa with Harry . . . I’d been almost asleep but it might not have *looked* like that . . .

I opened the door, not knowing what to say. The last time I’d spoken to Milo about Harry, it had been to complain how irritated my ex made me. How to explain the cosy scene he’d just witnessed? Worse, the champagne was making my head swim and I wasn’t even sure I could formulate a proper sentence, never mind convince Milo that it was all perfectly innocent. I swayed a little and held onto the door handle for support.

Milo’s face was in shadow. ‘You’ve got company,’ he said. ‘If I’d realised, I wouldn’t have come.’ He looked over at Harry’s car.

‘It’s fine. It’s just Harry. We . . . well, we seem to be getting on better these days.’

‘You do,’ he said pointedly.

Flustered, I shook my head. ‘No, what I mean is . . . we’re getting on *better* and that’s good for Emma.’

He nodded, but when I flicked on the outside light, I saw the uncertainty in his dark eyes.

‘Why don’t you come in for a minute? Say hello?’ I said with an air of desperate cheeriness. I really needed him to know that there was nothing going on between Harry and me.

He shrugged and stepped over the threshold, wiping his feet thoroughly on the mat before following me into the living room. Glancing around the room, his eyes fell on the sparkling Christmas tree in the corner.

‘You’ve put the tree up,’ he said in a neutral tone.

I swallowed. ‘Yes. Isn’t yours up yet?’

‘No.’ He turned and gave me a look. ‘I was holding off in the hope that we’d do it together at some point, the four of us. As we planned.’

‘Oh.’ I felt terrible. But then I thought: How unfair! The atmosphere between us had been sub-zero for a while now. How was I supposed to know he still wanted to help put our tree up? The tree decorating hadn’t even been mentioned again since that day at the ice rink.

I had nothing whatsoever to feel guilty about!

Irritated, because he was just standing there staring grimly at the tree, I picked up my glass and swigged back the rest of the champagne. The bubbles shot up my nose and the sensation made me cough and start to giggle helplessly, although it was fairly clear from his expression that Milo was not amused.

‘Oh, stop being such a grouch,’ I slurred. ‘Honestly, you’d be a dead ringer for the Grinch right now if you were wearing green.’

He was staring at the empty Bollinger champagne bottle on the side table, and now I really did feel prickles of guilt. I opened my mouth to explain.

‘I’m going,’ he said flatly, before I could utter a word. ‘Sorry I disturbed you.’

And he walked out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

‘Has he gone?’ asked Harry, looking surprised, when he came back down from checking on Emma.

‘Yup.’ I picked up the champagne bottle, marched briskly through to the kitchen and dumped it into the recycling. Coffee. I needed coffee. It had been undeniably fun, drinking the champagne with Harry, but now a dark shadow had fallen over the evening. I couldn’t think clearly about what had just happened with Milo, and I needed to sober up.

Harry appeared behind me and I pasted on a smile and turned. ‘Coffee?’

He nodded. ‘Please. Emma’s sleeping peacefully.’

‘That’s good.’

‘I should probably get the next bus.’

‘Really?’ I glanced out into the darkness. It was starting to snow. ‘You could always stay the night. You know where the spare room is.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. It’s freezing out there.’

‘Well . . . if that’s okay with you?’

‘Of course. No problem. Emma will be delighted to see you in the morning.’

So I made us coffee and we flopped on the sofa and watched a Christmas movie on TV in companionable silence. Harry watched it all the way through, which I found quite surprising because normally he hated romcoms. I’d seen it before, which was just as well because I’d never have been able to follow the plot. The coffee had done its job. My mind was clearer. And now I couldn’t stop dwelling on that cringeworthy exchange between Milo and me.

I felt so *embarrassed*.

What must he have thought of me? Casually swigging his expensive champagne with my ex and then slagging him off,

telling him he looked like the Grinch! Then I thought of something else and sighed so heavily that Harry glanced over. Adding insult to injury, Milo was going to see Harry's car still parked outside the house tomorrow morning.

And it didn't take a genius to work out what conclusion he would draw from *that* . . .

Next morning, after a restless night, I woke up exhausted but tried my best to be cheerful as I made breakfast for Emma and Harry. After waving Emma off in Harry's car, though, I shut the door and slumped on the sofa with a tired groan.

It was Friday, the day before the big Winter Wonderland weekend, and Emma was going to be spending the weekend with Harry's mum, while I helped with the event and Harry made his debut as Santa Claus.

Ellie needed all hands on deck today, so we'd be ready for the grand opening at eleven the following morning. I couldn't afford to lie around, even if I did have a splitting headache after the events of the night before! There would be mince pies and Christmas tree cupcakes to bake and a million other last-minute jobs to do.

Hauling myself up, I headed for the shower . . .

It was already a hive of activity in the baking school when I arrived at nine, just as Primrose and Katja were removing the first batch of mince pies from the ovens. Maddy and Jen were making the vanilla cupcakes, and Anita and Ellie were cutting out gingerbread people from the vast expanse of dough on one of the stainless-steel worktops.

Ellie greeted me with a tense little smile and I could sense that her stress levels were already rising – hardly surprising, since she'd been working so hard over the past few weeks and was desperate for the event to be a success.

'We don't have to make a *fortune* from the weekend, do we?' she said to me anxiously, clearly worried that not enough people were going to turn up. 'I mean, we'll still be able to

make lunch on Christmas Day for everyone who wants to come, even if we make just a small profit from the event.'

'Of course we will,' I reassured her. 'You've managed to get the turkeys at a bargain price. And anyway, I don't think you need to worry about numbers at the fair. Maddy's brilliant poster has gone up all over the place. A Winter Wonderland is going to be so popular we might even run out of mince pies.'

She looked horrified. 'Oh, don't say that!'

I laughed. 'That was supposed to be a comforting remark. Look, if we do run out of mince pies and cakes, there'll be people on hand, like me, to bake some more. I'm a free agent this weekend. Emma's at her gran's. So whatever you need, I'm here, okay?'

She gave a relieved nod. 'Thanks, Jaz. It's just the not knowing. Will enough people come? Will *too many* people come?' She sighed and dug her hands into her hair. 'Was I mad for thinking this would be a good idea?'

I smiled and shook my head. 'Ellie, stop worrying. It's going to be brilliant. Go off and do what needs to be done.' I watched her leave, already talking urgently into her phone, and I put on an apron and took her place at the bench, helping Anita to cut out the gingerbread people.

We worked hard, mostly in silence, except for Maddy going on about the wonders of Paris. She was off to the French capital with Jack the following week and couldn't stop talking about how amazingly romantic it was going to be.

'Where are you staying, Maddy?' asked Primrose.

'Oh, well, Jack's booked us into one of the grandest hotels in the city. It has views over the Champs Elysées!'

'How lovely.'

'I know. I absolutely can't wait.' She grinned. 'If this is what getting engaged is like, I think I'll be doing a lot more of it!'

'What? Getting engaged?' Anita joked. 'I'm not sure Jack will be keen on that idea.'

Maddy snorted. ‘Just the one man for me, thank you very much. I’ve met my match at last and honestly, I have to keep pinching myself that Jack proposed. I’m so bloody lucky.’

A little later, I glanced at my watch. Almost one o’clock and Maddy was still chattering on about Paris. ‘Apparently there’s a spooky lake underneath the Paris Opera House. Well, it’s not really a lake. It’s a huge water tank. But fire-fighters use it to practise swimming in the dark! Isn’t that amazing?’

We all agreed it was amazing, but while I was really happy for her, it was starting to wear me down – especially all the talk of the romantic things Jack had planned for them. My head was still aching and to be honest, what I was craving most of all was peace and quiet.

‘Do you mind if I just nip out for a minute?’ I asked Anita. ‘I need to phone Harry’s mum to check if Emma’s okay.’

‘Of course. You go.’ She smiled and shooed me out. Relieved to escape if just for a little while, I abandoned my apron, gathered up my coat and bag, and left, calling that I’d be back soon.

It was bliss to be out in the fresh but chilly air. Digging one hand deep in the pocket of my coat, I crunched through the snow on the green while I called Harry’s mum (Emma was having a whale of a time, apparently), then I decided to pop over to the glamping site to see how the marquee was coming along.

Ellie was nowhere in sight. But the marquee was all fitted out now with stalls ready for the cake sale display and other Christmas delicacies, and the tree, fully decorated, winked and sparkled with coloured lights in one corner. Other stalls were being set up on the field and a bouncy castle had appeared since yesterday, along with a food truck with curly lettering over the hatch that announced, ‘Chicken Dinner Winner’. (The hatch was currently closed.) The beautiful Bedouin tent was being kept for if the weather was terrible and people needed shelter.

As I left the marquee, I bumped straight into someone who was coming in.

Rori.

‘Hi!’ she gasped. ‘I was looking for you, Jaz. Milo said you might be at the baking school but when I got there, they said you’d nipped out.’

‘So you guessed I’d be here?’

‘A lucky guess,’ she agreed, nodding nervously.

‘Are things okay?’ I looked at her, puzzled. What could she possibly want of me?

‘Oh, yes. Well, better since I came to Sunnybrook. *Much* better.’

She winced and laid her hand over her stomach as if just thinking about the past made her feel ill, and I found myself wondering what exactly had happened to her. Aurora was such a pretty name. Did she prefer to be called ‘Rori’, or had others shortened it so now it had stuck? I remembered Milo saying she’d had a tough time, although he hadn’t gone into details, but close up, I suddenly saw how thin and pale Rori was. When she’d first introduced herself, it had been quite dark outside – but now, in the daylight, I could see that her curly blonde hair had been artfully teased to conceal the fact that it was actually quite thin in places.

My heart went out to her. I knew that extreme anxiety could cause hair loss.

What sort of stress could Rori have been under to be affected physically like that?

She gave me a tight little smile and looked down at the grass, as if she was working up to asking me something. Then she said, ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, but . . . is there something between you and Milo? I mean . . . do you *like* him?’

Taken aback, I stared at her. I wasn’t exactly sure what I’d been expecting her to say, but it definitely hadn’t been this, and I was thrown into complete confusion.

‘I . . . well, no . . . no, there isn’t,’ I stammered. ‘I mean, I do *like* Milo, but romantically? Put it this way. We won’t be

running off to get married at Gretna Green any time soon, that's for sure!' I joked.

She was searching my eyes, as if she wanted to know for sure if I was telling the truth.

'So you're not . . . *in love*? With Milo?'

I gave a nervous bark of laughter. 'What? No, no. I'm not sure where you got that idea from. We're friends. Well, we *were* friends. I'm not actually sure what we are now.'

'Right.' She nodded. 'Okay. Thank you for being so honest, Jaz.'

'You're welcome,' I said, puzzled.

She shrugged. 'Sorry for being so personal. I just . . . well, we're neighbours, aren't we? And it's just good to know these things.' She smiled apologetically. 'It saves any . . . misunderstandings.'

I nodded. 'I suppose it does.'

'Okay, I'll leave you to get on. Milo said you'd be busy helping your friend with the Christmas fair. We'll definitely be coming along to it tomorrow evening, by the way. It sounds like great fun.'

'That's good. The more the merrier. It's for such a fabulous cause.' I forced a smile, while inside I recoiled at the 'we'.

She walked away, head down, hands in her pockets, and I stared after her, feeling uneasy. Had she been making sure Milo and I weren't romantically involved before making a move on him herself (if she hadn't already)? And if so, why couldn't she just have asked Milo about the state of our relationship?

She'd taken me by surprise with her questions and my insides were in turmoil. Put on the spot, I'd reacted defensively and hadn't told her the whole truth.

All I knew was that in telling Rori there was nothing going on between us, I'd left the door wide open for her to get together with Milo herself . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I was standing lost in thought, just staring at the bouncy castle, which featured a huge and rather scary Father Christmas, when I noticed out of the corner of my eye someone in the doorway of one of the two shepherd's huts on the site.

It was Freddy.

The double doors of the hut were flung open and he was sitting on one of the three steps leading up to the entrance, staring at something in his hands. He looked as down and despondent as I was feeling. I walked over and just as I reached him, he looked up.

'Hi, Freddy. How are you liking the shepherd's hut?' I said chattily. 'Hope it's warm on these cold nights.'

He nodded. 'It's great. I've got used to sleeping in all my clothes so I don't even need the heating most of the time.'

I smiled. He was so considerate, not wanting to run up Ellie's heating bill. Usually, when kids were polite, it was because the parents had brought them up that way – so Freddy had probably had a good start in life. How sad that the family was now at war. Glancing down, I saw that he'd been looking at a photograph on his phone.

'Is that your mum?' I asked.

He nodded sadly.

'Are you missing her?'

He shrugged. 'I miss my girlfriend most. She understood why I had to leave.'

'What's her name? Your girlfriend?'

'Hannah.'

'Nice name. Does she know where you're living?'

He shook his head. 'I didn't want Mum and Dad putting pressure on her to tell them where I am, so it's best she doesn't know. We text, though.'

‘I bet Hannah misses you, too.’

Gazing gloomily ahead, he didn’t reply to that.

‘Can I see your photo?’

He handed his phone to me and I looked into the laughing eyes of a dark-haired woman in a lilac tabard. She was trying to shield herself from being photographed. ‘Did you take this?’

He nodded, a hint of a smile appearing. ‘Mum hates people taking photos of her, especially when she’s at work. So I do it just to wind her up.’ He paused. ‘*Did* it,’ he says, correcting himself.

‘Is she a hairdresser?’

He nodded. ‘I took that outside the shop she owns, near where we live in Portsmouth.’

‘She must really miss you,’ I said. ‘Honestly, I don’t know what I’d do if I ever lost touch with my daughter, Emma. It would feel like the end of the world, I think.’

‘Would it?’ He looked up at me. ‘But what if Emma had caused you so much heartache and disappointment by refusing to toe the line and go to uni like you wanted her to? What if she was the cause of so many angry slanging matches in the house that the neighbours eventually complained about the noise? Wouldn’t there come a point where it couldn’t go on like that and it was better if she just left?’

‘No.’ I gave a sad little smile. ‘Never.’

He gave a doubtful snort. ‘You’re just saying that to make me go back.’

‘Actually, Freddy, I’m not. I think I know how your mum must feel. She looks like a lovely woman in that photo but I bet she hasn’t smiled like that in a long time – not since she realised you’d gone and she’d lost you.’

He sighed. ‘You think?’

‘I do. My guess is she’s miserable right now. She won’t have been sleeping properly because she’ll have been

worrying herself sick about you . . . constantly keeping a hopeful ear out for the sound of your key in the door and always making enough food for you as well . . . just in case . . .’

I handed back his phone and he stared at the photo again, pressing his lips together and half-covering his face with his hand. ‘Dad will be glad I’ve gone, though,’ he muttered.

‘But will he really?’ I asked gently. ‘What’s he like, your dad?’

Freddy shrugged. ‘He was my hero when I was kid. He’s a fire-fighter. He saved a little girl and her baby brother once and almost died doing it. It was in all the papers.’

‘Wow. He sounds . . . really brave.’

Freddy nodded. ‘He is. But he wanted to be a fire-fighter right from when he was just a boy, and he doesn’t understand why I’ve changed my mind about studying law. I used to say I wanted to be a barrister, helping people in court, and I’d applied to uni and everything, and Dad was really proud.’

‘So what made you change your mind?’

‘I got a Saturday job, chopping veg in a restaurant kitchen, and I don’t know . . . I just loved it from day one.’ He smiled up at me. ‘I felt I belonged there. I loved the urgency of the kitchen atmosphere . . . how we all worked together against the clock to get the food out on time. I wanted to know more about creating great dishes and I looked into courses at college. But Dad didn’t approve. He says I’ve got a brain and I’d be wasting it if I worked in catering. But I just don’t see it like that. I want to be a chef. A really good one. And I don’t see that there’s anything wrong with that. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life. But Dad doesn’t understand.’

I sighed in sympathy. ‘He probably just wants what he thinks is best for you. It sounds like he loves you very much. If he didn’t care about you, he wouldn’t be bothered about what you do with your life.’

I’m trying very hard to be objective here, for Freddy’s sake, but it doesn’t stop me wanting to find this man, his angry and

overbearing dad . . . track him down and give him a good talking-to! Imagine being so unrelentingly stubborn and blinkered that your eighteen-year-old son felt he had no option but to leave home if he wanted to follow the career of his dreams! Really, whichever way you looked at it, it was unforgiveable.

I'd only heard Freddy's side of the story, but I was fuming on his behalf.

'Mum kept saying he'd come around to the idea. I just had to give him time. But the thing is, I don't think he ever will.'

'He might, you know. You've showed him how determined you are by leaving home and striking out on your own. That took guts. You've got a clear vision of who you are and what you want to do with your life and I think your dad will see that . . . in time.'

'Yeah, well, I'm not going back there until he promises to listen to me and accept that it's my life and I'll do what I want!'

'You must really miss your mum and your girlfriend, though,' I murmured. 'This can be such a lonely time of year when you're separated from the people you love.'

'I suppose.' He looked at the photo again.

'You know, the best present you could give your mum would be to go home in time for Christmas. Because she'll be breaking her heart at the thought of you not being there. I'm a mum. Trust me. I know this.'

He looked up at me, tears in his eyes, which he quickly dashed away.

'I *want* to see her. I really do. And Hannah as well. But if I see *them*, Dad will know where I am . . . and I don't want him to find me.' He shrugged. 'I've let him down and he's never going to forgive me for that. I almost went home that time Grandad saw me in Guildford and ran after me.'

I nodded. 'You could go home today if you wanted.'

He shook his head sadly. ‘I’ve been away too long. They must hate me for causing them so much trouble. It’s too late now.’

I sighed, sympathising with him, my mind drifting to Milo and Rori.

It’s too late now.

Freddy’s sad words were something I could definitely relate to . . .

Later, when I caught up with Ellie, I talked to her about Freddy.

‘I have a feeling he *wants* to go home – he’s really missing his girlfriend and his mum – but I think he’s frightened nothing will have changed, and they’ll be angry at him for causing them so much bother by taking off like that.’

Ellie sighed. ‘He’s such a fabulous cook. He’s rustled up the most amazing menu to serve from that old food van over there. He tried the dishes out on us last night and I’m almost drooling now just thinking about them. The Cajun chicken and roasted pepper wraps are honestly to die for.’

‘Sounds amazing.’

She nodded. ‘He’s going to make such a great chef one day. But he’s still so *young*.’

‘I know. He might think he’s fine on his own, but he needs his family, his mum especially.’ I smiled wistfully. ‘I keep picturing the reunion. Mother and son. And it makes me want to cry.’

She chuckled. ‘You’re just an old softie at heart, aren’t you? So . . . how do we make it happen?’

‘What? A reunion?’

‘Absolutely. Any thoughts on how we can persuade him to go home in time for Christmas?’

I thought over my chat with Freddy for a moment, picturing his mum in the photo he showed me.

Then I smiled at Ellie.

‘I *might* have an idea.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Saturday morning and the opening of A Winter Wonderland finally rolled around.

I'd been up and out of the house early, with a mission to accomplish. But by eleven on the dot, I was back in Sunnybrook, manning the cake stall with Katja in the main marquee – just in time for Ellie to open the glittering, fairy-light-festooned gates and get the ball rolling.

A queue of people had already gathered, muffled up and stamping their feet against the cold, eager to support a great cause and have a good time.

The main roads had been clear for my dash down to the south coast earlier, despite another covering of snow in the village overnight. Thankfully, the icy weather didn't seem to be putting people off. On the contrary, there seemed to be a continuous stream of visitors to the marquee, and Katja and I were kept so busy selling the mince pies, gingerbread and Christmas tree cupcakes, that we barely had time to exchange more than a few words to one another all morning.

Around two, Ellie stepped into my place and I took a break, wandering over to 'Santa's Grotto' (in the second shepherd's hut) to check on how Harry was working out as the Big Man himself. I was a bit sad that Emma couldn't be here, but to make up for it, I'd promised to take her to see a store Santa in Guildford instead.

I couldn't speak to Harry, as it turned out, because there were at least ten sets of parents and children in the queue, excitedly waiting for their turn – including, I noticed, the charity shop woman called Joan who sold me the Santa suit! She was there with her two granddaughters, and they were hopping about with excitement. I smiled to myself, feeling proud of Harry for doing his bit. He was great with kids. He'd be a very popular Father Christmas.

Freddy, too, was doing great business from his temporary food van, with help from Zak and Fen's husband, Rob. The 'Chicken Dinner Winner' sign had been replaced, and now the

words ‘Freddy’s Fantastic Feasts’ were emblazoned over the hatch in huge Christmassy lettering of red and green, with a robin, a silver bell and a golden star perched jauntily on the ‘Fs’. (The queue for Freddy was at least twice as long as the one for Santa.)

I wished I could relax and just enjoy the lovely festive atmosphere. But I couldn’t stop thinking about what Rori had said to me – that she and Milo would be coming along. The problem was, I’d no idea *when* they were going to make their appearance, so I was constantly on my guard, my eyes flicking over the crowds, torn between *wanting* to see Milo and dreading the moment when I’d spot him having a good time with Rori.

Rori had made it clear with her rather unsubtle questioning that she was interested in Milo herself, and I wished now that I’d been more truthful with her. I should have told her that Milo and I had been romantically close at one stage. But yet again, I’d managed to screw things up . . .

Later, when I was back behind the cake stall, serving customers alongside Jen, Ellie came over and said she was a bit worried about Freddy. He’d been working so hard, refusing to take a break, since five that morning, but he’d suddenly been taken ill.

‘He looked white as a sheet, as if he was going to faint,’ she said, ‘so I managed to persuade him to go and lie down in the hut for a bit.’

I stared at her, worried. ‘Poor Freddy. I hope he’s okay.’

She nodded. ‘I just popped over to check on him and he says he’s fine. Just exhausted, I think. He looked quite embarrassed about letting me down, would you believe? But I managed to convince him that Zak and Rob would be okay serving on their own for a while.’ She frowned. ‘I shouldn’t have heaped so much responsibility on such young shoulders.’

I shook my head. ‘It’s not your fault. When I saw Freddy earlier, he was in his element, smiling and chatting with the customers and doing exactly what he loves. I think it’s more

emotional and mental exhaustion than anything. Whatever he might say, that boy is missing home.'

Ellie sighed. 'You're right. And I don't know what to do to help him. He's so stubborn.'

At that moment, Katja came running up. 'Maddy's having an argument with some girl. She's getting quite hysterical and I'm not sure what to do.'

'Maddy's hysterical?' I looked at her in alarm.

'No, no. The girl. She's refusing to be served by Zak or Rob apparently and getting really upset.'

'Oh, hell,' groaned Ellie. 'I thought things were going too smoothly. Where are they?'

'Over by the food van.'

'Has she been drinking, do you think?' I asked, as the three of us hurried out of the marquee and over to the van.

Katja shrugged. 'Maybe. I just thought I'd better let you know in case she starts really kicking off.'

As we got nearer, I saw Maddy and the trouble-maker in question – a young girl with a dark ponytail, wearing jeans and a furry gilet. Maddy was trying to calm her down, but she shook off her arm impatiently and was pointing at the sign above the hatch.

'It says Freddy's Fantastic Feasts,' she wailed. 'I just want to see *Freddy!*'

I stared at her as the penny dropped. My heart was beating faster as I walked over to her.

'Excuse me. Are you Hannah?'

It was Freddy's girlfriend and she was a sobbing mess.

She'd come all the way from Portsmouth, thrilled at the prospect of seeing Freddy again after weeks of not knowing where he was, only to find he wasn't where he was supposed

to be. In the food van that had his name on it! The anti-climax was clearly too much for her . . .

An older woman with curly dark shoulder-length hair and a kind face was hurrying over, and my heart lurched as she got nearer and I saw who it was.

‘I was just parking the car,’ she gasped. ‘Hannah? Are you all right? What’s happened?’

‘I can’t find Freddy,’ said Hannah helplessly. ‘He’s not here.’

The woman turned around, saw me and grasped my arm. ‘Jaz? Oh, thank goodness. Is he really here? My Freddy?’

‘He is.’ I smiled at Freddy’s mum, feeling her urgency. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll take you both over to see him.’

I glanced at Ellie who was looking totally dumbfounded by this turn of events. But then, she didn’t know that I’d spotted the name of the hairdressers in the photo Freddy showed me the day before, and I’d driven down to Portsmouth at the crack of dawn and tracked his mum down, just as the shop was opening!

Ellie nodded, snapping out of her trance. ‘Take them over to the shepherd’s hut, Jaz.’

‘Okay.’ I smiled at Hannah and Jocelyn, Freddy’s mum. ‘Let’s go.’

I could feel the tension in the air as we hurried off, both women silent, just intent on finding Freddy. I knocked on the door of the hut and after a moment, he appeared, rubbing his eyes – and the look on his face when he glimpsed his mum and Hannah, I knew would stay with me forever.

Total disbelief at seeing them both was mixed with a mounting feeling of joy as he realised it was actually true. Jocelyn let out a little cry of happiness, her hands over her mouth as if she couldn’t believe her beloved son was standing there in front of her, and Hannah stood back as Freddy jumped down onto the grass and pulled his mum into the tightest hug ever. Jocelyn was weeping openly. I couldn’t see Freddy’s expression because his face remained buried in his mum’s

shoulder for a long time, but I didn't have to see his face to know what this moment meant to him.

At last, mother and son let go of each other, and Freddy turned to Hannah with a shy, delighted smile. Grinning broadly, she flung her arms around him and started telling him off for refusing to let her know where he was. But I knew she wasn't really angry with him. She was just relieved and over the moon to see him again . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I left them catching up in the shepherd's hut and hurried back over to the marquee, keeping a lookout for anyone familiar. It was mid-afternoon but already, the light was fading fast. The fairy lights were glowing even more brightly in the winter darkness, lending a magical feel to the whole event.

And then, just as I was slipping back into the marquee tent and the heart-rending sound of Wham's *Last Christmas* started playing over the speakers, I saw them.

Milo. With Mabel and Rori.

They were walking through the gates, and Mabel was in the middle, holding hands with them both. I felt a pang of real pain as I hid just inside the tent, watching them.

If I hadn't been so afraid of getting hurt again, that could have been me holding Mabel's hand . . .

'Hey, are you okay? You look as if your world just fell apart.'

Ellie appeared, looking concerned.

'Yes. I'm fine. Honestly. It's just . . .'

 I trailed off miserably.

'Freddy?'

I shook my head. 'Everything's fine over there. In fact, I've just witnessed a very emotional reunion between the three of them.'

'So is it Milo?' she asked softly, and I felt Ellie's arm slip around me.

I snorted sadly. 'Am I that obvious? How did you know?'

She smiled ruefully. 'Because it's clear to everyone who knows you that you and Milo should be together. And I know you realise that, too.'

'It's totally my fault we're not together and he's with . . . Aurora. It's such a gorgeous name, isn't it?' I pointed over at them, and we watched as Rori waved at Mabel on the bouncy castle, and Milo stood by and smiled.

‘It’ll work out for you both,’ murmured Ellie. ‘If it’s supposed to.’

I grinned. ‘That sounds like something Fen would say. Destiny and all that. But I’m not sure I believe in it.’

‘Well, we’ll see.’ She smiled. ‘I haven’t given up hope of a happy ending and neither should you. Now, how about we go and relieve Primrose and Ruby on the cake stall? I’m getting quite hungry and a sly mince pie would go down a treat!’

I threw myself into selling mince pies and gingerbread people and Christmas tree cupcakes, trying hard to forget about the happy little threesome out there enjoying themselves. I knew I’d be fine in the marquee for a while because Milo and Rori were busy watching Mabel on the bouncy castle. But after a while, I offered to go over to the baking school to collect more cupcakes (we were running short and I knew Anita was busy icing some more) and I fled before they could come into the marquee.

On the way, I found Ellie and explained that I couldn’t face them, and she told me to have a cuppa with Anita and stay over there for a while, and she would collect the cakes herself. So I did, and Anita seemed glad of the company and my help with the cupcake decorating, which she joked was becoming so monotonous, she’d probably be applying green icing to cupcakes in her sleep!

After a while, Ellie arrived to tell me that she’d just seen the trio leaving. I smiled at her gratefully, feeling sad relief wash through me. Popping my head round the store room door, I told Anita I’d be back to help later and I returned to the fair with Ellie.

Freddy was back behind the hatch of the food van, serving up his spicy food and looking like a happier, more relaxed version of himself. We walked over to where Jocelyn and Hannah were standing by the van, each enjoying one of Freddy’s Cajun chicken wraps.

‘Everything all right?’ I asked Jocelyn.

She smiled, chewing quickly on her mouthful and swallowing. 'Everything's fine now that I know where Freddy is and that he's doing okay.' Tears sprang to her eyes. 'Thank you so much, Jaz, for what you did this morning. You could just have phoned me but you drove all that way.'

'It was so important I wanted to talk to you in person. You were a stranger to me and for Freddy's sake, I needed to know I was doing the right thing, letting you know where he was.'

'I know. And I really appreciate it.'

I smiled. 'As soon as I saw your emotional reaction when I said I knew where he was, I was certain it really was the right thing to do. I knew he was missing you, too. And Hannah.'

She nodded and Hannah said, 'Isn't Freddy a brilliant cook?' She held up her wrap. 'He made me these the first time I came to his house and I loved them. He's so creative.'

Jocelyn looked sad. 'If only Mark would stop being so blinkered about what Freddy's future should look like. I've tried talking to him but he just won't listen. He seems determined a dazzling career as a barrister is the only way.'

'He could have a dazzling career as a chef,' retorted Hannah.

'Try telling his dad that,' Jocelyn said gloomily. She finished off her wrap and smiled over at Freddy. 'Delicious,' she mouthed, and he grinned at her, looking so proud, my throat felt suddenly choked.

I turned to Jocelyn. 'Does your husband know you're both here?'

'Yes. He refused to come with us. Said he had to go to work.'

'He's missing out.' Hannah smiled up at Freddy. 'I've never been to such a brilliant Christmas fair.'

'He looks so grown-up, doesn't he?' murmured Jocelyn, watching her son chatting to a customer as he handed over a bunch of wraps. 'I'm so proud of him. If only his dad could see him now.'

‘And taste his food,’ added Hannah.

‘Yes. The ridiculous thing is, Mark loves his son to bits. He wants what’s best for him, but all he’s doing right now is alienating Freddy. Driving him away.’

‘Will Freddy go back with you, do you think?’ asked Ellie.

‘Oh, no,’ said Jocelyn sadly. ‘He says we can come and see him any time we like, Hannah and me, but there’s no way he’s ever going home.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I was feeling exhausted by the time I put my key in the lock just after eleven and tumbled gratefully into the house.

It had been a wonderful day in many ways. We'd all been truly amazed at the number of people who'd turned up for the event. Ellie was quite overwhelmed. And that was just day one! We were expecting the numbers through the gates to be even higher the following day, Sunday.

My muscles were aching from standing behind the cake stall for most of the day. So I dropped my coat and bag on the sofa, went straight upstairs and ran a hot bath, pouring in a generous amount of soothing rose-scented bath oil. Then I got in and lay back with a sigh and thought about the day.

It had been a spectacular success by anyone's standards, and I was delighted for Ellie. She'd worked so hard to pull it all together, and there was no doubting the event would raise enough for a pretty spectacular Christmas Day lunch in the village hall. I had a feeling there would be plenty of funds besides – enough to donate a sizeable chunk to Food Share.

I was almost dosing off in the deliciously hot and soothing water when I suddenly became aware of a distant thudding noise, repeating over and over. Sitting up, the bath water sloshed around me as I strained to listen. I could hear a voice as well. A man's voice, deep and menacing.

Someone seemed to be banging furiously on Milo's door. But it was almost midnight!

A chill ran through me as I got out of the bath.

What was going on?

Quickly drying myself and pulling on my dressing gown, I ran downstairs and went to the kitchen window. Pulling up the blind a fraction, I saw a car I didn't recognise parked outside Milo's gate. Milo's car wasn't there; only Rori's was parked in the drive.

The banging was continuing, interspersed with angry shouts that filled me with alarm. In the darkness, I could just make out the shape of a man standing at the door. I couldn't hear what he was yelling, but it sounded very much like threats to me. And Rori was in the house, possibly with Mabel! They must be absolutely terrified.

I was running upstairs for my phone to call the police when I heard heavy footsteps on Milo's driveway and when I dashed back to the window and looked out, a burly man in a dark coat was flinging the gate shut and getting into what I assumed was his car. Next second, he gunned the engine and roared off into the night.

Quickly, I threw on some clothes, pulled on my coat and some trainers and went next door. I caught sight of some of the neighbours peering through their curtains at the disturbance, all clearly worried about what was going on at Milo's.

I rang the bell but there was no reply. Rori must be too scared to come to the door.

I bent down and pushed open the letter box. 'Rori? It's okay. He's gone. It's just me. Jaz from next door.'

I waited but there was still no reply, so I tried again. 'He just drove off in his car, so you're safe. Do you think we should call the police?'

At last, I saw movement in the bevelled glass in the door, and next second, the door opened just a crack and Rori's face appeared. She looked white-faced and frozen with fear.

'Are you okay?' I gasped. 'Who on earth was that, hammering on the door at this hour?'

Her frightened eyes were searching the street behind me, back and forwards, back and forwards. Then at last, she opened the door fully.

'That was my ex,' she said in a small voice. 'You'd better come in.'

‘Is Mabel here?’ I asked, looking around, as she led me through.

Rori gave her head a little shake. ‘No. Thank God. That would have been terrible.’ She went round putting on lights in the living room, fumbling with every lamp switch because her hands were shaking so much. ‘Sit down, Jaz,’ she muttered, her voice almost a whisper, as if she was still afraid the man would return. ‘I put the lights off when I recognised the car. But my ex isn’t stupid. He knew I was in here. Although goodness knows how he found out this was where I’d run to.’

‘*Run* to?’ I stared at her in horror. ‘Your ex was abusive towards you?’

She didn’t answer, just sat down weakly in a chair and leaned forward, hugging her arms tightly around herself. But her expression, as she stared blankly at the carpet, told me everything and my heart lurched with sympathy. Rori had always appeared nervous when she spoke to me; a bit like a rabbit caught in the headlights. And now I knew why. Had she been worried all along that her abusive ex would come after her and track her down here?

No wonder she’d been delighted to accept Milo’s offer of a roof over her head . . .

At last, she sighed and looked up. ‘Sorry, Jaz, can I get you a cup of tea?’

‘How about something a bit stronger?’ I suggested gently, thinking that’s what was often recommended for shock. And that’s exactly how poor Rori looked right now. Shocked to the core.

‘I think Milo has some brandy somewhere. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.’ Getting up, she attempted a smile. ‘Will you join me?’

I wasn’t that keen on brandy but I nodded and followed her through to the kitchen as she went to get glasses. But her hands were still trembling and when she reached for the brandy in a top cupboard, it almost slipped through her fingers. She just managed to catch it and it slammed down on

the counter. She gave a weak groan and leaned over the bench, digging her hands into her hair.

‘Hey, you’re okay.’ Gently, I rubbed her back. ‘Let me pour.’

I presented her with a neat brandy and she looked at it doubtfully. ‘Just drink it. It’ll make you feel better,’ I coaxed her, sipping on my own drink for encouragement.

In the end, she picked up the glass, took a small swallow, then she said, ‘Oh, bugger it!’ and downed the rest in one. And by the time she’d finished coughing like mad and laughing, which made me start to laugh as well, she had colour back in her cheeks and did indeed look a whole lot better.

I sloshed a little more brandy in each of our glasses for good luck, hoping Milo wasn’t keeping it for something special (the irony of *that!*), and we went back through to the living room. Rori dropped onto the sofa and I curled up in an armchair opposite and she started talking about how grateful she was to Milo for helping her when she was in such dire straits.

‘I’d packed a bag and run down to the station and got on the first train that arrived, which happened to be going to London,’ she said softly, almost in a daze. ‘I just needed to escape from him. I’ve got an auntie I’m close to there so I stayed with her for a few days but she lives in a tiny, one-bed flat so I knew I couldn’t be there long-term.’ She gave a wry smile. ‘It was pure coincidence that Milo happened to be on the London train that night. We hadn’t seen each other since we left uni, but we sort of just picked up where we left off. He could see how shaken I was and eventually, I told him the whole story. He came to see me the next day at my auntie’s to make sure I was okay. Then he persuaded me to come and work for him in the Sunnybrook Roastery, and I was so grateful to him.’ She looked at me and smiled. ‘He’s such a lovely guy, isn’t he? I mean, he’d help anyone in trouble.’

I nodded. ‘Milo is one of the good ones.’

She gave a yawn. ‘Sorry, Jaz. That brandy has made me so sleepy.’ She looked anxiously towards the window and I could tell she was still worried about her ex coming back.

‘Where’s Milo tonight?’ I asked, thinking I couldn’t leave her alone, not after what had just happened.

‘Oh, he’s in Brighton. He’s organised a Christmas party in a hotel down there for his Roastery staff and they’re all staying over and coming back tomorrow.’

‘You didn’t fancy going?’

Her expression was weary. ‘To be honest, since the trouble with my ex, I’ve completely lost all my confidence. The thought of a party and having to face loads of people I didn’t know felt a bit terrifying.’ She grimaced. ‘Of course, now I wish I’d been brave and gone with them.’

‘Typical that your ex would choose tonight of all nights – when Milo’s away and you’re all alone – to come round and terrorise you.’ I shook my head. ‘I think it’s called Sod’s Law.’

‘I know.’

‘Look, why don’t you go up to bed and I’ll stay over to keep you company? You look absolutely shattered.’

She looked shocked. ‘I couldn’t ask you to do that.’

‘You’re not asking. I’m offering,’ I told her gently. ‘Honestly, Rori, it’s no problem at all.’ I smiled. ‘To be honest, it’s so freezing cold out there, I quite like the idea of just curling up and going to sleep on that lovely cosy sofa.’

‘Really? I mean, there’s a spare room? Although I don’t think the bed is made up.’

I shook my head and indicated the sofa. ‘I have a feeling I’ll drift off to sleep right there no bother. Just until Milo gets back tomorrow?’

Her look of sheer relief told me it was the right decision. The poor woman was absolutely terrified of being alone. She fetched a duvet and a pillow and we arranged them on the sofa, then she smiled her timid smile and thanked me again. She paused at the door and looked at me, as if she was debating whether to say something else.

‘The reason I asked about you and Milo, and if there was anything between you, was because he deserves to be happy

and I don't really think he is.' She smiled. 'Are you sure you don't like him? I mean, *really* like him?'

'What?' I stared up at her. The brandy had clearly gone straight to her head! 'Of course I like him, but romantically? No. Definitely not!'

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. 'Me thinks ye protest far too much, Jaz,' she said softly, and I felt my cheeks flush the colour of peeled beetroot. I wriggled uncomfortably in my seat. Maybe it was time to stop pretending and just admit how I felt about Milo . . .

'Okay, yes.' I shrugged. 'I like him. *Really* like him.'

'I thought you might. And I don't blame you. He's lovely. Well, he'll always be just a mate to me, but I can totally understand why women find him so attractive.'

'Don't you . . . like Milo yourself?' I asked her, thinking of her running into the kitchen and kissing him.

She smiled. 'When my head was all over the place and Milo was being so kind to me, I confess there was a moment when I thought our friendship could be something more. But I quickly realised we weren't really right for each other, and I'd much rather have him as a friend. And besides . . . he likes someone else.'

'He does?' My heart missed a beat – well, *several* beats – at this.

She nodded. 'He told me last night that he's in love with you. But that things between you are too complicated to work out.'

'He *said* that?'

'He did. He said he saw you with your ex and it looked like he'd missed his chance with you. But he really doesn't want to lose you as a friend. He's hated the frostiness between you lately.'

'I've hated it, too.' My heart was beating so fast now, I was starting to feel breathless.

‘Well maybe you should tell him that, Jaz?’ She stifled a yawn. ‘Gosh, I’d better go or I’m going to fall asleep right here.’

I smiled at her as my heart turned crazy somersaults and my head did the same. ‘Goodnight, Rori. Sleep well.’

‘I think I will, with you here. Goodnight.’

She disappeared upstairs, and I went and curled up in the duvet, fully clothed, to think about Rori’s astonishing revelations.

Milo was in love with me. Things between us were too complicated to work out, but he really wanted us to remain friends.

That’s what he’d told Rori.

The question was: Did I really want to go back to us being ‘just good friends’?

As I felt myself drifting off to sleep, exhausted after everything that had happened that day, I knew the answer to that was very far from clear-cut . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY

When I woke next morning, I was confused at first, wondering where I was. Then I heard the sound of someone moving around . . . a kettle being filled . . . and Rori's face appeared around the door.

'Morning, Jaz. Did you sleep okay?'

I sat up, pushing away the duvet. 'Surprisingly well, actually. You?'

She grinned ruefully. 'Went out like a light. I think it was the brandy. Good idea of yours. Tea or coffee?'

'Ooh, tea, please.'

I put away the duvet and pillow while she was making the tea, intending to dash home and grab a shower then head on over to the baking school. We were doing the whole Winter Wonderland thing all over again today and Ellie would need all hands on deck again. Our first task would be rolling up our sleeves and donning aprons, and baking more Christmas goodies. The demand for them on the first day had been far greater than we'd anticipated, and we reckoned we'd run out of mince pies and cupcakes within a few hours of opening that day if we didn't get busy baking again. But as Ellie herself had pointed out, it was a very good problem to have . . .

I glanced at my watch. It was already nearly seven. I needed to get a move on. But after drinking my tea with Rori and grabbing my coat and bag to leave, I found myself hesitating on the threshold.

'Will you be all right?' I asked her anxiously. 'When does Milo get back?'

'Oh, any time now. Just go, Jaz.' She waved away my concern. 'I'll be absolutely fine.'

'Aren't you due at Roastery soon?'

'Nope. Day off.' She shrugged. 'I've got loads to do for Christmas, so it's just as well!'

She was being all bright and breezy but I wasn't convinced. Last night had been so traumatising for her.

'Are you good at baking?' I asked on impulse.

'Baking? Erm, yes, I can make a decent Victoria sandwich cake.'

'Great. How do you fancy helping us make more mince pies and cupcakes?'

'Oh, I'd love to.' She brightened instantly.

'Yes?'

She nodded eagerly. 'I mean, even if I don't bake, I can still help out, can't I? Make tea for the workers and wash the dishes . . . that kind of thing?'

'Absolutely.' I grinned at her, thinking what a difference a day could make. I'd convinced myself Milo and Rori were going to get together – but from what Rori told me last night, that was far from the truth.

Milo said he was in love with you . . .

Remembering her words sent a little shiver of longing skipping along my spine. But I told myself to keep it together. Today was important. I needed to concentrate on helping Ellie to make A Winter Wonderland the success it deserved to be . . .

'Look, I'm going to nip next door for a shower,' I told Rori, opening the front door. 'How about I pop back in twenty minutes and we can drive along to the baking school together?'

She nodded but I caught her anxious little look up and down the street.

'You can come next door with me if you like?'

'Oh, no. No, no. I'll be fine, Jaz. I'll lock the door and I'll phone the police if he turns up again and starts yelling.'

I nodded. 'Phone me as well. But I'm sure he won't be back.'

I sincerely hoped I was right as I opened my own front door and flew about getting ready.

By the time A Winter Wonderland opened again at eleven, we were all in place once more, ready to receive Sunday's visitors, and they streamed in from the moment Ellie opened the gates.

Rori was on the cake stall with me, and we were getting on surprisingly well. She was a little hesitant at first about standing behind the stall with me and chatting to customers, but after a while, she seemed to relax a little. I knew she must still be haunted by what had happened the night before, her bully of an ex turning up at Milo's door.

The news of the day was that Maddy's fiancé Jack had gone down with a horrible dose of flu and as a consequence, their trip to Paris was in jeopardy. Maddy appeared in the marquee around two, in order to give Rori and me a break, and she was naturally desperately disappointed.

'I can't believe it,' she wailed. 'We were so looking forward to it. But Jack could barely raise his head off the pillow this morning, so we're going to have to cancel the whole thing.'

'He might be better by the time you're due to depart,' said Rori optimistically.

Maddy shook her head. 'No chance. The trip's only three days away. In fact, we might not even get our money back. Dad's going to check our insurance policy.' She groaned. 'I'll be devastated if it turns out we've lost all our money.'

'Poor Maddy,' I murmured, as we headed out of the marquee and over to the baking school. (Anita was likely to be up to her neck still in vivid green icing, and I'd promised we'd come over and have a cuppa with her during our break!)

'Oh, there's Milo!'

I swung round to where Rori was pointing, and sure enough, he was walking over to us, looking a little bit delicate. It must have been a good staff party.

‘Hi!’ He looked surprised to see us together. ‘Ellie told me what happened last night, Rori. Are you okay?’

She nodded. ‘I’m fine. Honestly. It was just a shock, that’s all, when he turned up and started banging on the door and yelling. It was so *late*. I was just really glad Jaz was there.’

I exchanged an awkward smile with Milo.

‘Ellie said you were brilliant, staying over and everything.’ His dark eyes caught on mine. ‘I should have been here instead of in Brighton at a daft party.’ He sounded almost angry. ‘I’d have phoned the police and sent that bloody bully packing.’

Rori smiled at him. ‘It all worked out okay. Luckily, he gave up the banging after a while. I think he realised I’d call the police if he didn’t stop causing such a horrible disturbance.’

‘People like him are the scum of the earth,’ he muttered under his breath, and I could see he’d been really worried about Rori. He pasted on a smile. ‘Anyway, where are you both off to?’

We explained, but just as we were about to head over to see Anita, Ellie came running over.

‘Can I drag you away for a minute, Jaz?’ she panted, looking worried.

I looked at her, puzzled, but it was clear she was in a hurry and didn’t have time to explain. So I apologised to Rori and Milo for rushing off, and I followed in Ellie’s wake, wondering what on earth was going on.

We were heading in the direction of Freddy’s food van, and I suddenly spotted Jocelyn standing there, close to the hatch where Freddy and Rob were serving. She was talking to a bearded, sandy-haired man in jeans, navy coat and a tartan scarf.

‘Guess who that is with Jocelyn,’ murmured Ellie.

I looked at her in surprise. ‘It’s not Freddy’s dad, is it?’

She nodded. ‘Jocelyn introduced him to me. I couldn’t believe he actually came. I’m just hoping there’s no trouble.’

From what Freddy said, his father has a temper and seeing Freddy going completely against his wishes could be a recipe for disaster.'

'That's true.' Thinking of Freddy, my stomach clenched with worry. 'His father's made it clear he's dead against Freddy being a chef. So what the hell is he here for, if not to create a fuss?' From what I could see, Freddy was concentrating on the line of customers and totally ignoring his mum and dad . . .

Jocelyn suddenly spotted me and her face lit up. 'Jaz! I'm back again.'

I smiled. 'I had a feeling you wouldn't be able to stay away.'

'Well, I couldn't resist seeing my lovely son in action again. And I've managed to persuade my husband to come along this time. This is Mark.'

Mark held out his hand and we shook, and he said gruffly, 'Jaz. You must think a lot of my son to make such a long round-trip to seek out Jocelyn yesterday morning.'

'I do. He's a lovely . . . young man.' I was going to say 'boy' but stopped myself just in time. Freddy was no longer a child who had to do what his dad told him. 'We're all so fond of him here, and he's running the food van like a pro. Freddy's a real credit to you both.'

I glanced up at Freddy and from the trace of redness in his cheeks, I guessed he could hear what I was saying.

Mark nodded cagily but didn't reply.

'Halloumi fries for one and a Cajun chicken wrap, please,' said the man at the head of the queue to Freddy. 'I don't know what your secret ingredient is, fella, but I had one yesterday and it was amazing. The spice nearly blew my head off!'

The woman he was with smiled at Freddy. 'Your food is the only reason we came back today. And my husband isn't an easy man to please when it comes to his stomach, let me tell you. I'm not so keen on spicy things but the halloumi fries I had yesterday were delicious – so lovely and crispy.'

‘I’m glad you enjoyed them,’ smiled Freddy, and I saw Jocelyn’s heart melt right there.

‘So are you going to try Freddy’s food, then?’ She looked at Mark challengingly and I could see this was tricky ground between them. They exchanged a look and I waited, sure Mark was going to refuse. Then he sighed. ‘I suppose we’d better get in the queue, then.’

‘Yes, we’d better.’ Jocelyn gave me a triumphant smile behind her husband’s back as they stood behind the people who were waiting.

‘Crikey, Dad, are you sure you know what you’re letting yourself in for?’ called Freddy, and several people chuckled and looked around at Mark, presumably thinking Freddy was joking. Mark said nothing, but he flicked his eyes to the sky and I could see he was trying not to smile.

I waited, chatting to Ellie, and finally they were at the front of the queue.

‘So . . . Freddy . . . you’d better let me try one of those Cajun wrap things,’ said Mark.

‘Really? You want one?’ Freddy looked surprised.

‘Of course I do. If you’re set on being a chef, I need to know if you’re going to be a good one!’

‘Okay, one Cajun chicken wrap coming up,’ Freddy said calmly, not betraying for an instant what I imagined he must have been feeling – shock at his father’s apparent about-turn. ‘And for you, Mum?’

‘Same for me, love.’

‘Right.’ In what could have been a very awkward situation for him, Freddy spun round and put together the food with a professionalism that belied his young age. And from the look on his dad’s face when he bit into the wrap, I got the distinct feeling that the spices Freddy had used in his recipe weren’t the only thing to have gained his dad’s approval . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

It seemed as if the entire village had turned out for the final day of A Winter Wonderland.

Rori continued to help me on the cake stall and she seemed more relaxed as the day went on. I saw her standing by the bouncy castle talking to Ellie during her break at one point, and as I watched, she threw her head back and did a proper belly-laugh. I was glad she was settling in, getting to know people. It was clear she didn't want to talk about the terrible things she'd been through with her ex – the things she was obviously *still* going through. But hopefully she'd confided in Milo. He was such a great support, and I found myself feeling quite protective of Rori and very glad she'd found a temporary home at Milo's.

Changed days indeed!

I was avoiding Santa in his shepherd's hut today – largely because I'd had a weird conversation with Harry the night before. I'd been drifting off on Milo's sofa, Rori upstairs in bed, when my mobile rang and it was Harry. I could hear laughter and chatter and Christmas music in the background.

'I'm at a boring party having to talk to boring people so I thought I'd phone you,' he said.

It was obvious he'd been drinking so I laughed and said what on earth did he want to talk about at just gone midnight? There was a long pause after that and I honestly thought he might have casually fallen asleep.

Then just as I was about to give up and end the call, he mumbled, 'Jaz. You only live once. At least, I think you do. Obviously that's only my opinion. But anyway, what I mean to say is you need to let love back into your life, okay?'

I chuckled. 'Harry, go away. You're drunk.'

'No I'm not! Well, yes, I am. But I mean it, Jaz. You've got to take a risk or you'll never be happy.'

He then started to burble on about people who told jokes that really weren't funny and how they should all be rounded up and forced to watch *Mrs Brown's Boys* on a twenty-four-hour loop. I laughed and pointed out that this was quite unfair because I rather liked the programme and so did millions of other people. Then I heard Vivien's voice in the background asking him what on earth he was doing, lurking in the kitchen instead of joining in with the merriment.

'Goodbye, Harry,' I said, laughing, and we ended the call. I'd felt a bit uneasy for a while after that. What had he said exactly? *You need to let love back into your life*. Well, as long as he didn't think he could persuade me that a reunion was a possibility. Because that definitely wasn't happening . . .

Now, as I looked over at the long queue for Santa, I couldn't help feeling sorry for my ex. He'd be nursing one very sore head while being obliged to talk to an endless stream of excitable kids. It served him right for allowing a party to interfere with his Father Christmas duties!

At last, towards six o'clock, the crowds began to thin and the place emptied.

Ellie rushed around, making sure the funds we'd collected during this amazing second day were all present and correct, and locking them away in the café safe, ready to transfer to the bank the following morning. She dashed back and gathered us helpers all together and made a rather emotional speech, saying she could never thank us enough for all the support we'd given her 'baby'.

I felt a pang of tenderness for her when she said that about the fair having been her baby. I knew that beneath the frantic activity that had filled Ellie's life over the past few weeks, the longing for an IVF miracle in January had probably never been very far from her mind.

She said there were drinks waiting for us back at the café, so we all walked over there, chatting about the day. I looked around for Harry but he was nowhere to be seen, and I guessed he must have gone straight home to nurse his hangover.

Ellie and Zak popped open some prosecco (Maisie had been allowed to stay up and was drinking a special ‘Christmas cocktail’ her dad had made for her), and we sat around and toasted the event’s success and talked about the Big Festive Feast, which was planned for Christmas Day. So far, around fifty people had put their names down to attend, and Maddy commented that we’d have to spill over into the Bedouin tent if the number grew much larger.

(I was secretly hoping that Freddy wouldn’t be number fifty-one. After seeing him chatting to his dad earlier, I had high hopes he would be going home for Christmas.)

We would all be doing our bit for the Big Festive Feast, whether it was transporting the crates of food to the village hall kitchen, peeling hundreds of sprouts, cooking the turkeys, greeting people at the door wearing our reindeer antlers and showing them to their seats, or actually serving up the Christmas meal. We’d also be lending a hand preparing the village hall in readiness for the event, putting up decorations, setting up the long trestle tables and decorating them with freshly-gathered pine tree branches, holly berries and candles. The meal was planned for late afternoon when it was growing dark and frosty outside. It would be a wonderful contrast to the glowing warmth of the sociable gathering within.

At last, people started getting up to go home. I caught Maddy before she left with Katja. ‘Any news about getting your money back for the Paris trip?’ I asked, but she shook her head gloomily.

‘We might get the train travel reimbursed but not the hotel, and that’s obviously the most expensive part.’ She shrugged. ‘Jack says he’s going to make it the best Christmas ever, to make up for it.’

‘Well, that sounds good. Hey, it’ll be your first Christmas as an engaged person!’

This at least evoked a smile. And I waved them off and shrugged on my coat.

‘Jaz? Hang on.’ It was Ellie, hurrying over. She grinned. ‘Er . . . Santa wants to talk to you.’

‘Santa?’ I laughed and looked around. ‘Where is he, then?’

‘In the hut.’

‘Oh, hell.’ My heart sank as I recalled Harry’s drunken advice of the night before. *You need to let love back into your life.* ‘I hope it’s not about what I *think* it’s about.’

‘What do you mean?’ Ellie frowned.

‘Harry wants us to get back together.’ I stared at her gloomily.

‘Really?’

‘He told me the other week that he’d like us to be a family again.’

Ellie nodded thoughtfully. ‘Well, I suppose you’d better go and set him straight.’

‘I suppose I should.’ Warily, I picked up my bag. ‘Wish me luck.’

She grinned. ‘Good luck. And Happy Christmas!’

I snorted, wondering why she was looking so cheerful. ‘It’s a bit early for that, isn’t it?’

‘Off you go,’ she said, practically shooing me out of the café. I guessed she was exhausted and couldn’t wait to get the place to herself so she could go to bed!

I walked slowly over to the shepherd’s hut, already rehearsing in my head what I would say to let Harry down gently. But my stress levels were rising. I was feeling exhausted after two very long days, and if Harry started putting the pressure on me to let him back in, I wasn’t sure I trusted myself not to crumple and say yes, just to get away!

My heart was thumping as I knocked on the door and went in. Obviously saying yes was the last thing I was going to do. But the thought of letting him down wasn’t a pleasant one. I’d have to be really clear, right from the start. It just wasn’t going to happen . . .

Harry, still in his Santa garb, was sitting on the bed, relaxing back against the headboard, his boots crossed one over the

other. A single candle flickered on the bedside table, casting a glow over his golden buttons. The Santa suit really was so gorgeous . . . just like the real thing, whatever that was. He raised a hand in greeting and did a *ho-ho-ho* in a really deep voice – and in spite of everything, I started to chuckle.

Then I reminded myself how good Harry was at making me laugh. I wasn't going to be drawn in . . . persuaded to rethink for Emma's sake . . . I had to be firm from the word go.

Harry made a move to get off the bed, but I held up my hand. 'Stop. Please just stay there. Hear me out, okay?' To my relief, he relaxed back, so I carried on with my speech. 'If you're about to say what I think you're going to say, I'm really sorry, Harry, but it's just not going to happen. We're never getting back together.' I sighed, my insides churning. There was no easy way to tell him what I was about to say. But I had to. I had to make things crystal clear, otherwise there would always be that tiny room for doubt.

'The thing is, Harry . . . well, I'm in love with someone else. I'm sorry. But I really am. I've moved on and I've decided . . . well, I've decided that my future is with Milo.'

I paused, waiting for him to react and start trying to convince me otherwise. But he was just staring at me, clearly shocked by my announcement. (I was feeling pretty shocked myself, to be fair, hearing it spoken aloud.)

I shrugged sadly. 'That's if Milo will have me, of course, after all the horrible uncertainty I've put him through. He must be absolutely sick fed up with me changing my mind . . . kissing him one moment and holding him at arm's length the next . . . and I wouldn't blame him if he laughed in my face. Not that he would. He's far too much of a gentleman to ever do that. But anyway, that's beside the point. What I'm trying to say is that if there's even the tiniest chance he might forgive me and allow me to prove to him that this time, I'm absolutely certain that we belong together . . . well, I'm sorry, Harry, but I just have to go for it . . .

'Er, can I stop you there?' he muttered, sounding weirdly emotional and not like him at all. I felt terrible. I'd really upset

him. But I had to stand firm.

‘Look, it’s no use, Harry,’ I said warningly, as he got off the bed. ‘I know what I want now – beyond a shadow of a doubt – and that’s not going to change.’

I looked up into his eyes. He was standing right in front of me now. He seemed strangely taller in the candlelight.

Then my heart gave a giant lurch in my chest.

Harry’s eyes were green. But the golden candlelight was flickering in the kindest dark brown eyes I’d ever seen . . .

‘Milo?’

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

‘Yes, it’s me,’ said Milo, removing his whiskers. ‘And by the way, for the record, I’m in love with you, too.’

He removed some escaped beard fluff from his tongue. ‘Respect to Harry for wearing this bloody face hair all weekend. He must have swallowed enough woolly fluff to knit a Christmas jumper.’

I laughed as my mind whirled around crazily. I’d confessed my love for Milo, thinking all the time that I was talking to Harry, and now Milo had admitted he felt the same!

He was gazing at me with an intensity that was doing weird things to my insides. I gazed back, heart racing, my legs feeling as wobbly as a blancmange. And then he reached for me.

I’d have been in heaven – if it wasn’t for the enormous cushiony belly getting in the way. I really wanted to kiss him, but somehow the idea of snogging a big cuddly Santa just made me giggle.

‘Jeez, talk about a passion killer,’ Milo said, patting his huge stomach with a rueful smile.

Reaching up, I pulled off his hat. It felt velvety soft in my hands. ‘So why on earth are you dressed up as Santa, anyway?’ I ran my hand through the side of his hair which was flying upwards because of the static.

‘Actually, it was Harry’s idea.’

‘Harry?’ I stared at him. ‘But why?’

Milo chuckled. ‘He seems to know you better than you know yourself.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, he came to find me earlier, saying he wanted to talk about you. I was expecting him to start demanding to know if there was anything going on between us. After seeing the pair

of you snuggled up together on the sofa, I was convinced you were on the way to getting back together.’

I shook my head firmly. ‘It was just your terrible timing. But it must have looked really bad.’

‘It did. I have to say, I felt pretty down after that. I’d probably have given up all hope if Harry hadn’t told me that he suspected you were in love with me.’

‘But how did he know that?’

‘It’s true, then?’ Milo gave a mischievous grin.

I laughed. ‘Of course it’s true. I thought it was *me* who was the doubting Thomas. *Was* the doubting Thomas,’ I corrected myself swiftly. ‘I mean, I just confessed my feelings in full to you, thinking you were Harry, so it’s not as if you can be in any doubt now?’

‘Okay. Good to hear. Look, can you get me out of this ridiculous costume? I feel like any minute now a sleigh and reindeers are going to magically appear and whisk me off to the North Pole.’

Chuckling, I helped wrestle him out of the Santa suit, until he was standing there in his familiar jeans and sweatshirt, crucially minus the generous belly.

‘Harry said he knows now that you’ll only ever be friends. But he really cares about you. He wants you to be happy.’

I smiled wistfully.

‘He said I should stop wasting time and just tell you how I felt.’

‘And he suggested you put on the Santa suit?’

Milo shrugged. ‘He thought it would break the ice.’

‘Right. Well, it did that, all right.’

‘Come here.’

‘I’m here. This shepherd’s hut isn’t exactly big.’

‘Can I kiss you?’

‘I thought you’d never ask.’

‘Jaz?’

‘Yes?’

‘You’re not going to run away this time?’ He looked deep into my eyes. ‘I promise you, I’m not going to hurt you.’

I swallowed hard, feeling myself trembling inside. ‘It’s impossible to know what will happen in the future, but hearing you say that now is good enough for me. I believe you, Milo. Really, I do.’

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. ‘Sucker,’ he whispered in a funny voice in my ear, and I started to laugh. That was the thing about Milo. He could always make me laugh.

And there was something else he could always do.

He could make my entire body melt when he kissed me.

I clung to him as his lips met mine, giving myself up to the ecstasy of the feel of his hard body against me. Eagerly, I pulled out his shirt and ran my hands over the smooth skin of his back, feeling the heat between us mounting as we finally allowed ourselves to let go and smash through the obstacles that had been keeping us apart.

There was so much frustrated passion in that kiss. We were both panting when we finally drew apart.

‘I’ve got to go.’ Milo looked at me in dismay.

‘Now?’

‘I’m driving over to my parents and spending the day with them tomorrow.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Mum will be waiting up with the kettle on.’

‘Okay.’ I smiled up at him. ‘You’d better go, then.’

‘When I get back, we should spend some . . . quality time together,’ he murmured, tightening his hold on me for another kiss. ‘Without the girls for a change. Just us.’

‘Sounds good. But have you got the time, it being so close to Christmas and you being the big café boss and all?’

He grinned. ‘That’s the beauty of being in charge. You can *delegate*. I’m yours whenever you’re free yourself.’

‘I’ll talk to Harry and sort it out,’ I promised, wishing he didn’t have to go.

‘Are you sure?’ His eyes were suddenly filled with doubt. ‘You’re not going to chicken out and decide this was all a big mistake because you’re not ready for another relationship?’

‘No, I promise I won’t.’

‘Okay.’

I felt terrible. It was all my fault that Milo couldn’t quite believe in a happy ending for us. So to make up for it, I smiled and said, ‘You’re not going to believe what I’ve got planned for us. This will be the best “quality time” you’ve ever experienced in your life.’

He laughed. ‘Wow. Promises, promises.’

‘I’m serious,’ I said, my heart beating faster as a plan formed in my mind. ‘Are you sure you can take some time off?’

‘Yes! I told you.’

‘Okay, well, prepare for quality time like no other. It’s going to be so romantic you’ll feel like you’re starring in a romcom.’

He chuckled. ‘Can’t wait. Now, kiss me again before I go.’

So I did, and then we walked over to his car, arms around each other, and he said he’d phone me as soon as he arrived at his parents’ house.

‘You’d better,’ I joked, ducking down to the open window.

‘Hey, I always keep my promises, Jaz. You believe that, don’t you?’

I pretended to look doubtful. Then I smiled and said, ‘You know what, Milo? I absolutely do.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

We were on the Eurostar, Milo and I, heading for Paris.

He sat opposite me, reading the guidebook I'd bought him and looking up every now and then to smile at me, as if he were afraid I might suddenly vanish in a puff of smoke. I, too, could hardly believe Milo was here with me, on a train hurtling through the tunnel, and that – after all we'd been through – we were finally a couple and heading off on a romantic few days together.

Maddy had been over the moon when I'd offered to take the short holiday in her place. With their money unexpectedly refunded, they already had plans to book something else once Jack had fully recovered from his flu virus.

Emma and Luna wouldn't be left out of the fun, either. They'd be enjoying themselves at Harry's while we were away. Emma was going to the nursery party in her Christmas tree outfit the following afternoon, and then Harry and Vivien were taking her to see Santa in Guildford. She was so excited. I'd sat and helped her write her letter to Father Christmas the day before. I asked her what presents she'd like to receive from Santa and she'd frowned, thinking hard, then announced, 'Everything! Just write "everything", Mummy!'

Arriving at the small but luxurious hotel Jack had booked in the centre of Paris, we checked in, and Milo was laughing at me because I couldn't stop gasping aloud at the fabulous interior. The reception area was decked out in full festive splendour, and it turned out that our room was equally stunning, with its view over the Champs Elysées.

'I can't believe this!' I gazed out over the twinkling lights of the most famous avenue in Paris, a spectacular sight against the darkness of the night. Some of the shops were still open and the nightlife was in full swing. Tomorrow, Milo and I would join the tourists and Christmas revellers strolling along the avenue and taking in the sights.

But not tonight . . .

Milo slipped his arms around me and nuzzled my neck. 'Well done, Jack,' he murmured. 'Couldn't have chosen better myself.'

'Hey, guess what?' I turned and slid my hands over his chest, smiling up at him.

'What?'

'Jack booked dinner for eight.'

'But it's seven already.' He glanced at his watch and frowned. 'I suppose we should think about getting ready, then.'

'No need. He ordered dinner in the room. With champagne.'

Milo's smile widened appreciatively. 'I like his style. So this means we have plenty of time to do . . . other things first?'

'We do.' Grinning, I glanced speculatively over at the super-king bed. 'If you ask me, that neat bedlinen is just *begging* to be ruffled.'

'Couldn't agree more,' said Milo, and next second, I found myself lifted off my feet and deposited rather unceremoniously in the centre of the bed.

With a squeal of delight, I pulled him on top of me.

And then all talking ceased as we kissed passionately and began to explore the many and varied delights of spending time in the most romantic city in the world at Christmas time . . .

EPILOGUE

Christmas Day in Sunnybrook Village Hall. The day of the Big Festive Feast.

Snow had fallen overnight, adding a gorgeous festive sparkle to the high street, although the day had dawned crisp and bright with clear blue skies. Our guests were arriving at two, and the atmosphere – as we all worked together, with Freddy as head chef – couldn't have been more Christmassy.

Freddy had worked out a detailed schedule of tasks to make sure we were on time, starting with drinks to welcome everyone. Rows of glasses were lined up ready and the prosecco was chilling in the fridge, along with the non-alcoholic Christmas punch that Maddy had created.

Christmas music had been belting out since ten that morning, when Ellie, Maddy, Katja, Freddy and I had arrived in high spirits to get the party started. First task: Crank up the heating and get the Christmas music on! Second task: Turkeys in the oven! Much of the food preparation had been done the day before, mainly by Freddy, so now we could take a little time, warming ourselves up with coffee and a quick mince pie, before getting down to the business of making it a day to remember.

By two, when the first guests arrived amid a chorus of 'Merry Christmas!', the aroma of roasting turkey filled the hall, traditional carols were playing softly in the background and candles glowed on the two long rows of tables. The place settings had been given an extra festive touch with sprigs of holly and gleaming red berries, fir tree garlands and silver-sprayed pine cones.

Many of our guests were elderly; people on their own because they'd lost their spouse, or because they couldn't be with their family for one reason or another. Some arrived not really knowing anyone, but as we toasted one another over drinks, the magic of Christmas Day seemed to break down barriers, so that soon, even the shyest of guests were drawn into the chatter and the laughter that was filling the room.

Two women arrived with their children. Andrea had recently escaped a violent marriage and she and her three young children were now living in a hostel; and Eve's landlord had sold the house she'd been renting the previous month and she'd been unable to find anywhere else to live that was affordable, so she and her two little boys had ended up sleeping on friends' sofas.

Ellie and I brought out presents for the children, which they unwrapped with an excitement that made lots of us teary-eyed, and I could see what it meant to Andrea and Eve. They hadn't been able to give their children the Christmas they deserved, but watching them enjoying themselves, laughing and playing with each other and their new toys, almost made up for the bad times.

Around three, everyone took their places and Freddy stood and carved the turkeys, amid a chorus of 'oohs' and 'aahs', while the rest of us rushed around in the kitchen, getting vegetables into heated serving dishes and placing them on the tables.

I went round pouring the wine and Ellie made a little speech, wishing everyone a happy Christmas and saying how lovely it was to see everyone here, and she ended by raising a toast to Freddy, who'd prepared the feast they were about to enjoy.

Freddy was blushing to the roots of his hair but he was smiling at the same time. And as the door opened and two more people arrived, the assembled guests rose to their feet, with a clattering of chairs, and raised their glasses in a toast to the young man at the head of the table.

'Freddy!' they chorused.

The two new people, who happened to be Jocelyn and Mark, stood there watching as the applause and cheers for their son grew and filled the hall. And then Ellie, looking rather emotional, rushed forward to welcome the pair, and with a bit of jiggling around of places, managed to get the little family sitting together.

The turkey and trimmings were all thoroughly enjoyed, and when Primrose and Katja brought in the Christmas puddings Freddy had made and set them alight with brandy, the applause was deafening. After coffee and chocolate mints, the tables were cleared and rearranged, and the grown-ups settled down to watch *White Christmas* on a big screen, while the children played in a room next door, watched over by their mums, who seemed to be getting on famously, chatting and swapping stories about their lives.

After the film, we sang Christmas carols around the piano and there were games of charades and a Christmas quiz, organised by Ida and Maureen, both members of the local Women's Institute. Then one of the older men, called Bob, was revealed to be a particularly good singer and he was persuaded to get up and perform, which he eventually did, singing a duo with Maureen, who could also hold a tune rather well. The result was a charming performance of *Strangers in the Night*, which had everyone applauding and whistling at the end.

At last, towards eight, the party began to wind down.

But as people started to leave, Mark – Freddy's dad – suddenly got to his feet and to our surprise, cleared his throat and, flushing awkwardly, made a little speech.

'Erm . . . before you go . . . I just want to say thank you to Ellie and her team for allowing us to join in with the festivities. My wife persuaded me to come today and I'm very glad I did because the warmth and the positive spirit in this room have given me a different perspective on this thing called life. It's a struggle for many people and we should just be grateful for what we have – friends and families – and support each other in any way we can, without judgement.'

A murmur of approval at this rippled around the room.

'Freddy, your chef today, is my son and I can't tell you how proud I am of him. Not just for the food, although I'm sure you'll all agree that was pretty good, but for the kind and caring and incredibly resourceful young man he's turned into. I didn't always appreciate his qualities, but I do now, son.' He

glanced at Freddy, who was staring back at him, speechless. 'So anyway, that's all I wanted to say, really . . .'

Mark turned to Jocelyn, clearly struggling to know how to end his speech.

Jocelyn reached over and squeezed his hand. Then she smiled at her son through happy tears. 'We love you, Freddy. Merry Christmas, everyone!'

Mark smiled awkwardly through the applause, clearly wishing the earth would swallow him up. It had taken a lot for him to stand up and say those things, and as I watched father and son smiling at each other, Mark clapping his son on the back, I knew that life for Freddy had most certainly taken a turn for the better . . .

Later, with Emma now over at Harry's, I lay on the sofa in Milo's arms.

'I wish I'd been there to help,' he murmured.

I laughed softly. 'I think you probably had a far more challenging job, looking after two excited little girls at Christmas. But it was an amazing day. I'm so proud of Ellie for making it all happen. She's such a star.'

'And Freddy's gone home?'

'Yup. He was quite emotional, having to leave us all, so I think he'll be back. I hope so.'

'And everyone got on all right?'

'Great. There were some people who obviously recognised each other but had never got to know each other. But today changed things. Friendships were made, and maybe even a romance.'

Milo chuckled. 'A romance? Really?'

'Well, maybe. Maureen and Bob. They were perfect strangers but they sang a duet, and I saw them chatting away together, all very cosy, at the end of the evening.'

'What did they sing?'

‘Strangers in the Night.’

‘Very prophetic.’

‘Exactly.’ I gave a huge yawn. ‘Gosh, I’m so tired. But it’s been such a great day.’

‘Bed?’

I turned and smiled at him, and we kissed, long and lingeringly. Then Milo heaved himself off the sofa, took my hand and pulled me to my feet. ‘Come on. Christmas Day isn’t over quite yet.’ The way his dark eyes sparkled with mischief made my heart beat a little bit faster.

So with our arms around each other and my head on Milo’s shoulder, we stepped over the tin of Quality Street and the empty wrappers, and walked slowly upstairs . . .

THE SUNSHINE SISTERS

Book 1: *Aurora*

The start of an exciting new trilogy within the Little Duck Pond Café series!

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Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed diving headlong into the festive season, Little Duck Pond Café style. And I really hope your own Christmas turns out to be just as magical!

I'll be writing an exciting trilogy of stories next called THE SUNSHINE SISTERS. Aurora's past is clouded in mystery. She's escaped to Sunnybrook, but will she find the answers she's looking for before her past catches up with her?

I'm so looking forward to bringing you this heart-rending but uplifting story and revealing what's been happening to all your favourite Little Duck Pond Café characters!

In the meantime, happy reading and lots of love,

Rosie xxx

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