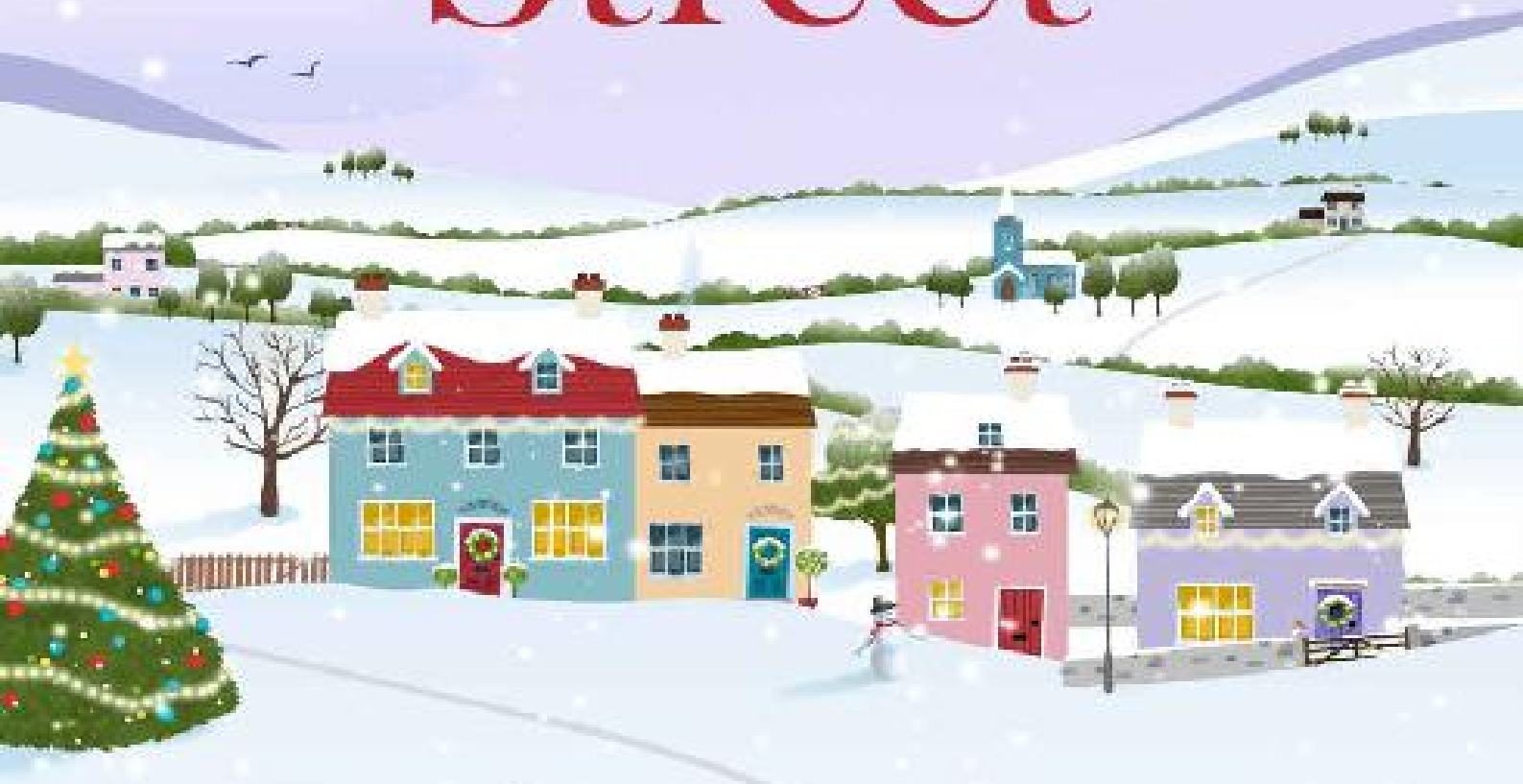




Christmas Lights
on
**Foxglove
Street**



Alix Kelso



CHRISTMAS LIGHTS ON FOXGLOVE STREET

A FOXGLOVE STREET NOVEL

BOOK FIVE

ALIX KELSO

LAKE FALLS PUBLISHING

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For my husband, David.

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“PUT my precious little babies on the phone! I miss them so much!”

Carrie Dixon laughed as her friend Leah Walker began making cooing noises and her face scrunched up on the video call.

“You’ve turned into a crazy cat lady ever since you got those two moggies,” Carrie said, glancing around the flat in search of the animals in question.

“And after four weeks in their company, you’ll be a crazy cat lady, too.”

“I think I’m probably already there, actually, and I’ve only been staying here for a few days. They’re both awfully cute.”

Seeing no sign of the cats anywhere, Carrie called out their names. “Coco! Praline! Where are you? Your crazy cat mother wants to speak to you both on the phone.”

Carrie heard a meow from beneath the fleecy throw draped across the sofa. Pulling it back revealed two cute cat faces blinking up at her.

“I think I’ve woken them from their afternoon nap,” Carrie said to Leah. “I’ll put you on.”

Carrie turned the phone so Leah could see her two cats snuggled up together on the sofa. While Leah squealed and babbled words of affection from the phone screen, the cats yawned and looked unimpressed before closing their eyes and going back to sleep.

“I don’t think they miss you,” Carrie laughed as she turned the camera phone around again.

“Of course they miss me,” Leah insisted. “They probably just don’t understand why I’m inside the phone screen instead of curled up beside them on the sofa.”

“If it helps, they’ve spent a lot of time staring out the window since you left. I think they’re looking for any sign of you walking back up the front path.”

“Ooh, my lovely little moggies! See, I knew they missed me. Thanks ever so much for looking after them, Carrie. I’m so grateful.”

“You’re doing me as much of a favour as I’m doing you.”

“True. It’s a win-win for us both. We’re two very lucky ladies.”

Carrie was still thanking her lucky stars for the chance to house-sit for Leah, who was spending four weeks working in New York City. When her old university friend had called up last month with the news about the amazing work placement she’d been offered in NYC, Carrie had been thrilled for her, knowing how hard she worked as a policy adviser at the London-based charity where she’d been building a career for the past few years.

The placement was a chance to meet people at a partner charity and develop new skills, but Leah had been worried about whether she could take up the opportunity. The cost of boarding her two cats for an entire month was prohibitive, and Leah wasn’t sure she liked the idea of removing her precious pets from their home for such a long time, anyway.

As Carrie’s landlord had just announced an unaffordable rental hike for the house she shared with three other tenants in Winchester, she sensed a chance to give herself some breathing space while she found somewhere new to live. When she’d suggested to Leah that perhaps she could live in her flat and cat-sit for her while Leah jetted off to her job placement in New York, her friend had jumped at the chance. Not only would her beloved cats be cared for in their own

home, but Leah would have the reassurance of knowing her flat was occupied by someone she could trust to look after the place in her absence.

Carrie had moved in four days ago, and after Leah gave her a crash course in cat care and talked her through the lengthy document she'd put together outlining the animals' feeding routine, veterinary information, and what to do if faced with various worst-case scenarios, Leah had said a tearful goodbye to Coco and Praline before hurrying off to catch the train from Hamblehurst to Heathrow Airport.

Securing any kind of temporary place to stay over Christmas was a huge relief for Carrie. Living in the cosy ground floor flat on Foxglove Street in the quaint little town of Hamblehurst was a perfectly lovely bonus on top.

"How's it going over there in New York?" Carrie asked.

"It's amazing. The job placement is brilliant and it's been non-stop since I got here. Plus I get to see New York at Christmas. It's so beautiful and exciting!"

"I bet it is. I hope you enjoy every minute of it."

"How are you settling in at the flat? Any problems?"

"Everything's fine. Although I can't figure out how to turn on the little fireplace in the living room."

"Sorry, I knew there was something I forgot to explain before I left. It's old and a bit temperamental."

While Leah gave instructions, Carrie tinkered with the switches on the electric wood-burner style fireplace and let out a cheer when the light came on and the fake flames began flickering.

"Success!" Carrie said. "It's been cold here the past few days and although the central heating does the job, it will be nice to enjoy looking at a cosy fireplace when I'm in the sitting area."

"Coco and Praline will enjoy it too. They love lying on the rug and toasting themselves beside the fire when it's switched on."

Carrie laughed as a little furry head appeared from beneath the fleecy throw on the sofa. “Praline is already checking it out. Oh, and now Coco’s getting up, too.”

She smiled as the two cute cats leaped down from the sofa and got comfortable on the fireside rug. Both cats were female and petite in size and utterly adorable. Coco was a luscious dark chocolate colour while Praline was a milk chocolate shade with soft caramel-coloured swirls in her fur.

“I hope the cats aren’t too much trouble for you?” Leah said.

“Don’t be daft. They’re no trouble at all. They’re gorgeous. Although I wish they weren’t called Coco and Praline. Anytime I call their names, I can’t stop thinking about stuffing my face with chocolate.”

Leah laughed. “That reminds me. I bought boxes of chocolates to give to my other neighbours in the building for Christmas gifts and then forgot to drop them off before I left. As I won’t be back until the day after Boxing Day, would you mind knocking on their doors and passing along the presents from me?”

“Sure, I’d be glad to.”

“Brilliant. If you look inside the wardrobe in my bedroom, you’ll find a big Christmassy shopping bag. All my Christmas gifts are in there. My parents and sisters have said they’ll wait until I get home before we all swap gifts, so just ignore those presents. Have a poke around the labels and you should find one labelled for Melissa and Stuart, that’s the couple in the flat upstairs, and another for Joe, who’s my neighbour across the hallway.”

Carrie quickly found the neatly wrapped gifts in the wardrobe and carried them through to the kitchen table.

“It’s nice that you know your neighbours well enough to exchange Christmas gifts,” Carrie said. “I scarcely saw any of our neighbours on the street where I was living in Winchester.”

“Living in a converted house means we’re a little more likely to see one another when we’re coming and going.”

Leah’s flat occupied one half of the ground floor of a Victorian house, while a second flat occupied the other half. The flat was a small one-bedroom, with a snug open-plan kitchen and living space and the tiniest shower room Carrie had ever seen. Leah had explained that the upstairs flat was a larger two-bedroom, taking up the entire first floor. All three flats shared a common front door and ground floor hallway.

Carrie had already met Melissa and Stuart, who lived upstairs, crossing paths with them in the hallway a couple of times. But she hadn’t met the other neighbour yet.

“I still haven’t introduced myself to Joe across the hallway,” Carrie said. “Handing out his Christmas gift will be a good way to do it.”

“He works long hours at the veterinary practice he runs with his parents and sister. I don’t see a great deal of him either, but he’s friendly enough, if a bit on the quiet side.”

“Noted.”

“Have you been able to get on with your work okay at the flat? I hope the broadband hasn’t been acting up or causing any problems?”

“It’s been fine, and I’ve had no trouble working here. It’s very cosy sitting at the kitchen table with my laptop while the cats prowl around and keep me company.”

Carrie worked as a freelance graphic designer and photographer. Her work was varied, from producing marketing graphics for corporate clients to creating digital illustrations for publishers, advertisers, and branding consultants. While these jobs provided the bulk of her income, she also made a little extra money with her photography work and used her design skills to create her own unique products, from greetings cards to notebooks to mugs and coasters, all of which she sold online.

As a digital freelancer, Carrie relied on an internet connection to communicate with her clients, deliver

commissioned design products, and run her little online shop.

“And I know I said this before,” Leah said, “but you can come and go as you please at the flat. The cats are completely fine on their own during the day when I’m working in London, so please don’t feel you have to stay with them all the time.”

“Actually, I’ve been out and about exploring Hamblehurst a few times these past couple of days. You live in a really pretty town, Leah.”

“I know. I’m so lucky.”

“Oh, and I met some other neighbours on the street already. I bumped into a lady called Olive Nimmo when I was on my way to the library. She lives further down the street, and introduced me to another lady, Sally Shepherd.”

“Yes, I know Olive. She’s lovely. But I don’t know Sally. Foxglove Street is a long street, though, so there are plenty of people there I haven’t met.”

“Olive was telling me about the Christmas Lights extravaganza they have on the street every December and how most people put some decorations in their front garden to make things look festive. Do you do that?”

“Eek! That’s something else I forgot to tell you about while I was showing you the ropes before I left to catch my flight. The street looks amazing at Christmas time. You’re in a for a treat, Carrie! I bought some decorations last year to do my bit and—”

On the video call, Leah suddenly glanced away from the screen and started talking to someone else. After a moment, she looked back at Carrie.

“Carrie, I’m sorry, I have to go. I came into the office early so I’d have time to chat with you before work started, but a few of my colleagues have arrived now and they want to get a head start on our projects for the day.”

“Off you go and get stuck in.”

“I’ll get back to you about the Christmas lights, okay? It’s a bit complicated.”

“No problem. Have a great day!”

Carrie put on a ridiculous American accent as she delivered the catchphrase, making Leah laugh. After giving her a wave across the miles, Carrie disconnected the call.

Her friend was so lucky getting to spend Christmas in New York. Carrie could just imagine how pretty it must look there, with all the Christmas trees and lights and festive window displays.

Still, she thought the cute Hampshire town of Hamblehurst could probably give the Big Apple a run for its Christmas money. When she'd strolled down the high street the other day, she'd been amazed by the beautiful festive decorations strung up on the lampposts, and the shop owners had gone above and beyond to lure visitors into their stores with glorious decorations filling every window.

During the past three years that Carrie had lived in Winchester, she'd loved it when Christmas arrived and the cathedral Christmas market began. Nothing could look more wonderful than the ancient cathedral precinct glowing with festive lights and bustling with the continental Christmas market that traded there every December. When she'd packed up her belongings and left her rented house and housemates behind, one of her biggest regrets was that she would no longer be able to stroll through the beautiful cathedral grounds anytime she chose to, savouring the festive vibes.

However, after glimpsing Hamblehurst high street dressed up in its Christmas finery, Carrie knew she'd be quite happy here this December. Once she heard about the Christmas lights extravaganza organised by the residents of Foxglove Street each year, she'd been even more excited at the prospect of taking part.

It would be nice to feel part of something lovely this Christmas. Leaving behind the pretty house she'd shared in Winchester hadn't been easy, and doing it so close to Christmas made things harder still. But there was no way she could have continued living there, not with the evil landlord ramping up the rent so much.

Carrie was grateful to have a roof over her head and a lovely flat all to herself for once. She'd never lived alone before and was already wondering how on earth she'd cope with noisy, messy housemates again when she moved on in the new year. After just a few days by herself with only the adorable Coco and Praline in the flat for company, she already appreciated the benefits of solo living.

“Meow,” said Praline, peering at her from the fireside rug.

“Are you a mind reader?” Carrie laughed. “Did you know I was thinking about you and your gorgeous sister and how much I'm enjoying snuggling up here with the pair of you?”

“Meow,” said Praline, getting to her feet and dashing through to her bowl in the kitchen.

“Ah, I see. You just want fed, is that it?”

“Meow.”

Laughing, Carrie rose from the sofa and stepped into the snug kitchen area to sort out some snacks for the felines. While the cats crunched on their kibble, she glanced at the two wrapped gifts sitting on the kitchen table which Leah had asked her to deliver to her neighbours.

As she'd just finished a major design project for a client before chatting to Leah on the video call, Carrie decided now was as good a time as any to drop off the gifts. She could hear someone moving around upstairs in the flat above, either Melissa or Stuart, which meant she could off-load at least one of Leah's gifts.

And as for the neighbour who lived across the hallway, well, having lived here for four days already, it was long overdue for her to meet the other resident of the building and introduce herself.

“'Tis the season to be jolly, after all,” Carrie said to herself as she picked up the wrapped Christmas chocolates and headed out of the flat to play Santa Claus.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, she'd delivered the first box of wrapped chocolates to the upstairs neighbours and enjoyed a friendly chat with Melissa, who'd invited her in for coffee. Melissa and her partner, Stuart, were in their late thirties and both worked as lecturers at a local college, which meant they kept irregular hours depending on their teaching schedule. Carrie liked them both and was glad to know there were two long-term residents on-hand should she encounter any complications at the flat that couldn't be answered by consulting the comprehensive instruction manual Leah had prepared for her before leaving.

After dropping off Leah's gift with Melissa and accepting a gift for Leah to enjoy when she returned from New York, Carrie went back downstairs and knocked on the door across the hallway. Humming a Christmas carol to herself while she waited, Carrie wondered about the neighbour she'd yet to meet.

Leah had said his name was Joe and that he worked as a vet. When there was no answer to her knock, she realised he was probably at work. As a freelancer who usually worked from home, Carrie often had to remind herself that most people actually had to go to a place of work in order to earn a living. At two o'clock on a Monday afternoon, a man who worked at a vet was probably at his vet surgery.

She rapped on the door one more time just in case and was about to give up and try again later when the door flew open to reveal a frowning, bleary-eyed man on the other side.

"Yes?" he said. It was more of a bark, actually. He didn't look too happy and the Christmas carol Carrie had been humming died in her throat.

"Oh, I'm sorry if I disturbed you," she said. "I'm Carrie. I'm house-sitting for Leah across the hall and looking after her cats while she's away."

The man stared at her before running a hand through his hair, which was already standing up on end, bed-head style. Carrie took in the clothes he wore, a loose grey t-shirt and checked flannel trousers that together looked a lot like pyjamas.

“I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“Uh, sort of. Yeah, actually, you did.”

“Gosh, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you worked shifts, and...”

“How can I help?”

His irritated tone and deep frown made Carrie blush with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, again. I just wanted to give you this Christmas present.”

Carrie thrust the wrapped gift towards him. He stared at the item for a moment, blinking, before taking it from her. “Uh, thanks.”

“No problem.”

“Who did you say you were?”

“Oh, I’m Carrie. I’m house-sitting for Leah.”

“Right.”

“She’s in New York and forgot to give Christmas presents to the neighbours before she left, so here I am, being Mrs Santa Claus.”

Carrie laughed, although it sounded more like a gurgle. This was mortifying. She’d woken this guy up and quite clearly annoyed him, and she felt bad about that.

“It’s Joe, isn’t it?” Carrie asked and offered a smile.

He let out a long sigh and rubbed at his eyes. “Yeah.”

Well, so much for the introductions. Carrie was sorry she’d woken him up, but did he have to be so rude? Wasn’t he even going to say a proper hello?

Inside Joe’s flat, a phone rang. He turned from the door and grabbed his mobile from the coffee table behind him in the small living room and set down the Christmas gift Carrie had given him. When he glanced at the phone screen, his frown deepened, which was quite a feat considering how furrowed his brow already was.

“Sorry, I need to answer this,” Joe said.

“Sure, okay, well I’ll see you—”

Carrie didn’t get to finish the sentence because Joe swung the door closed in her face. Carrie blinked, not quite believing what had just happened.

“Oh! Well!”

Turning from Joe’s door and crossing the hallway, Carrie went back inside her flat. Leah had said that Joe was a bit on the quiet side, but she might have mentioned he was also horribly rude.

Yes, she was the one who’d woken him and got him up out of bed, but she’d had no idea he might be asleep. It was two o’clock in the afternoon! Leah hadn’t said anything about him working shifts. Or perhaps there was another reason why he slept through the middle of the day? Maybe he was some sort of party animal.

Carrie laughed at that idea. From what she’d learned about Neighbour Joe so far, he was much too grumpy to be a party animal.

Annoyed at herself for the unkind thought, Carrie blew out a breath. She’d caught him at a bad time, that’s all. Perhaps the next time they crossed paths, the next-door neighbour would be wide awake and in a better mood.

JOE WHITAKER HIT the button on his phone to answer the call.
“What’s the news?”

“The dogs are doing fine,” said his sister Yvette, on the other end of the line. “They’re both on the mend and looking good.”

“Did you check the surgical wound on the collie?”

“Yes, it’s clean.”

“And what about the little terrier? How are the cuts and scrapes looking?”

“They’re fine and there’s no sign of infection.”

“Did you administer the scheduled doses of antibiotics?”

“Yes, Joe, I did,” Yvette laughed. “I am actually a qualified vet, just the same as you are.”

“I know, it’s just...” Joe blew out a breath. “I didn’t think the collie would make it. It was touch and go, after the shock and trauma she sustained. I’d hate to get the dog through surgery only for her to slip away because I missed something serious while I was operating.”

“You didn’t miss anything. You did a great job last night, Joe. Dad says you didn’t leave until six o’clock this morning.”

“I wanted to stay to make sure the collie was okay. I didn’t like her vitals after we brought her out of surgery.”

“Well, you can relax. Her vitals look fine to me.”

Joe sank into the sofa and rubbed at his eyes, which felt grainy and sore. After being up half the night performing emergency surgery on the collie, and then staying until morning to monitor the animal's progress, he was wiped out. Although he'd slept since coming home, it had been fitful, his dreams punctuated by the upsetting scene he'd attended last night and the anguished pain of the animals he'd rushed to save.

Sunday evening usually found Joe at the veterinary surgery on Park Street, which he ran with his family. His father, Bernard Whitaker, had started the practice thirty years ago, alongside his mother, Laurie, a veterinary nurse turned practice manager. Joe's younger sister, Yvette, was one of eight vets who worked there. The family practice was one of the largest in the area.

Although the surgery was closed on Sundays, Joe liked to spend time there when the place was quiet, prepping for the week ahead and dealing with paperwork. Last night, he'd also been on call. Several local vet practices took turns to provide emergency cover for their pool of clients and to be available for other assorted issues that arose out of hours and which required the urgent services of a qualified vet.

A road traffic accident late last night resulted in a call from the police just as Joe had been turning out the lights and was about to head home. A three-car collision on a nearby dual carriageway had caused serious injuries for several occupants, and although thankfully there were no fatalities, it had also caused significant injuries for the two dogs being transported in one of the cars.

When Joe arrived on the scene just before ten o'clock at night, he found a tangled mess of damaged cars, ambulances with their blue lights flashing, and paramedics administering aid. The police officers in charge led him to the side of the road where a border collie lay bleeding and in a bad way, her quiet, still demeanour indicating shock and possibly more serious internal injuries. Another officer was clutching a small Yorkshire terrier who was badly cut and yelping.

He'd come prepared for the worst. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had to rush to put a dog to sleep following a road traffic accident because its injuries were too severe and it was the only option to end the suffering. Those were always the worst cases to deal with, the ones where an animal's life was ended so cruelly and with the creature's last moments filled with pain and terror.

After assessing the dogs, Joe knew the little Yorkshire terrier had sustained only minor injuries and would survive, assuming it didn't go into shock following the trauma of the car accident. He wasn't sure about the collie. There was a bad leg break, one that wouldn't be easy to repair, and nasty lacerations along the animal's back sustained during the car accident.

As he'd crouched by the roadside to examine the collie, the dog had swung her terrified gaze towards him as she lay panting on the ground, and Joe thought it was almost as if the animal was pleading with him to save her and telling him she trusted him to make it all better.

I've got you, girl, he'd whispered under his breath. *I've got you.*

The collie's eyes had stayed on his as he ran his hand over her quivering body. Collies were known as one of the smartest of all dogs, for good reason. They understood so much just by looking into a person's eyes.

The easy option would be to put the dog to sleep. The collie seemed to know this was what he was thinking, her dark eyes imploring.

Surgery was risky. More than risky, considering the serious nature of the leg break and the shock the animal had sustained. As his specialism was orthopaedic surgery, Joe had the skills to perform the procedure. The question was whether the dog would make it through, and whether he'd discover more serious internal injuries once he got started.

But as far as Joe was concerned, there was always hope.

When the dogs' owner, an older man who was being strapped to a stretcher before being loaded into the back of an ambulance, pleaded with Joe to do whatever he could to save his pets, Joe knew the decision was already made.

With help from the other emergency responders, Joe stabilised the collie and carefully loaded her into the back of his vehicle. Two police officers were released from the scene to accompany Joe back to the surgery, one driving the veterinary surgery's van while Joe comforted and monitored the collie, and the other officer sticking close to the little terrier who'd been secured inside a cage for transport.

By the time he made it back to the surgery, the rest of the on call emergency team had arrived to assist, some from the Whitaker practice, some from other neighbouring surgeries who'd heard about the accident and turned up to lend a hand. While another vet dealt with the little terrier and tended to its many cuts and scrapes, Joe had rushed into surgery with the grievously injured collie.

The procedure to set the badly broken leg took over two hours. Cleaning and stitching the nasty wounds on the poor creature's back took another hour. The collie's heart rate gave them all cause for concern during the entire process, and there was one moment when Joe thought the dog might not make it through.

But eventually, the surgery was over and the dog was taken to a warm cosy kennel to sleep off the anaesthesia. Joe waited and watched, hoping the dog would pull through.

When the animal finally opened its eyes at just after five o'clock in the morning, Joe had let out a long sigh of relief. Although the dog had done little more than blink before lapping at some water and going back to sleep, it was a good sign.

Joe's father, Bernard, had arrived at the practice not long after and sent him home to sleep, promising that he'd take good care of the injured collie and her terrier friend and make sure Yvette called him later with an update. Not trusting himself to drive after the long night he'd had, especially

following the awful scene he'd witnessed at the site of the road traffic accident, Joe had walked home to his flat on Foxglove Street, and all but collapsed into bed with exhaustion.

"I spoke to the dogs' owner earlier," his sister Yvette now said on the phone. "His name is Roger Irving and he's being treated in hospital for assorted injuries sustained during the accident and won't be discharged for several days. He's relieved his pets are doing well and grateful you looked after them."

"What are their names?" Joe asked, realising he'd been thinking of the two dogs as 'the collie' and 'the terrier' ever since he'd arrived at the accident scene.

"The collie is called Peggy, and the terrier is Lulu."

Joe smiled at the sweet names.

"Mr Irving doesn't have family nearby, so we'll have to hang on to both dogs until he gets out of the hospital."

"Peggy won't be well enough to go home for a few days at least, anyway. As for the terrier, Lulu, her wounds were painful but superficial. I don't mind looking after her until the owner is discharged."

"Aw, you're a good man, Joe. I'd offer to take the little sprite home myself, but you know how the boys are. The dog needs to rest, not be chased around the house by two excited six-year-olds."

Joe laughed, imagining his twin nephews' delight at the idea of a dog to care for. The two boys were adorable, even if they were a handful.

"Anyway, I just wanted to call up and let you know how things are going with the dogs," Yvette said. "You did a good thing last night, Joe. Not everyone would've gone to the trouble of trying to save that poor collie, especially if it meant all-night surgery."

"It could've gone either way."

"Not once you got involved. You're the most committed and hard-working vet I know."

Joe was about to laugh, but it turned into a yawn instead.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” Yvette said.

“No, someone else did that.”

“What do you mean?”

Joe’s gaze turned to the wrapped Christmas gift he’d set down on the coffee table when he’d picked up his phone to answer the call from Yvette.

“A neighbour was at the door to give me a Christmas present.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

Joe supposed it was nice, even if he had been a bit baffled while answering the door. The woman who’d shoved the gift towards him was a complete stranger. Had she said something about staying with Leah, his neighbour across the hall? He couldn’t even remember what she’d said her name was. Caroline? Cassie?

Roused from his fitful sleep by the loud knocking at his door, he’d been barely awake when he’d talked to her. He realised he’d probably seemed a little grumpy.

“It’s a bit early to be handing out Christmas presents,” Joe complained to Yvette, annoyed with himself for his grumpiness more than he was annoyed with the mysterious visitor who’d woken him up. “It’s only the first week in December.”

“Perhaps your neighbour just likes to be organised?” Yvette said. “Which reminds me, are you coming to our veterinary practice Christmas night out next weekend? I need to confirm the numbers with the hotel restaurant.”

Joe sighed and rubbed at his sore eyes. “No, I think I’ll give it a miss.”

Now it was Yvette’s turn to sigh. “Come on, Joe. It’ll be a laugh. I can even whip up a plus-one for you to make the night extra fun and festive.”

“No, thanks.”

It was hard to miss Yvette's pitying tone, even if she was trying to hide it. The longer he'd been single, the more people seemed to think they ought to pair him off with someone once Christmas arrived. As Joe hadn't been on a date in over two years and hadn't been in anything resembling a relationship for even longer than that, it stood to reason that his loved ones would want to try to make him happy.

But their well-meaning meddling and needling only made him feel embarrassed. He'd much rather skip Christmas altogether. Sure, he'd turn up for the Christmas Day dinner at his parents' house and swap gifts with his family; he wasn't a complete Grinch, after all, and he feared his mother's wrath too much to refuse to be there for the traditional Whitaker Christmas feast. But as far as all the other Christmas parties and get-togethers and endless festive occasions were concerned, he'd gladly do without them, thanks very much.

"You don't want to enjoy spending time with the other vets and nurses from our practice and celebrating Christmas together?" Yvette asked, incredulous.

"Not really," Joe said, sounding gruffer than he'd intended. "Look, I'll do the on call duty on the night you're all out having your Christmas get-together. Someone has to do it. I'm happy for it to be me."

Yvette sighed down the line, her patience gone. "Whatever."

They chatted for another few minutes about what was going on over at the vet's practice before hanging up. Joe knew Yvette well enough to understand he'd annoyed her. She wanted him to take part, to get involved, to be social. Most of the time, he was happy to do those things. But at Christmas time, it felt harder, somehow.

Seeing all the happy couples gazing into one another's eyes as they shared kisses beneath the mistletoe and seeing families celebrating with their little ones and getting excited about the arrival of Santa Claus... it all just reminded him that he was completely alone. At thirty-seven years-old, he'd thought he'd be happily married by now with kids of his own.

But a wife and children seemed so far out of reach that it made his heart ache.

And it hurt even more at Christmas time. Every year, it seemed to get worse.

So, no, he didn't want to go along to the veterinary practice's Christmas night out and watch all the other staff and their spouses getting cosy while fending off their attempts to pair him off with random women.

And, no, he didn't want to turn up for carol concerts or tree lighting or any of that stuff, either. He hated being the single guy who everyone felt sorry for. It was easier just to pretend Christmas wasn't happening at all.

Joe glared at the wrapped Christmas gift sitting on his coffee table. He supposed he'd have to make a trip to the shops soon and buy gifts of his own to give out. Or perhaps he could just order a bunch of stuff online and have it delivered to his flat and be done with it.

Well, once he'd wrapped everything up in Christmas paper, of course. That always took forever, considering his cack-handed efforts with the sticky tape.

Joe pushed thoughts of Christmas shopping out of his head. December was barely under way and there was plenty of time left. If it hadn't been for the annoying stranger who claimed to be staying across the hall and who'd come knocking at his door and thrusting Christmas presents at him, he wouldn't even be thinking about Christmas at all.

Turning for the shower, Joe made a belated start on his day. He wanted to get over to the surgery and check on the dogs he'd cared for last night. Although he trusted what Yvette had told him about their condition, he wouldn't feel right until he'd seen them for himself.

After the trauma the poor dogs had endured last night in the road accident, he knew the animals would need all the care and comfort they could get.

CARRIE WALKED ALONG FOXGLOVE STREET, breathing in the crisp fresh air and enjoying the feel of the wintry late afternoon sunshine on her face. The sky was a dazzling cloudless blue, and after finishing her work for the day, she was eager to get outside and stretch her legs.

Hamblehurst was such a pretty town and Foxglove Street was a gorgeous road to walk along while soaking up the midwinter sights. She was sorry she hadn't visited her friend Leah here before. Leah had moved to Hamblehurst over a year ago, but with both their lives so busy, they'd usually organised their occasional get-togethers around work commitments in London when they were both in the city at the same time.

After only a few days living here, Carrie understood what had drawn Leah to Hamblehurst. Although she remembered Leah remarking on how the expense of the London housing market had pushed her far out into the rural depths of Hampshire, Carrie guessed the reason Leah remained here was because it was such a lovely place to live.

The houses along Foxglove Street were a mix of detached and semi-detached properties, sprinkled with some short terrace blocks in between, and a few small apartment buildings dotted here and there. Some houses were large Victorian villas, others tiny little cottages. Front gardens were well-tended and neat, and many sported pretty winter planting arrangements in pots beside the front doorsteps. As the long, winding street ran between Hamblehurst high street at one end and Riverside

Road at the other, access to local shops was easy and nearby Peartree Park was only minutes in the opposite direction.

As Carrie walked along the street, breathing in the frosty air, she couldn't stop grinning at how lucky she was to be staying here for the entire month of December. Passing a house on her left, she saw her new Foxglove Street neighbour, Olive Nimmo, in the front garden.

"Hello, Olive!" Carrie called out.

The older lady looked up from the plastic storage box sitting on her front path and in which she was digging around. "Hello, Carrie. Well, isn't it nice to see a lovely smiling face passing by my front gate?"

Carrie grinned. "It's such a gorgeous wintry afternoon, and I'm enjoying getting out for a walk in the fresh air."

"Good for you. I just got back from a nice walk to the park with Elsa and must say I'm feeling refreshed."

A little terrier dog came hurtling out of Olive's front door, chomping on a squeaky chew toy. When the dog saw Carrie on the other side of the front gate, it ran towards her and dropped the toy on the path for her to throw.

Carrie had met Elsa a few days ago when she'd first bumped into Olive not long after arriving on the street. Elsa belonged to Olive's next-door neighbour, and Olive had explained that she walked the dog while her neighbour, Angela, was at work during the day. It was obvious that Olive and Elsa were fond of one another.

"Leave Carrie alone, you rascal," Olive told the dog, who was nudging the squeaky toy with its nose and glancing up at Carrie hopefully. "She doesn't want to touch your slobbery toy."

Laughing, Carrie stepped through the gate and picked up the toy before tossing it across the small front lawn. "I'm happy to play for a minute. Those puppy dog eyes are irresistible."

"How are those two cats you're looking after for your friend?"

“Oh, they’re fine and also irresistible. I’ve already had to buy more cat snacks for them because every time they purr and give me that look, I can’t help giving them a treat. I’m a soft touch when it comes to animals.” Carrie glanced at the plastic storage box Olive was rummaging through. “What are you up to?”

“I’m sorting out my fairy lights for the front garden.” Olive pulled a length of twinkle lights from the box and frowned at the knotty bundle of wires. “I must not have tidied these away as carefully as I thought I had last time I put them up. Look at this knot!”

“Let me help.”

Carrie took the bundle of lights from Olive and got to work disentangling the wires.

“I didn’t put any lights up last year,” Olive said as she pulled a small collection of decorative snowmen from the storage box and examined the electrical wires wrapped around them. “Last winter was a bit of a nasty one for me, and between the terrible weather we had and a few friends being ill and some other things too, I never quite got into the Christmas spirit. I plan to make up for it this year.”

“These lights will do the trick, I’m sure.” Carrie unpicked the knotty wires and held up the twinkle lights in triumph. “Where do you want to hang these?”

“Around the branches of that little shrub outside my front window, and then I’ll pop these little twinkle snowmen beside the front door.”

Together, they strung the fairy lights around the shrub in the border and arranged the snowmen in place. While Carrie helped Olive deal with the task, she also did her duty and tossed Elsa’s squeaky toy whenever the dog dropped it at her feet. Once the lights were plugged into the external electrical socket, Olive switched them on.

“Oh, that looks lovely, Olive!” Carrie said, clapping her hands together at the festive scene. The garden shrub twinkled with multi-coloured fairy lights and the little snowmen glowed

white beside the steps, their smiling plastic faces lit up with merry Christmas joy.

“Good, all the lights are working just fine.” Olive switched the lights back off. “Once my neighbour’s little daughter, Lindsey, gets home from school later, we’ll do an official Christmas lights switch-on together. Her mum, Angela, is planning to put up her own Christmas lights this evening after work, and I promised Lindsey she could flip the switches to light the place up and then we’d have hot chocolate together.”

“That sounds like fun.”

Olive gestured along the street. “Most of the neighbours are in the process of putting up their own lights and decorations this week, too. The street is starting to look very festive. Have you been able to put up any Christmas lights at the flat where you’re staying?”

“Not yet, but I’m chatting to Leah later today and hopefully she can tell me where she keeps her decorations.”

When Carrie had first met Olive, she’d explained how she was house-sitting for Leah for a few weeks. They’d been walking along Foxglove Street at the time, Carrie on her way to visit the local library to check out a few books to enjoy during the long winter evenings she’d be staying in Hamblehurst. When they’d passed another neighbour putting up lights around his front garden fence, Olive had told Carrie about the Foxglove Street Christmas Lights extravaganza, explaining how most people who were fit and able made the effort to add some festive cheer to their front garden with a few lights or decorations.

Just a few days later, Carrie could see just how many residents participated in the neighbourhood festivities, and she was keen to do her bit too, even although she was only staying temporarily.

“Well, if you can’t find your friend’s Christmas decorations and need any spare twinkle lights, just let me know,” Olive said, pointing to the storage box at her feet. “There are a few extra bits and pieces in here that I’d be glad to let you borrow.”

“You aren’t putting these up too?”

“I’m sure Lindsey will convince me to add a few more twinkle lights to the front garden later, and I’ll be happy to indulge her, but there are only so many electrical sockets available and the last thing I want is to plug in too many things and accidentally burn my house to the ground.”

Carrie laughed. “I’m sure that won’t happen.”

Just then, Carrie’s phone rang in her pocket and when she checked the screen, she saw it was Leah calling from New York.

“I’d better answer this,” Carrie said. “It’s Leah and I don’t want to forget to ask her about where she stashes her Christmas decorations.”

“I’ll see you later, dear.”

Olive waved her off, and before she slipped out the garden gate, Carrie indulged scruffy little Elsa by tossing her squeaky toy across the front lawn one last time. Laughing as the excitable dog dashed off in pursuit, Carrie tapped the button on the phone to speak to Leah and turned towards her flat further along the street.

“You sound out of breath,” Leah said after they’d exchanged hellos.

“I’m walking back to your flat,” Carrie replied. “I was chatting with Olive, your neighbour down the street, and helping her put up some Christmas lights in her front garden. You’ll have to tell me where you keep your Christmas decorations so I can do my bit and make the street look festive.”

“I have a box of Christmas things stored in the outbuilding at the bottom of the garden. The flat’s too small for things like that, so the outbuilding comes in handy. But it’s a bit of a mess in there, which is why I wanted to talk you through how to find my stuff on the shelves.”

By the time Carrie returned to the flat, she was caught up on Leah’s New York news and had updated her on Coco and Praline’s antics since they’d last chatted. After locating the

outbuilding key on the wall hook in the kitchen, Carrie went out the back door that led from the small kitchen area to the rear gardens of the shared property. The two cats ambled out behind her, yawning from their naps and sniffing the late afternoon air, no doubt deciding whether it was too cold to venture further than the back door.

The rear garden of the property was small, no more than a stretch of lawn edged with shrubs and a paved path leading to the bins lined up along the side fence. At the back of the garden stood the brick outbuilding next to the wall that separated the garden from the property on the other side. Carrie twisted the key in the lock and gave the door a hard shove to open it, while cradling the phone at her shoulder while she worked.

“Okay, I’m inside the outhouse,” Carrie told Leah, feeling along the wall for a light switch. “It’s a bit creepy in here.”

“I know. I almost never go in there unless I absolutely have to. It gives me the willies.”

Carrie found the switch at last and flicked on the lights to reveal a cobwebby space and an array of shelves across both sides of the outhouse. The shelves were numbered to show which ones belonged to which flat. Leah guided her to the box in which she stored her Christmas decorations and Carrie lifted the plastic crate from the shelf.

“Because it’s a small flat, I don’t have lots of Christmas decorations,” Leah explained. “But you’ll find a small and very naff artificial Christmas tree inside the box, and some cheap and cheerful decorations to put on it. There are also a couple of sets of fairy lights. The longest of the two sets was the one I used last year to do my festive bit outside in the garden.”

“Brilliant.” Carrie peered through the plastic lid at the stored decorations. “I’m looking forward to this.”

“I also bought a funny little illuminated Santa Claus last year, but he stopped working a week before Christmas. Must’ve had dodgy electrics. I felt bad having to throw him away, even although he didn’t cost much.”

“I’m sure the twinkle lights will do the trick.”

“There’s an electrical socket near the front door on my side of the building, which you can use to plug in the lights.”

“Good. It sounds like I’m all sorted.”

On the other end of the line, Carrie heard Leah chatting to someone else for a moment.

“I’ll have to go, Carrie,” Leah said. “I’m meeting one of the senior managers for coffee and as it’s a great chance to pick her brains, I don’t want to be late.”

“I hope it goes well. Good luck! Speak to you later.”

They hung up, and Carrie hoisted the plastic storage box into her arms, then used her elbow to flick off the overhead light. She was about to step outside when someone suddenly appeared in the doorway right in front of her, blocking out the dim afternoon light and giving her the fright of her life.

“Eek!” Carrie screeched as she reared backwards from the hulking figure in the doorway. Her mind blank with fright, she threw the plastic crate of Christmas decorations towards the towering man looming over her.

“What the...? *Oooft!*”

The hulking figure stumbled as the plastic crate connected with his chest and propelled him backwards to the ground. With the pale afternoon light beyond the outbuilding once more slanting through the door, Carrie gasped at the sight of the man sprawled on the garden path.

A man she recognised immediately as her neighbour across the hallway, Joe.

“Oh, my goodness! Are you okay?” Carrie rushed outside and crouched down to where Joe was pushing himself up on his elbows and blinking in stunned surprise.

“What did you do that for?” he barked, rubbing at his chest and glaring between Carrie and the plastic crate now upended beside the outhouse door.

“You gave me a fright! You just appeared in the doorway out of nowhere!”

“You could’ve knocked me out! A few inches higher and that box would’ve taken my head off!”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Bloody hell.”

Joe’s outraged expression and furious tone should’ve chastened her, but his astonished disbelief combined with the strangled noise he’d made when she’d clocked him with the plastic crate caused a bubble of laughter to well up inside and escape before she could stop it.

Carrie slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Do you find this funny?” Joe snapped.

“No, not at all,” she said, making a poor attempt to hide her laughter. “I’m truly very sorry. But if you hadn’t taken me by surprise and scared me half to death, I wouldn’t have thrown the crate at you.”

“Oh, well, forgive me for coming and going as I please *in the place where I live*. Shall I make a formal appointment with you the next time I need to fetch something from the outbuilding?”

Carrie shook her head and got up from the crouched position she’d been in. She held out her hand to Joe. “Can I help you up?”

“No, thanks,” he said, pushing himself to his feet.

“I really am sorry. Did I hurt you very badly?”

Joe rubbed at his chest and gave her a stony look. “I’ll live.” He gestured to the outbuilding. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going in there now.”

She couldn’t work out from his tone whether he was still furious or if he was now trying to be funny. It wasn’t easy to read his expression, either. Was that a glint of humour in his eyes or was it still seething outrage?

Before she could decide between the two, Joe disappeared into the outbuilding. By the time he reappeared with a small cardboard box in his hands, Carrie had picked up the plastic crate she'd thrown at him.

“Are you finished in here?” he asked her.

“Yes, I'll lock up.”

“I'll do it.”

Joe turned the key and checked the handle was secure.

“Sorry, again,” Carrie said.

He nodded. “It's fine.”

“Listen—”

Before she could say anything else, Joe's phone rang, and he pulled it from his pocket and checked the screen, then answered the call.

As he talked into the phone, he started walking towards the back door of his flat, giving Carrie a curt nod of goodbye as he departed. Moments later, he disappeared inside his flat, the back door locking behind him.

He was an odd guy, Carrie thought to herself as she crossed the garden towards her own flat. While attacking a person with a heavy plastic crate wasn't exactly the best way to make new friends, he could've at least tried to see the funny side of it.

Carrie reminded herself that she'd only met Neighbour Joe twice and had managed to make a nuisance of herself on both occasions. First, she'd knocked on his door and got him out of bed, and even although it had been the middle of the day, she'd still inconvenienced him. Now, on their second meeting, she'd assaulted him with a box of Christmas decorations.

No wonder he'd loped off with barely a nod goodbye.

As Carrie took the plastic crate into the flat, she decided she ought to make an effort to apologise properly to her neighbour. She'd be staying here for the next four weeks, after all, and although things hadn't got off to the best start, there

was still time to put things right. The last thing she wanted was any awkwardness on account of a few silly missteps on her part.

It was Christmas, the season of goodwill, and that meant she ought to do something to make Neighbour Joe crack a smile instead of giving him reasons to grimace.

LULU, the little terrier who'd been involved in the Sunday night car crash, stood whimpering beside Peggy the collie, who lay inside the special convalescence kennel at the Whitaker veterinary practice. Peggy's broken leg was encased in a cast and protective bandage while she recuperated, and Lulu sniffed at the bandages, looking unhappy. Joe could see how bonded the two dogs were to one another.

"You did the right thing letting Lulu stay here with Peggy for the first few nights after the accident," Yvette told him as they peered at the two dogs. "But I think Lulu will be better in a home environment now while she recovers from her injuries."

"I agree, but I hate having to separate them," Joe said.

"It's for the best. And it's only for a few more days until their owner is discharged from hospital."

Joe would've already taken Lulu the terrier home to his flat before now, but the poor little dog had flipped out any time they tried to remove her from Peggy's side. The trauma of the car crash had left its mark on both creatures and the continued separation from their owner was no doubt causing anxiety, too.

But remaining in the vet's surgery was no longer helping Lulu, and the noise and constant comings and goings were interrupting the terrier's rest and recovery. It would help the dog to be in a quieter home environment, and when Joe wasn't working at the surgery, he was happy to have Lulu stay at

home with him. Still, he hated to separate the little dog from her canine friend, even if it was for the best.

“Come on, little one,” Joe said, coaxing the terrier with a gravy bone. “You’re coming home with me tonight, and I’ll bring you back tomorrow to see Peggy.”

Lulu glanced his way, as if considering his suggestion, before turning back to the sleepy collie who blinked slowly. Peggy nuzzled Lulu on the side, as if pushing her towards the open door of the recuperation kennel, and Lulu took a reluctant step towards Joe. A moment later, the terrier accepted the gravy bone he was holding out.

“They understand every word we say,” Yvette said, her voice soft. “Anyone who says differently doesn’t know what they’re talking about.”

Joe clipped a lead into Lulu’s collar, and after running a hand over Peggy’s head to say goodbye, he led the terrier out of the recuperation area while Yvette closed Peggy’s kennel door. The collie laid her head down on her paws and closed her eyes. The accident and the surgery that followed had left the old girl exhausted.

“Do you need any dog supplies to take home with you?” Yvette asked as they walked through to the surgery reception area, which was quiet now as the practice had closed half an hour ago.

“I’ve already loaded a bag of kibble into the car,” Joe replied.

“What about food and water bowls?”

“I had a spare set in storage at the flat and I looked them out before I came here.”

Remembering the incident at the outbuilding, Joe rubbed at his chest where he’d been struck by the plastic box thrown by his lunatic neighbour. He still couldn’t remember her name, or what she was doing in Leah’s flat. Nor could he remember where Leah was, for that matter. He had some vague recollection of Leah mentioning a work trip when they’d passed one another in the hallway a few weeks ago...

“Are you okay?” Yvette asked. “What’s with the face? You look like you’re trying to do complicated long division in your head.”

“What?”

Yvette rolled her eyes. “Exactly. You’ve got a baffled look on your face.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. And why are you rubbing at your chest? You’re not having a heart attack, are you?”

Joe sighed. “No, Yvette, I’m not having a heart attack.”

“Good, because you promised to babysit the boys on Thursday evening while Oliver and I go Christmas shopping on behalf of Santa Claus, which means you’ll need all your wits about you. I can’t leave my children with someone who wanders around looking baffled while clutching at his chest.”

“I’m fine,” Joe laughed.

He’d forgotten he’d offered to babysit his nephews, Seth and Jack, while Yvette took care of Christmas shopping errands. It would be fun looking after the boys for a few hours. The twins were a handful, but Joe could manage them in short bursts. Hopefully, Lulu would have gone home with her owner by then, so she’d avoid being manhandled by the enthusiastic pair of kids.

“By the way, there’s still time to change your mind about our vet’s night out next weekend,” Yvette said as they crossed the reception area. “Are you sure you don’t want to come along for some dinner and drinks?”

“Thanks, but I’ll give it a miss.”

“Your loss.”

“Let’s see if you’re still saying that when you wake up on Sunday morning with a screaming hangover.”

“A screaming hangover? As the mother of two six-year-old twins, that’s a luxury I can no longer afford.”

Laughing, Joe left the surgery, waving as Yvette locked the main door behind him. The little terrier, Lulu, trotted along at his side, panting and looking anxious. After giving her a minute to sniff the grass beside the car park and enjoy a toilet break, he loaded her into the back of his car. As he frequently used his vehicle to transport animals around, given his line of work, it was already set up with a protective grill and a fresh dog bed in the boot space.

The moment he lifted Lulu into the boot, she whimpered and tried to get back out again. After the trauma of the car crash, it would take time for the poor animal to recover from what had happened and feel comfortable travelling again.

Joe gave the dog time to settle before closing the boot door. He waited another few moments with the engine running to make sure the dog wasn't about to flip out in panic. By the time he pulled out of the car park, Lulu was whimpering but looking out of the window with interest as they slowly drove down the road.

It was progress. Joe knew the physical injuries the two dogs had suffered weren't all they'd have to recover from over the coming weeks and months. If he could help the little terrier begin the process of getting comfortable with car travel again following the accident, then he was glad to do it.

On Foxglove Street, he pulled onto the shared driveway outside his flat and got out of the car. When he opened the boot, Lulu almost sprang into his arms in her eagerness to exit the vehicle.

"You shouldn't be jumping around like that," he told the little dog as he scooped her into his arms. "Your cuts and scrapes are still healing, and you don't want to rip open any of those stitches, believe me."

The dog licked his face and whimpered. Joe set her on the ground and grabbed the bag of kibble from the back seat before locking the car and turning for the main entrance to the flats.

"How about we have some dinner, Lulu. How does that sound?"

The little dog glanced his way and let out another whimper.

“Don’t worry. I’m not cooking.”

Another whimper. Joe laughed as he unlocked the door and led the dog into his flat.

* * *

From the front bay window in the lounge area of her flat, Carrie looked out in amazement at the sight of Neighbour Joe cuddling the cute little dog he’d brought home in his car. He seemed to be talking to the animal, too, and *laughing*, which was even more amazing.

Considering she’d got nothing out of him beyond a few surly grunts and complaints since they’d first met, it was reassuring to know he wasn’t a complete Mr Miserable.

Yes, okay, he’d had good reason to be grumpy, considering how, when they’d met earlier in the afternoon, she’d flung a heavy plastic crate at him and almost knocked him out. But still, the transformation between then and now was astonishing.

Remembering what Leah had said about Joe being a vet, she realised he must enjoy working with animals a great deal. He obviously had an affinity with them, judging by the way he handled the terrier. Carrie noted the bandages on two of the animal’s legs, and how carefully Joe set the creature on the ground before leading the dog into the building, taking his time on the steps so as not to rush the tiny mite.

The smile that lit up Joe’s face when the dog reached the top step and let out a little bark made Carrie smile, too. He looked good when he smiled, as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders. He ought to smile more often.

Smiling suited him far more than being Mr Miserable did.

As Joe disappeared from sight, Carrie finished untangling a length of twinkle lights she’d removed from Leah’s storage box. She plugged the lights into the socket to make sure they

were working and grinned as they all lit up. The longer of the two sets was destined for the garden area outside the flat window and with the wires now straightened out, she could get out there and get stuck into some festive decorating.

Over in the kitchen, the oven timer pinged. Carrie laid aside the twinkle lights and hurried to the oven. Removing the tray of chocolate chip cookies she'd baked and setting it on a trivet to cool, she breathed in the sweet sugary scent. The aroma had been swirling around the small flat ever since she'd whipped up the cookie batter and popped the tray into the oven, but with the treats now baked, the smell was even more delicious.

She was no patisserie chef, but Carrie enjoyed indulging in a spot of baking from time to time, and cookies were one of her favourite things to prepare. At Christmas time, she especially loved baking batches of her favourite flavours to hand out as extra gifts. Her cranberry and orange cookies were particularly popular amongst her old housemates back in Winchester, but Carrie's favourite was chocolate chip. At Christmas, she added a few extra drops of vanilla extract and a sprinkling of cinnamon and ginger spice to make them more festive.

Once the batch of cookies cooled down, she'd take them over to Neighbour Joe to apologise for throwing that heavy plastic box at him earlier. She wanted to make amends and her Christmas chocolate chip cookies would surely help do just that.

Ten minutes later, the cookies were ready for delivery, cool enough to shift onto a plate but still warm enough to be irresistible. After arranging them on a plate, she crossed the hallway and knocked on Joe's door.

She heard the dog bark followed by the sound of scurrying paws. A moment later, the door opened a crack and Joe peered out.

"Oh, hello," he said, a wary look crossing his face when he saw it was Carrie who'd knocked on his door.

“Hi, Joe,” Carrie said, her tone cheerful. “I wanted to apologise for throwing that box at your earlier. I baked some cookies for you.”

Joe’s gaze flicked to the plate in her hands but he didn’t open the door any further.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, still eyeing the cookies.

“I wanted to. I feel like I’ve got off on the wrong foot with my neighbour across the hall since I arrived here, and I’d like to put things right.” She offered him a smile and held out the cookies. “So, here you go.”

“Um, well, thanks. That’s nice of you.”

Joe opened the door a little further to accept the plate and the little dog Carrie had seen him with earlier came barrelling into the hallway, yapping and making a beeline for the main exit.

“Lulu! Come back here!”

Joe chased the dog down the hallway and steered the animal back towards his flat. The main door to the building was closed, but Carrie could see Joe’s alarm at the dog’s attempted escape.

“Lulu!” Carrie parroted as the dog ran towards her. “This way!”

As the dog closed in, its little claws scraping on the tiled floor, Carrie shifted to one side to corral the animal back into Joe’s flat. Because she was still holding the plate of cookies, there wasn’t much else she could do to help except stick her leg out to prevent Lulu rushing towards the stairs on the other side of the hallway.

However, despite the bandages on the dog’s legs and the clear evidence of many cuts and scrapes Carrie could now see, Lulu was a nimble little critter. Carrie attempted to block the dog at one side while Joe brought up the rear, but Lulu changed direction at the last moment and instead of zigging into Joe’s flat, it zagged into Carrie’s.

“Yap! Yap! Yap!” Lulu barked as the little terrier raced into the flat.

Carrie watched the scene unfold in horrified slow motion as Lulu charged into the living area where Coco and Praline were curled up on the rug at the fireplace. The two cats sprang to their feet and arched their backs, hissing at the unexpected canine intruder.

Lulu barked and lunged towards the cats.

Coco and Praline leapt up onto the sofa before springing to the kitchen table and towards the counter.

“Yap! Yap! Yap!”

“Hiss! Meow! Hiss!”

“Dear God!”

Carrie raced inside the flat at the same as Joe did, and the two of them collided as they squeezed through the door together. Joe’s elbow knocked the plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies out of Carrie’s hands and up into the air.

The plate landed with a crash on the laminate floor and broke into pieces, spilling cookies in all directions.

Lulu, who was in the kitchen area barking at the cats who were out of reach and hissing up on the counter, turned at the clattering noise and scurried over to see what was going on. At the sight of the spilled cookies on the floor, the dog grabbed one up and started chomping on it.

“Are those chocolate chips?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Carrie replied.

“Dogs can’t eat chocolate! It’s poisonous to them!”

“Oh no!”

They both leaned down at the same time to grab the cookies before the dog could eat any more, and Carrie’s head smacked against Joe’s with a sickening crack.

“Ouch!”

“Jeez!”

Carrie reeled back, blinking as stars burst in her field of vision. Joe winced and shook his head then rallied as he grabbed up the spilled cookies and, in a move Carrie could scarcely credit, managed to prise Lulu’s mouth open and scoop out the cookie she’d nabbed before the dog could swallow any more of it.

Lulu let out a grumble of protest before snaffling at the floor for stray cookie crumbs.

Dazed and with her head spinning, Carrie took a moment to get her bearings and suck in a deep breath. Everything had happened so quickly. It had only been a few seconds since Lulu had dashed into the flat and towards the cats, causing mayhem, but the terrified thoughts that rushed through Carrie’s mind in an instant as she’d imagined the worst-case scenario had left her shaken.

The two gorgeous cats injured, or worse. Bloodshed and flying fur. The prospect of having to explain to Leah how she’d allowed her precious felines to be murdered by a marauding dog.

Carrie brought a shaking hand to her temple and felt a bump already rising at the spot where Joe’s head had connected with hers.

“Are you okay?”

Carrie blinked at Joe, who was standing in front of her and looking concerned, his hands filled with cookies and pieces of broken plate.

“I’m okay,” she replied and rubbed at her head. “Just a little winded, that’s all.”

“Yap! Yap!”

With the spilled cookies whipped up off the floor, Lulu’s attention returned to the cats perched on the kitchen counter. As the animals traded woofs and hisses, Joe marched across to the kitchen table where he dumped the cookies and broken plate before scooping Lulu up into his arms.

“That’s enough trouble from you, Lulu,” he said as the dog scrambled in his arms in an attempt to get closer to the cats.

“Yap! Yap!”

“I’m sorry about the cookies landing on the floor,” Joe said, looking unhappily at the mess he’d dropped on to the table. “And I’m sorry about the broken plate, too. I’ll replace it.”

“Don’t worry about it. It was an accident and there’s no need to replace the plate.”

Carrie knew Leah’s kitchenware was similar to her own—cheap and cheerful. Her own kitchen things were currently boxed up in a small storage unit until she found her next place to live, and she could always swap the broken plain white plate for a similar one from her own belongings if need be.

“Well, anyway, sorry about all this mayhem,” Joe said and offered an awkward smile. “Lulu is very sorry she upset the cats.”

Carrie glanced at the little dog, who looked more excited at the sight of the cats than bloodthirsty. Considering how cute the canine was, it was hard to believe now that she’d had any ill intent.

“I’m sure she just wanted to make new friends,” Carrie said. “Is the dog okay? I see she’s wearing bandages.”

“Lulu is a patient at my vet’s practice. She was in a car crash at the weekend but is on the mend. I’m just looking after her for a few days while her owner is in hospital.”

“That’s very nice of you.”

Joe’s face flushed at the compliment. “Anyway, we’d better get back to my flat. Lulu’s supposed to be taking things easy while she recovers.”

When he reached the door, he glanced back at the cookies he’d scooped up from the floor. “Sorry again about the cookies. I bet they would’ve been delicious.”

“I’ll make another batch. It’s the work of moments.”

“Don’t do that on my account.”

“I’d like to. I wanted to apologise for throwing that plastic box at you earlier today, and it feels like I haven’t done that yet.”

“Perhaps me knocking a plate of home-baked cookies out of your hand and smashing a plate into pieces while allowing a dog in my care to run riot around Leah’s cats means we’re even.”

Carrie laughed. “Still, I’ll probably make more cookies, anyway. I’ll bring some over later when—”

“Really, there’s no need.”

His suddenly gruff tone stopped her mid-sentence. Just when she thought they were getting along a little better, Mr Miserable had to put in an appearance. What was this guy’s problem?

“Um, sorry again,” Joe said and walked out of the flat.

A second later, Carrie heard Joe’s flat door click closed. So much for getting to know her neighbour across the hall, and so much for apologising for her earlier faux pax at the outbuilding. The chocolate chip cookies she’d baked were supposed to break the ice with the guy. Instead, they’d led to complete chaos.

As she swept the broken plate and ruined cookies into the bin, she just hoped the little dog would be okay. She’d wanted to ask about the car crash the poor creature had been involved in, but Joe had run off before she’d had the chance. Still, if the dog was able to tear around the place chasing cats, it must be well on the road to recovery.

Coco and Praline shot her looks of disgust at the ordeal they’d just endured before hopping off the counter and stalking towards the sofa. With her offer to bake more cookies firmly dismissed, Carrie returned to the Christmas decorations in the living area. The light was already draining from the December sky, but if she was quick, she could string the twinkle lights outside the flat window before darkness fell.

It would be nice to bring a little Christmas cheer to the place.

And perhaps it would be nice to show Frowning Joe that she only wanted to be a good neighbour during her short time here.

* * *

Joe peered out the sitting room window to the front garden, where the new neighbour across the hallway was currently arranging fairy lights around the shrubbery.

He wished he could remember her name. Was it Cassie or Caroline? Carly, maybe?

Although she'd introduced herself the other day when she'd first knocked on his door, he'd failed to catch her name because he was still half-asleep. Despite meeting her twice since then, he still didn't know what she was called.

When she'd chucked the plastic box at him earlier that afternoon, it hadn't exactly been the right moment to ask her to refresh his memory. The ridiculous mayhem unleashed half an hour ago when she'd dropped by with the peace offering of cookies hadn't offered any opportunities, either—at least none that wouldn't have been awkward.

The next time he saw her, it would be their fourth meeting, and he'd have to embarrass himself—and her—by admitting he still didn't know her name.

If she was only staying at Leah's flat for a few weeks, perhaps he could just avoid her altogether, and that way he wouldn't have to ask her name at all. She was a passing stranger, cat-sitting for his neighbour, and she'd be gone soon enough. He didn't have to become best friends with the woman.

Except, as he watched her arranging the fairy lights around the window of Leah's flat and drape them over the shrubs in the small patch of garden on her side of the building, Joe

couldn't help but think he ought to at least try to make an effort.

Those cookies she'd brought to his door had smelled divine. The sugary scent mingled with chocolate and vanilla and spices had him salivating from the moment he'd opened the door. If the cookies hadn't been upended while he'd been chasing after Lulu, he would've scoffed every single treat on the plate.

So why had he refused her offer to bake another batch?

Because that was his knee-jerk reaction to most opportunities for social interaction these days. Just say no and keep everyone at a distance, whether it was the vet practice's Christmas night out or the promise of cookies from the mysterious woman now living across the hall.

Just say no and accept life as a sad loner.

Joe watched the neighbour finish draping the fairy lights around her half of the front garden. She crouched down to the electrical socket beside the front steps and a moment later the lights turned on. When she stood back up, her face was lit with joy at the bright lights twinkling in the early evening gloom, a smile lifting all the way to her eyes.

The mysterious neighbour was pretty, even if she was a health and safety hazard who chucked heavy boxes at unsuspecting people who were only minding their own business.

Joe's gaze travelled to the dark patch outside his own front garden. The house probably looked a bit daft with one side lit up with Christmas lights and the other still plunged in darkness. Last year, when Leah had decorated outside, he'd done his bit and strung up some lights so the front of the house looked the part on both sides of the door.

But last year, he'd still had some hope that his time as a single man surely couldn't last forever. If someone had told him he'd still be alone the following Christmas, he wouldn't have believed them.

Even mustering the energy to put up some Christmas lights felt beyond him.

What was the point? What was the point when you were alone and there was no one in your life or in your home to share any of those Christmas moments with?

There *was* no point. It was all just a stupid waste of time.

Joe glanced one more time at the mystery neighbour out there in the garden still fussing with the Christmas lights and then turned from the window. Lulu the terrier was asleep on her bed beside the radiator, calm now after her earlier antics. To the sound of soft canine snoring, Joe settled on the sofa with his laptop and opened the latest edition of one of the veterinary journals he liked to keep up to date with.

There was plenty of reading to occupy him for the rest of the evening. In his line of work, there were always new insights to learn and new techniques to master and new medicines to discover. A night buried in the latest journals was no hardship for Joe.

And if it stopped him thinking about those Christmas cookies he'd missed out on, and the odd tumble he'd felt in his gut when that smile had lit up the mystery neighbour's face when she'd switched on those fairy lights outside, then that was even better.

CARRIE KNEW she'd gone overboard with the extra Christmas lights she'd bought for the little garden outside the flat, but she couldn't help herself. The trio of illuminated snowmen now perched below the front window was too gorgeous to resist when she'd spied them in a high street shop. Their sparkly snowy bodies, brightly coloured scarves, carrot noses, and cheerful festive smiles were the perfect finishing touches to the twinkle lights already dancing around the front window and garden shrubs.

And in Carrie's opinion, you could never have too many Christmas decorations.

Sparing a glance for the undecorated garden outside Neighbour's Joe's flat, she wondered when he'd do his bit and get into the spirit of things. The couple who lived upstairs, Melissa and Stuart, had already hung strands of fairy lights around the insides of their front windows, and they cast a warm glow onto the garden below. Now that Carrie had added the cheerful snowmen trio to the twinkle lights she'd draped around the shrubs and the window frame, the total absence of decorations on Neighbour Joe's side was even more glaring.

Perhaps he was too busy at work to deal with Christmas decorations? Carrie wondered if she ought to offer to help him add a few twinkle lights to his side of the building. Still determined to be a good neighbour and make amends after throwing the heavy plastic box at him earlier in the week, Carrie considered knocking on his door to find out if he'd like an extra pair of hands to add some festive touches to the place.

She hadn't seen Joe since the disastrous Christmas cookie incident. She hadn't seen the little dog who'd gone charging into the flat in pursuit of the cats, either. Joe had said something about looking after the animal for a customer at his vet's surgery. If she knocked on his door to mention the Christmas lights, she could ask after the little critter. She'd like to know the animal was still on the mend after the road accident Joe had mentioned, and...

"Uncle Joe! Look at those snowmen! They're all lit up!"

"Look, Uncle Joe! They're awesome!"

Carrie turned at the sound of children's voices behind her. Two little boys were hurtling up the front path towards the snowmen decorations, their faces bright with excitement. Joe walked behind them, carrying two small backpacks hooked over his arm.

"Don't touch those Christmas lights, boys," Joe called out.

"We won't touch them, Uncle Joe," one of the boys replied, even as he pressed a finger to the carrot nose on the largest of the snowmen. "We just want to look at them."

"Are these your snowmen?" the other little boy asked Carrie, as he, too, poked a finger at another of the carrot noses.

"Yes," she replied, charmed by the small children. "Do you like them?"

The boys nodded. "We have a ginormous Santa Claus light outside our house," one of them replied.

"And reindeer, too!"

"Yes, and reindeer, too. They all light up."

"That sounds wonderful," Carrie smiled.

The two boys jumped up and down in delight as they admired the Christmas snowmen, which were almost as big as they were. When he reached them at the front step, Joe gave Carrie a cautious smile.

"Hello, again," he said.

"Hello, Joe."

A tiny frown creased his brow at her response. What was wrong with him now? Couldn't she even say hello without provoking an appearance from Mr Misery?

"Listen," Joe said. "Uh, this might sound odd, but—"

"Where are your Christmas lights, Uncle Joe?"

Joe stopped talking and blinked down at his nephew. "I haven't put any up yet."

"Can we help you put them up?" the boy asked.

"Yes! We can help, Uncle Joe. Mum says we're brilliant at doing stuff with Christmas decorations."

"I'm sure she did."

Carrie saw the genuine warmth in Joe's expression as he smiled at his nephews. While one of the boys was still jumping up and down on the spot at the prospect of doing some Christmas decorating, the other was giving her a strange look.

"You're not Uncle Joe's neighbour," the little boy said, peering at her in surprise as if he'd just realised he didn't recognise her. "Uncle Joe's neighbour is Leah, and you're not Leah. Who are you?"

"I'm Carrie, Leah's friend."

"Carrie, that's it," Joe said, clicking his fingers together. At her astonished look, he blushed. "Sorry, I mean... I didn't quite catch your name the first time we met, and..."

"I'm Seth," interrupted the little boy who was peering up at her. "I'm six."

"I'm Jack," said the other child. "I'm six, too. We're twins."

"But not *identical* twins," Seth added. "That's why we don't look exactly the same."

"We're fra... uh, fra..." Jack frowned. "Uncle Joe, I can't remember what we are."

"Fraternal twins," Joe laughed.

“Fraternal, dummy,” Seth said, rolling his eyes at his brother.

“You’re the dummy.”

“No, you are!”

“Okay, that’s enough boys,” Joe said. “We haven’t even got inside the flat yet and you’re already fighting with each other. What did we agree in the car on the way over here?”

The boys traded surly glances with one another. “No fighting,” they said in unison.

“Correct. Because if there’s any fighting, what happens?”

“We don’t get to order pizza for dinner,” Jack said, folding his arms and glaring at his brother. “Don’t call me dummy, Seth, or we don’t get pizza.”

“I want pizza!” Seth shouted. “I love pizza!”

“Then you know what you have to do,” Joe said.

“Is Carrie having pizza with us?” Jack asked.

“Uh, well...” Carrie wasn’t sure how to respond, even as little Jack tugged at the edges of her coat.

“What pizza do you like, Carrie?” Jack asked. “I like marge and rita.”

The mangled pizza topping pronunciation made Carrie laugh. These were cute boys. Noisy, but cute. She was about to reply to the sweet kid when Joe spoke.

“I’m sure Carrie has other dinner plans tonight,” he said, giving her a look she couldn’t decipher. “And we’ve kept her talking long enough. Get yourselves inside, boys, and take off your muddy boots before we go inside the flat.”

The two boys hurtled up the front steps and through the door. Joe gestured to Carrie with the tiny backpacks slung over his arm.

“I’m looking after my nephews for a few hours tonight while my sister and her husband go shopping. Between the

homework in these schoolbags and the pizzas they plan to order, we've got a busy night planned."

"I hope you all have fun," Carrie replied with a smile.

Joe nodded and followed his nephews inside the house. There was no further mention of the pizza the boys had offered to share with her, which was a shame.

Carrie wouldn't have minded joining the cute kids for dinner and getting to know her neighbour a little better, but Joe had shut that idea down firmly enough.

He was an odd guy. An animal lover and an obviously doting uncle, judging by what she'd seen so far, and yet odd, just the same.

Or perhaps he'd just taken a dislike to Carrie? Between waking him from sleep, assaulting him with a heavy box, and then accidentally helping to spark a yappy-dog-meets-outraged-cats incident, she couldn't exactly blame him for wanting to keep his distance.

The man hadn't even remembered her name until she'd introduced herself to his nephews. While she was eager to make friends with the neighbours during her short stay here on Foxglove Street, he acted like he couldn't care less.

Why did that bother her? Was it because she felt bad for all the mishaps she'd instigated? Was it because she wanted to spread some Christmas cheer?

Or was it because Neighbour Joe had a dark twinkle in his eyes, despite all his brooding, and that twinkle made her want to get to know him a little better?

Shaking her head at that ludicrous idea, Carrie finished adjusting the trio of snowmen and grabbed her camera bag from the front step where she'd left it. The new festive arrangement made for a perfect Christmas photograph in the darkening afternoon. Later, she'd play around with her editing software and add some of her signature design flourishes, and then format the finished image into a set of Christmas cards for her little online shop. The other items in her festive range

were selling fast and she wanted to make the most of the festive spending season while she could.

Once she'd snapped the perfect shot, she headed back inside the flat. As she closed the door, she heard the sound of Joe and his nephews laughing in the flat across the hall.

She imagined the scene—the boys racing through their school homework while Joe supervised and phoned in the pizza order.

He was a natural with the kids, that much was obvious. She couldn't help but wonder why he was living alone and why some smart woman hadn't snapped him up yet.

Perhaps his bursts of grumpiness repelled the women who'd tried.

Laughing at that idea, and yet not entirely convinced by it, Carrie settled in the cosy sitting room with her laptop and her photo images of the cheerful snowmen. While Coco and Praline snoozed beside her on the sofa, she got to work, and all thoughts of Grumpy Neighbour Joe were soon forgotten.

* * *

Bribed with the promise of pizza, Joe's nephews soon finished their homework while tucked up in the dining nook and poring over their exercise books, pencils scribbling and tongues stuck out in concentration. Once he'd checked their work and helped them tidy away their school things, he let them look at the pizza menu from the takeaway on Hamblehurst high street.

Neither of the little boys could actually read the thing word-for-word, but seeing them study the options and debate the toppings they wanted made Joe's heart clench with love.

His nephews were a pair of noisy rascals with a knack for finding trouble, but he loved them with every fibre of his being and enjoyed the chance to babysit them while their parents shopped.

While they waited for the pizza delivery, the boys insisted on setting up the small artificial Christmas tree Joe had

brought in from the outbuilding earlier in the day, anticipating their desire to make the place look festive. Once he'd put the tree components together and stabilised it on the floor, he set the boys loose with the tinsel and cheap plastic ornaments.

By the time the pizza arrived, the tree was done and looked exactly like a tree decorated by two six-year-olds was bound to look—like a crazy mess. The boys clapped their hands when the fairy lights were turned on and declared it to be the best Christmas tree ever.

Joe snapped a photo of the two of them standing on either side of it, knowing his sister would get a kick out of the shot of her sons grinning with pride at their accomplishment.

The marge and rita pizza, as Jack called it, was devoured in record time, followed by bowls of ice cream. By the time Joe had cleaned their faces and hands, and, in Seth's case, changed the kid's jumper on account of the ice cream he'd dripped all over himself, and got the two of them settled with a Christmas film on the television, he was wiped out.

When the doorbell rang just after eight-thirty, Joe tiptoed across the room to let Yvette inside, not wanting to wake his nephews who'd long since conked out together on the sofa while the film played on. Stepping into the flat, his sister grinned at the sight of her sons curled up beside one another and fast asleep.

"Were they any trouble?" Yvette asked Joe in a hushed voice.

"Loads, but we survived."

Yvette let out a soft chuckle when she saw the Christmas tree at the window. "It looks like you let the boys deal with the tree decorating."

"Why not put them to work? I doubt I could've done much better."

Yvette shook her head, and whimpered when Joe showed her the photo he'd snapped of Seth and Jack standing beside the tree, the two of them looking as proud as punch with their decorating triumph.

“That’s a keeper,” she said, her voice thick.

“I’ll send it to you. Want a hand carrying these two out to the car, or shall we wake them up?”

“We’ll wake them up. They’ll wake up anyway as soon as we step outside. It’s freezing out there tonight.” Yvette paused before she reached her sons on the sofa and turned back to Joe. “By the way, do you know your house looks like the Grinch’s place from outside?”

Joe frowned. “What are you talking about? I just put up this tree.”

“You can’t see the tree from outside, not with your blinds and curtains closed at the window. There are pretty fairy lights around the windows in the flat upstairs, and I see your neighbour Leah has added some lovely illuminated snowmen outside her flat. Beside all that lovely festive lighting, your place looks like a grim black hole.”

“Thanks very much. Anyway, those aren’t Leah’s snowmen. She’s away working in New York or something. The snowmen belong to Carrie the cat-sitter.”

“Well, they’re gorgeous. And you should definitely put up some outside lights, too, Joe. Yours must be the only property on the street without any lights up.”

“Is there some Christmas lights law I didn’t know about?” Joe said, sounding grumpy.

Yvette rolled her eyes. “No, but doesn’t Foxglove Street have some sort of Christmas Lights extravaganza every year? The residents take a lot of pride in it.”

Joe had forgotten about the Christmas Lights extravaganza and how it was a semi-official thing here on Foxglove Street. No one would come knocking on his door if he didn’t take part, but people did put a lot of effort into sprucing the street up during December.

“I’ll throw some lights around the shrub outside the flat.”

“Wow, that sounds like a lot of effort, Joe.” Another eye roll from Yvette. “What’s the matter with you these days?”

“Nothing’s the matter,” he scowled.

Their hushed voices had slipped into harsh tones. On the sofa, the twins woke up and blinked around the room. When they saw their mother had arrived, both boys leapt up, easily shaking off sleep the way only little children can do.

“Mum, look what we did to Uncle Joe’s tree!” Seth shouted as he got up from the sofa.

“I put the star on top, Mum!” Jack announced, clambering towards his mother.

“It’s a masterpiece,” Yvette said, greeting her sons with hugs. “Grab your coats and boots and we’ll get home. Dad’s waiting out in the car.”

Once the boys were ready to leave, Joe handed them their backpacks and walked them all to the main door.

“Did you thank your Uncle Joe for the pizza and ice cream?” Yvette asked.

“Thanks, Uncle Joe!” the boys yelled in unison as they raced down the steps towards the street where their father was already getting out of the car to help them into the back seat.

“Thanks, Uncle Joe,” Yvette smiled, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“My pleasure, sis.”

“Get some lights up out here and stop being such a Grinch.”

“Thanks for the sage advice.”

“See you tomorrow at the surgery.”

Joe watched them all drive off, grinning as the boys waved from the back seat. Before he went back inside his flat, he stepped away from the door and glanced at the house.

Twinkle lights flashed around the upstairs windows of Melissa and Stuart’s flat, and around the window and garden shrubs of the flat next to his. The illuminated snowmen trio Carrie had set up earlier that afternoon looked ridiculously festive, too.

The front of his own flat, bathed in darkness, looked gloomy and depressing in comparison. Yvette was right. He ought to make an effort and do more than just chuck a few spare fairy lights around the shrub below his front window.

Walking out to the front pavement, Joe glanced up and down Foxglove Street, noticing for the first time just how Christmassy the road looked with so many lights and decorations bringing warmth and cheer to the neighbourhood.

He might not feel Christmassy, but that didn't mean he shouldn't do his bit for the street. It's not as if he'd have to do anything other than hang some lights outside and then forget about them until it was time to take all the decorations back down again.

After his morning shift at the veterinary surgery tomorrow, he'd bite the bullet and deal with the outside lights. Perhaps then Yvette would stop yapping on about Christmas and leave him alone.

“OH, well done, Joe! This looks so lovely!”

Carrie arrived home and walked up the garden path to where Joe was draping Christmas lights around the assortment of shrubs outside his flat. The string of lights that he'd threaded through the evergreen leaves featured old-fashioned lanterns in shades of red and white. In the front window of his flat, multi-coloured twinkle lights shimmered inside the glass, framing the Christmas tree that now stood in the centre.

“My nephews helped me put up the tree while they were here last night,” Joe said. “And my sister reminded me I ought to get some lights out here, too.”

“Well, it looks wonderful and very festive.”

She might not actually live here, but Carrie was relieved Joe had sorted out a few lights for the front of his flat. Actually, he'd gone above and beyond to make his house look like a proper part of the Foxglove Street festivities. Whenever she'd come and gone from the place these past few days during the hours of darkness, it made her heart sore to see Joe's house devoid of lights.

Was his life devoid of light, too? Judging by the way he acted, she couldn't help but think so, even if she hadn't really spent enough time with him to know for sure. Perhaps she'd got him wrong.

“Now that you've put up these lovely lights, you'll be all set for the Foxglove Street Christmas meet-and-greet

tomorrow afternoon,” Carrie said, gesturing to the lights now shining outside Joe’s flat.

He glanced up from his spot beside the shrubbery, the flicker of a smile on his face now gone. “Meet-and-greet? What meet-and-greet?”

“A few neighbours have organised a last-minute festive meet-and-greet so people can say hello and wish each other a merry Christmas,” Carrie explained. “Olive Nimmo, who lives further down the street, mentioned it to me when I first arrived here. She thought it would be nice to have a little get-together and a few other neighbours agreed with her. I suppose it’ll be like a fun Christmas street party.”

Joe frowned. “A street party? In December? Won’t everyone be freezing?”

“That’s why it’s happening tomorrow afternoon. The weather is set to be sunny and bright and not too cold. As soon as Olive saw the fair forecast, she finalised the plans with the other folk on the street she’d been chatting with and it’s all set to go.” Carrie laughed. “It sounds like it will be fun.”

“Right.”

“Olive and a few other helpers are printing out a leaflet with the details and will post them through all the Foxglove Street letter boxes this afternoon, inviting people to pop outside tomorrow between one o’clock and two-thirty to say hello to their neighbours. Everyone’s being asked to bring their own hot chocolate or cup of coffee or whatever, to make it nice and sociable. Anyone who wants to bake a few Christmas treats to bring along and share can do that, too. I’m quite excited about it.”

When Joe said nothing further and asked no more questions about the Christmas meet-and-greet, Carrie ploughed on.

“Do you think you’ll be able to drop by and say hello?”

“Probably not. I expect I’ll be busy catching up with paperwork at the vet’s practice tomorrow.”

“That’s a pity.”

Considering the look on Joe's face, anyone would think she'd just invited him to spend the afternoon sucking lemons. While an impromptu Christmas weekend get-together in the street might not be everyone's cup of tea, he didn't have to appear quite so glum at the prospect.

She held up the shopping bag she'd carried home from a grocery run to the high street.

"I was just out at the shop stocking up on baking supplies. I'm planning on making another batch of my Christmas chocolate chip cookies to share with people who turn up tomorrow."

His disinterested expression wavered at this news. "Like the ones you baked the other day?"

"The very same."

A pained look crossed his face. "Sorry again about knocking those cookies to the floor. I bet they were delicious."

"Pop outside tomorrow afternoon for ten minutes and you'll find out just how delicious they are."

"Uh, well... I'll see if I can spare some time."

"You should. I think it'll be fun."

Joe only nodded and fiddled with the lantern lights he was hanging on the garden shrub. His lack of engagement should have had Carrie heading back inside the flat. Instead, she found herself speaking again.

"Where's the little injured dog you were looking after? Lulu, was it?"

"She's back home with her owner now. He was discharged from the hospital the other day."

"That's good news. Is Lulu still on the mend?"

Joe smiled, and Carrie at last saw a flicker of the warm-hearted man she'd seen yesterday when he'd been with his nephews.

"She'd definitely on the mend, yes. The car accident left her with a lot of cuts and scrapes, but they're all healing well."

Now that she's back with her owner and in her own home, she'll get better much faster."

"It sounds like it was a terrible trauma. I can't even think about a poor little dog being caught up in a car accident. It makes me shudder."

"You're not the only one who feels that way. When I arrived at the scene on Sunday night, I thought I'd have to put the other dog to sleep."

"There were two dogs hurt?" Carrie winced at the idea.

"Lulu and Peggy. Peggy had to have surgery to fix her broken leg. It was a long, tough night in the operating room."

Things clicked into place inside Carrie's head. "Wait, is that why you were asleep when I knocked on your door earlier this week? Because you'd been up all night performing surgery?"

Joe nodded.

"Gosh, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"You don't have to apologise. How could you know?"

He gave her a smile, which made her feel a little better about all the mean thoughts she'd had about him being Mr Grumpy. She'd known there must be a good explanation for his brusque mood that day when they first met and was relieved to finally solve the minor mystery.

"Is the other dog, Peggy, also on the mend?" she asked.

Joe nodded again. "She has a long recovery ahead of her and won't be as agile as she used to be, but she'll be fine. She's gone home with her owner too, and I think they're all just glad to be back together again after what happened. It was a nasty car crash."

The animated way he talked about the animals he'd cared for and nursed back to health—and brought back from the brink of death, by the sounds of it, in Peggy's case—made Carrie see a different side to Joe. As he spoke, his voice was soft, his gaze thoughtful.

He wasn't Mr Grumpy. How could he be, when he spoke this way about those injured animals? And if he had been out of sorts the day they'd first met, well, it stood to reason he would be if he'd been up all night saving the life of some poor hurt dog.

Realising she'd been staring at him this whole time, Carrie cleared her throat and shuffled her feet.

"I'm glad to know that little Lulu is okay, and the other dog too," she said. "Well done for putting them both on the road to recovery."

He gave an awkward shrug. "It's my job."

"Well, it sounds like you're very good at it."

Carrie saw his cheeks colour. With another shrug, he turned back to the Christmas lights on the shrub.

"Anyway, if you decide to pop outside tomorrow afternoon to wish your neighbours a merry Christmas, I'd love to see you," Carrie said. "I'll keep a few cookies in reserve for you, just in case."

He glanced her way again. "Thanks, uh, I'll see if I can make it."

Carrie smiled, guessing that was about as much of a commitment as he was willing to make. She patted her bag of baking supplies. "I'd better get inside and make a start on these cookies."

With a wave goodbye, she left Joe to finish hanging his Christmas lights. The short conversation they'd shared had helped her see another side to her neighbour. He was quiet and caring, thoughtful and obviously committed to his profession.

But she sensed something else, too. Loneliness, perhaps? Maybe, maybe not. She didn't know the man well enough to be sure.

I'd like to know him better, though, she thought as she unlocked the flat door and went inside. When he's not masquerading as Mr Grumpy, he's a pretty nice guy.

Maybe if he turned up tomorrow at the Foxglove Street Christmas meet-and-greet, she'd get the chance to know him better.

THE RESIDENTS of Foxglove Street couldn't have asked for a lovelier December afternoon to hold their Christmas meet-and-greet event. As Carrie sipped from the travel mug of hot chocolate she'd brought with her, she smiled at the sight of people mingling and chatting on the street, basking in the welcome warmth of the wintry sunshine even as they huddled inside their coats and tucked scarves around their necks.

Carrie was standing with Olive Nimmo and a few other younger women she'd only just met that afternoon. Olive had introduced her to Ellie Jones, who Carrie vaguely recognised from her recent visit to Hamblehurst library, where Ellie was one of the librarians, and to Jess Shepherd, whose mother, Sally, Carrie remembered meeting a week or so earlier when she'd first bumped into Olive.

"I had no idea so many people would turn out this afternoon!" Olive said, bringing a mug of tea to her lips. "I'm thrilled to see such wonderful community spirit here on our little street."

"None of this would have happened at all if you hadn't taken the initiative, Olive," Ellie said, smiling at the older lady.

"This was a fantastic idea," Jess added. "At this time of year, we're usually all so busy rushing around dealing with Christmas shopping or heading off to festive events here and there. It's lovely to just take a moment to step outside and wish a merry Christmas to the people who live right there on the street beside you."

“I couldn’t agree more,” Olive said. “With the short days and long nights, it’s too easy to go for weeks without interacting properly with the people you live alongside.”

“Although, having said that, I don’t actually live here anymore,” Jess said with a laugh. “Does that mean I’m gate-crashing?”

“Hardly,” Olive replied. “You’ve lived here since you were a little girl, Jess. And you only live a few streets away now.”

“Speaking of which, are you all set for your big move in the new year?” Ellie asked Jess.

“Almost,” Jess said.

“You must be very excited,” Olive said.

“I can hardly wait,” Jess said, her eyes lighting up.

Olive turned to Carrie. “Our Jess here is taking the plunge and moving in with her boyfriend Darren next month.”

“Oh, congratulations,” Carrie said. “What a lovely way to start the new year.”

Jess’s smile widened. “I think so, too.”

“Darren and Jess lived next door to one another since they were children,” Olive said. “Last summer, things took an unexpected change of direction in their relationship.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Jess laughed. “Falling for the boy next door was the last thing I expected to happen.”

“Which is what makes it so dreamy,” Ellie said. “You and Darren are living out a real-world, real-life romance novel.”

Jess laughed at that. “If you say so. Although packing up all my stuff again so I’m ready to leave the flat doesn’t feel so dreamy. This will be the third time I’ve moved house in a year.”

“That’s no fun,” Carrie said. “And I can sympathise. I had to put most of my stuff into storage before I came here to flat-sit and cat-sit for Leah, and packing up took far longer than I thought it would. And then, come January, I’ll have to move again.”

“Where will you be staying once your cat-sitting duties are finished?” Olive asked.

Carrie shrugged. “I’m not sure, yet. I had to leave the house I was sharing in Winchester because the landlord increased the rent and I couldn’t pay my share anymore. I’ve been looking around on the rental websites and so on, but so far nothing has caught my interest and too many options are out of my price range, anyway.”

“Do you want to return to Winchester?” Ellie asked. “It’s such a pretty city.”

“I know, it really is,” Carrie said. “But I’m not wedded to the idea of going back there. It might be time for somewhere new. I’m a freelancer, so I can work from anywhere, really. I’ve always shared houses or flats until now, but after only a week and a half living by myself at Leah’s place while she’s gone, I can see the attraction of going solo.”

“Maybe you should check out the flat I’m leaving?” Jess suggested. “It’s tiny, but perfect for one. Although I had a few issues with some of the appliances, the landlord isn’t awful, just a bit slow off the mark getting things fixed. It’s a cosy little flat, and if I wasn’t moving in with Darren, I’d probably stay there longer and be quite happy.”

Carrie let this idea roll through her head. Despite loving her short time in Hamblehurst so far, she hadn’t considered staying here once Leah returned from her adventures in New York City.

In fact, she’d wondered if it might be a nice time to move further north and be closer to her parents. They’d settled in Yorkshire a few years ago after Carrie’s father retired, and she missed seeing them as much as she used to when they’d been living in Bath, which was where Carrie grew up.

“If you wanted me to introduce you to my landlord, I’d be glad to,” Jess added. “As far as I know, he hasn’t found a new tenant yet.”

“Can I get back to you on that?” Carrie said. “My parents live up in Yorkshire, which is where my mum is from

originally, and if I haven't snagged a new place I like in the next couple of weeks, I was thinking I might go and spend some time with them for a while and squat in their guest room while planning out my next steps."

"That sounds like a lovely idea," Olive said. "I'm sure they'd love to see you."

"If I'm serious about living in a place of my own, I might have a better chance of affording somewhere up north rather than down here."

"I don't know how you youngsters deal with all these high costs you face, between housing and utility bills and student loans and all the rest of it," Olive said, shaking her head. "It was all different in my day."

"I'm thinking of taking in a lodger to help out with my bills," Ellie said, an unhappy expression on her face. "I've always loved having my own place and not having to share with housemates, but everything's so expensive at the moment and it's hard to make ends meet on my salary."

"You could always move in with Jeff and share your bills that way," Jess said with a sly wink.

Ellie coughed on a mouthful of coffee. "We're not quite there yet."

"I'm sure it's only a matter of time," Olive said, then turned to Carrie to explain. "Ellie has been seeing her neighbour across the street, Jeff, since the summer. They've been getting on like a house on fire."

"Gosh, does everyone pair up with each other on this street?" Carrie asked, amused at the idea of both young women finding love with their neighbours right here on the street where they lived.

"Actually, now that you mention it..." Jess looked thoughtful. "My mother's new boyfriend lives here on the street, too."

"He didn't live here when they first got together, though," Ellie said.

“No, but he was renovating the house at the other end of the street when they met.” Jess gave Olive a speculative look. “And you and Walter have been almost inseparable since the summer, too.”

“We are just friends, as you know perfectly well,” Olive said, looking stern.

“Good friends,” Ellie said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Very good friends,” Jess added.

“Oh, you girls are very naughty to tease an old lady,” Olive said.

Jess laughed and turned to Carrie. “Walter is my boyfriend Darren’s grandfather, and lives next door to my mother.”

“Wow, this really is a cosy community,” Carrie said.

“Of course it is,” Olive said, and waved a hand around to signify the neighbours currently making chit-chat in the street and across garden fences. “Foxglove Street is a lovely place to live and I make no apology for becoming good friends with another ancient soul like myself.”

All three young women laughed.

“You’re not ancient, Olive,” Ellie smiled.

“You’re our wise elder and guardian of all things Foxglove Street,” Jess laughed.

“Well, I don’t quite know what that means, but thank you,” Olive grinned. She glanced at the plastic box Carrie had tucked beneath her arm out of the way while she sipped her hot chocolate. “I think we ought to eat a few more of those Christmas cookies you baked for us, Carrie. They are extremely tasty.”

“Oh, yes please,” Jess added.

Carrie opened the lid and offered the box. “Help yourselves. I’m so glad you like them.”

While the ladies dug into the last of the cookies in the box, Carrie looked around again at the lovely street, filled with chattering neighbours and festive cheer. Although the bright

winter sun made it hard to make out the Christmas lights in the front gardens, there were plenty of other signs of the season—decorative snowmen similar to those Carrie had set up outside her flat, candy canes lining pathways, rotund Santa Claus ornaments and polar penguins.

And that was before she even started looking at the festive plant pots filled with holly and ivy and bright red berries that many residents had set up at their front doors, along with other seasonal features. As people milled around, sharing news and home baking, Carrie couldn't help but feel a little seduced by the sweet vibes of the lovely place.

Perhaps living here for a little longer, if not on Foxglove Street then somewhere else around Hamblehurst, was an idea worth thinking about?

From a nearby house, Christmas carols began drifting from an open window, and everyone within hearing distance smiled in appreciation. As Olive, Jess, and Ellie remarked on the music and began discussing their own favourite carols of the season, Carrie caught sight of someone making their way along Foxglove Street, looking unsure of himself.

It was Joe.

Carrie's spirits lifted to see him, and they'd already been high to begin with. As the Christmas meet-and-greet was already past the halfway mark, she'd thought he wasn't going to turn up after all. Seeing him now made her stupidly and ridiculously happy, for reasons she didn't quite understand.

"Joe! Hi, there!" Carrie called out, waving her free hand in the air while juggling her hot chocolate tumbler and cookie box in the other.

Joe's gaze met hers and a small smile tugged at his mouth. He made his way towards where she stood with the other ladies, nodding brief hellos to the people he passed along the way.

"Hello, Joe," Carrie said. "It's so nice to see you here. I suppose you already know these lovely ladies?"

Joe nodded and exchanged greetings with Olive, Jess, and Ellie.

“How’s little Elsa?” Joe asked Olive.

“She’s fine, and fully recovered from the mood she was in after receiving her vaccination shots last week,” Olive said with a laugh. “Ladies, you ought to have seen the fuss that little dog made. Anyone would think she was being murdered as Joe gave her the annual shots. I’m only glad Lindsey wasn’t there to hear the howling.”

Olive pointed along the street to where the little dog stood beside its owner Angela and her daughter Lindsey.

“Some dogs barely bat an eye during vaccinations, and others get a little upset,” Joe said.

“Well, you did a fine job of calming her down, Joe. I was very grateful. Although next time I might just let Angela take Elsa to the vet’s instead. My nerves aren’t up to the shock of hearing a dog yelp like that.”

Joe laughed and his gaze landed on the box of cookies Carrie was holding.

“Are those the Christmas cookies you said you were baking for today?” he asked, looking hopeful.

Carrie grinned and swung the box in his direction. “Help yourself.”

* * *

Joe had forgotten all about the mad Christmas meet-and-greet thing that was happening on the street this afternoon. After taking advantage of the quiet Sunday morning to spend a few hours over at the vet’s practice dealing with the never-ending mountains of paperwork, he’d enjoyed the stroll home beneath the cool wintry blue skies while thinking about what to make for a late lunch once he got back to the flat.

When he’d turned onto Foxglove Street and seen the pavement filled with people milling around and yapping to one

another, he'd wondered what on earth was going on. Then he'd remembered the meet-and-greet Carrie had told him about.

He'd had no intention of putting in an appearance. Socialising with neighbours would inevitably mean being quizzed about how he planned to spend Christmas, and it would only be a matter of time before the sympathy looks began as they took pity on him for being a sad loner forced to endure Christmas by himself.

It's good you've got your parents to spend Christmas Day with. He'd heard that one too many times to count. And it must be lovely to have your nephews in your life, too. I'm sure you're a brilliant uncle to them.

Uh-huh. Nope, he wasn't in the mood for any of that sort of talk, which meant the meet-and-greet was a Big Fat No.

But as he stood at the top of Foxglove Street, he realised he couldn't get back to his flat without running the gauntlet of festive merriment taking place up and down the road. He briefly considered hurrying back around to the high street and phoning a taxi to drop him off outside his flat, but not only was the idea ludicrous, no taxi driver would entertain a journey so short.

So, he'd ploughed on along the street, looking purposeful and keeping up a brisk pace to make it seem as if he was in a big hurry. That approach got him a few steps along the road before he was nabbed by a customer of the veterinary practice who stopped him to say hello and discuss her dog's worming treatment, and soon enough his progress slowed to a crawl.

When he set eyes on Carrie, chatting with a few other neighbours, he'd almost been relieved. Not that it made any sense why he should feel that way.

Perhaps it was because she was a stranger on the street, a newcomer, someone who didn't know all about his personal business and who was unlikely to ask awkward questions.

Perhaps it was because of the box of cookies he saw in her hands, which reminded him he was hungry for lunch.

Or perhaps it was because the bright smile she gave him felt like the sunrise lighting up the horizon.

Frowning, Joe shoved *that* thought to the back of his mind and looked at the plastic box Carrie was holding.

“You’d better be quick, though,” Carrie said, jiggling the plastic box at him. “These cookies have gone down a treat with your neighbours and I can’t guarantee how much longer they’ll last.”

Her eyes twinkled as she spoke. Joe couldn’t help but return her smile.

Selecting a cookie and biting into it, he had to resist the temptation to close his eyes and moan in ecstasy.

Ever since he’d clumsily knocked the plate of cookies out of Carrie’s hand the other day when they’d chased after Lulu when the little dog barrelled into Carrie’s flat, he’d been fantasising about how good the treats would’ve tasted if they’d ended up inside his mouth instead of on the floor.

Now, as the sweet flavours of milky chocolate and sweet vanilla and spicy cinnamon melted in his mouth, he wished he’d accepted Carrie’s offer to make a fresh batch of cookies to replace the ones he’d stupidly spilled all over the floor. If he’d known he was denying himself this pleasure, he never would have refused.

“They’re good, aren’t they?” Jess Shepherd said, nudging Joe with her elbow.

“Amazing,” Joe said around a mouthful of crumbly cookie.

“You’re in the wrong business, Carrie,” Ellie smiled. “You should become a baker.”

Carrie laughed at this. “It’s just a hobby, and this is a just a recipe I found on the internet. I’ll send it to you, if you like?”

“Please do,” Ellie said, then glanced over Joe’s shoulder. “Oh, there’s Jeff arrived at last. I’ll see you later, ladies.”

Ellie disappeared across the road, and a moment later Jess said goodbye too, explaining she was due to start a shift at the ice cream parlour where she worked on the high street. As Joe

snagged a second cookie from the box in Carrie's hand, Olive spied Walter Montgomery emerging from his house further along the street and bade them farewell in order to join the older gent so they could catch up with a few other neighbours together.

Finding himself alone with Carrie, Joe felt suddenly awkward.

"I hope it wasn't something I said," he joked.

Carrie laughed again. "I think everyone just wants to mingle. Why don't you introduce me to a few more people? I'm sure you probably know everyone who lives here."

"Uh..."

Joe wasn't sure he liked that plan. He just wanted to continue on towards home. The flat was only a few more steps down the street. But apparently Carrie was a genuine people-person, because she looped her arm through his and steered him towards a clutch of people further along the pavement.

"Hello!" she said cheerfully.

"Oh, hello there," said a woman Joe vaguely recognised. "Hello, Joe. Who's your new friend, then?"

Joe turned from the small group of people, most of whom looked like they were in their late forties, maybe early fifties, and glanced at Carrie, who was clearly waiting for him to provide an introduction.

"Uh, this is Carrie," he said. "She's flat-sitting for my neighbour, Leah, for a few weeks. Carrie, this is, uh..."

Although a few of the people standing in the small group looked familiar, he couldn't for the life of him remember any of their names.

The woman who'd already said hello rolled her eyes and laughed. "I'm Gayle Harrison. Nice to meet you, Carrie. Joe, I can't believe you don't recognise me. I've been singing in the community choir with your mother for the past three years, and you and I have been neighbours on this street for even longer than that!"

“Sorry, of course, Gayle. I had a brain freeze. Probably all this chilly wintry air.”

Joe laughed, but inside he was cringing, even although he had no real cause to feel embarrassed. If he'd bumped into this lady more than four times in his life, he'd be surprised. That was the problem with being the local vet and a known face around the town—many people knew who you were, even if you hadn't a clue who they were.

Happily, the other women in the group were soon quizzing Carrie about her cat-sitting duties and how she was settling in on the street. Joe was happy to take a back seat while these interactions proceeded.

He could see his flat from where he stood. If Carrie was happy chatting with these nosy women, perhaps he could scarper?

“So, Joe, do you have any lovely Christmas plans this year?” Gayle asked, pulling him from thoughts of his escape plan.

Suppressing a sigh, Joe offered an easy shrug. “Christmas Day dinner with my parents and my sister's family as usual, I expect.”

“Oh, lovely. I hope you enjoy yourselves. And how are your two little nephews?”

“They're great. Always causing some sort of trouble. Thanks for asking.”

“You ought to get a move on and have a couple of little kiddies of your own, Joe,” Gayle said, her tone bright.

“Um, well...”

It felt like everyone was staring at him, waiting for a response.

“There are plenty of young women who'd like to take you off the market, Joe!” said another of the ladies in the group. “Just say the word, and I can rustle up a few available females!”

Everyone hooted with laughter at this. Joe felt his face flush with heat and embarrassment. This entire conversation was mortifying.

“I, uh...”

“Joe, didn’t you say you had to be back at your flat for the heating engineer arriving at two-thirty?” Carrie said.

Joe blinked at her, wondering what she was talking about. “Er, did I?”

“Yes, I’m sure you said two-thirty. I’ll walk back with you in case he turns up early.” Carrie turned to the group of women. “Nice meeting you all! If I don’t see you again, have a lovely Christmas!”

Carrie once more hooked her arm into Joe’s and he found himself being steered back towards his flat.

“Eek, I’m so sorry,” Carrie said. “I could tell those women put you on the spot with those brazen questions and comments about kids and hooking you up with some random woman. I feel badly because I’m the one who stopped to talk to them.”

“It’s not your fault. People like to be nosy, I suppose.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I made up that excuse about the heating engineer. I couldn’t think of anything else.”

Joe laughed. “I’m grateful. You’re quicker on your feet than I am.”

After dodging a few more neighbours on the street, they stepped through the front gate and walked to the main door of their building. Joe unlocked the door to save Carrie juggling with her drinks tumbler and cookie box.

“Thanks again for the cookie,” he told her once they were inside the shared hallway. “It was delicious.”

“I kept a few more in reserve for you in the flat, just in case you didn’t turn up today for the meet-and-greet,” Carrie said. “Want to come inside and have them? I could pop the kettle on.”

Lured by the prospect of enjoying more of the cookies, Joe nodded. “Thanks, that sounds good.”

Inside Carrie’s flat, they shrugged off jackets while the cats trotted over to say hello. As Coco and Praline wound themselves around Joe’s legs, Carrie filled the kettle and set out mugs.

“Did you enjoy the meet-and-greet, minus the interrogation about your reproductive plans?” Carrie asked, giving him a wry grin.

“It was nice to see a few neighbours out and about,” Joe said.

“I’m glad you turned up for a little while. When I mentioned it yesterday, you didn’t sound keen.”

“Actually, I sort of forgot all about the meet-and-greet,” he admitted. “I was on my way back from the practice when I got caught up in all the mingling on the street and had no choice but to chat to a few folks as I tried to get back to the flat.”

Carrie laughed at this. “You’re not much for socialising, are you?”

“Can you blame me? I was only there five minutes before someone started asking me when I planned on getting married and having kids.”

“It was a horribly nosy question. Some people just can’t seem to help themselves. I’ve had my fair share of that sort of thing, too.”

“You have?”

Carrie nodded. “When you’re young and single, people seem to think they have a God-given right to know why you aren’t already married and starting a family. Honestly, the cheek of some people never fails to amaze me.”

“I thought it was just me who got those questions.”

Carrie let out a laugh. “Are you kidding? I was at a friend’s wedding last year and offered to hold someone’s baby while they nipped to the loo. This other wedding guest who I hardly even knew started asking me when I’d have kids of my own

and telling me not to leave it too long or all my eggs would be shrivelled up. I was speechless.”

“Wow. I suppose I should be grateful no one’s given me advice about my dwindling sperm count now that I’m hurtling into my late thirties.”

The moment he’d made the quip, Joe cringed. Why was he talking about his sperm count? Okay, so Carrie had been the one to start talking about her eggs, but still...

From the kitchen counter, she only gave him an amused smile, apparently unfazed by his sperm talk.

“Some people just think it’s okay to quiz people about personal things like that,” Carrie said. “I honestly can’t understand it. The thing is, sometimes it cuts a little too close to the bone. I have a friend who’s struggled with fertility problems, and has suffered four miscarriages, and so when these clueless morons start asking her why she and her husband don’t have kids yet and tell her to hurry up and get on with it, she’s left shattered.”

“That’s awful,” Joe said, automatically sympathising with this friend of Carrie’s who he didn’t even know. “Casual conversation is one thing. But sometimes it’s too easy to forget that what you think of as a simple question might actually touch a raw nerve.”

Carrie’s gaze held his across the small flat. It was almost as if she could read the unspoken thoughts racing through his head, and for a moment he wondered what it would be like to share his sadness with her, share his sense of loss about the things he wanted so desperately in his life and yet couldn’t seem to have.

He’d never felt any desire to open up to anyone else about those feelings. If he was being honest with himself, those feelings embarrassed him, and made him feel like he was moping.

Quite why Carrie, who was almost a complete stranger, should make him want to talk about things he’d never talked about, was a mystery.

The kettle clicked off the boil and Carrie turned her attention to filling the mugs. Joe was relieved and also sorry that the moment had gone. The idea of spilling his guts to this woman about his deepest feelings was completely ridiculous... and yet something in her gaze had made him want to do just that.

He wasn't entirely sure why.

"Here, have some more cookies," Carrie said, carrying a plate to the coffee table and gesturing for him to take a seat on the sofa. Returning to the kitchen, she sat the mugs on a tray, added a sugar bowl and a small jug of milk, and carried everything over.

Joe helped himself to sugar and milk, before snagging a cookie. As Carrie took the armchair on the other side of the table, curling her legs beneath her, Joe felt more relaxed in her company than he had with any other woman he could remember.

Biting into a cookie of her own, she waggled her eyebrows at him and sipped her coffee. "Not too bad, these cookies, even if I do say so myself."

"They're terrific," Joe agreed. "I was just thinking I wished I'd taken you up on that offer earlier in the week to make another batch for me after I ruined the first lot."

"I'll make more for you. It's nice to have someone to share them with. The recipe makes enough for a couple of dozen cookies, and although I could make a smaller batch, it's a bit of a faff halving the ingredients and then turning on the oven for only a few biscuits."

"Are there spices in these cookies? I think I taste cinnamon."

"Cinnamon and ginger. That's what makes them so Christmassy."

"And there's vanilla in here, too?"

"Yes, and of course the chocolate chips."

"The flavours all go really well together."

“Like I told your neighbour, Ellie, it’s just a recipe I found online. I’ll send it to you if you want?”

“I’m not much of a baker. In fact, I don’t bake at all. But maybe I ought to give these a try. They’re pretty tasty.”

Joe drank some coffee and told himself to stop wittering on. Coco and Praline leapt onto the sofa and purred while they kneaded at him with their soft paw pads and decided where they wanted to lie down for a sleep. Watching the cats stopped him from prattling on any more about the cookies. They really were terrific, but if he sang their praises any further, Carrie would think he had a screw loose.

“I’m glad you like the cookies, Joe,” she said. “And I’m glad I’m finally able to make amends for knocking on your door and waking you up last week, and then assaulting you with a heavy plastic box. I feel bad about making a nuisance of myself.”

“You didn’t,” Joe laughed. “I’m not usually asleep in the middle of the afternoon, so that’s hardly your fault. And in retrospect, I should’ve called out from the garden that day when I realised someone was already in the outbuilding, instead of just marching through the door like that.”

“I’m sorry. You’re sorry. We’re all square.”

“Good.”

Coco and Praline finally found the perfect spot on the sofa, snuggled together on a fleecy throw that was draped over the cushions. Tucked up beside one another and with their noses snuggled beneath their tails, they looked cute.

“Those two are completely irresistible,” Carrie said, setting down her coffee mug and getting to her feet. “I have to get a shot of them for Leah.”

She grabbed a camera from the nearby sideboard and after fiddling with the settings, dropped to her knees on the floor and began snapping shots of the two cats, who just blinked a few times and then ignored her. After a moment, she looked at the screen on the back of the camera and flicked through the shots, then turned it around so Joe could see.

“That’s a good one,” he said. “Leah will love it.”

“I think so, too. Although I’ve already sent her so many pictures of her cats since she left, she’s probably seen enough by now.”

Joe took in the professional camera and the expert composition of the photos she’d taken. “Is that what you do for a living? Are you a photographer?”

“I do a bit of photography on the side, but I make most of my living as a graphic designer. I’m freelance, and having the photography is useful for when there’s a lull in my income, which happens from time to time when you’re self-employed.”

“So, do you take family portraits, pet portraits, that sort of thing?”

“I do a little bit of that, although not so much at the moment. Most of my photography is stock image-based, the sort of thing that designers license and then use in their graphic work. I upload my best photographs to the licensing sites online and that brings in a reasonably regular trickle of income. I also use my photos to create merchandise for my little online shop, where I sell things like greetings cards and notebooks and mugs, that sort of thing.”

“That’s a very creative career.”

“I love it.”

Joe watched as Carrie continued flicking through the carousel of photos on her camera screen. A curl of hazelnut-coloured hair fell from behind her ear and across her face, her eyes focused as she studied the images she’d caught. Her face lit up suddenly, and the light in her eyes made something jolt inside Joe’s chest.

“I forgot I’d taken this one!” she said, scooting onto the sofa next to Joe and turning the camera around so he could look. “There was a hard frost the other morning and I ran outside to catch this photo of the street looking all sparkly. What do you think?”

With some effort, Joe pulled his gaze from Carrie’s face to the camera screen she was now tilting towards him. But as he

took in the elegant black-and-white image of a dark and wintry Foxglove Street sprinkled with shimmering frost beneath the milky streetlights, all he could think about was the press of Carrie's leg against his own on the sofa and the delicate scent of her perfume, and the way that stray lock of glossy brown hair fell across her cheek.

"It's lovely," Joe said, his voice strangled. "Oh, is that the time? I'd better go."

Setting his mug on the table, he rose from the sofa.

"You haven't even finished your coffee yet," Carrie said.

"Sorry, it's just that, er, I remembered an email I forgot to send when I was over at the vet's practice earlier. I should log on at my laptop and take care of it."

"Well, take these leftover cookies with you." Carrie grabbed sheets of kitchen roll from the counter and wrapped up the cookies. "If I eat any more of these, I'll explode."

She held out the wrapped cookies, and when Joe took them from her, her soft, warm skin brushing against his hand sent a hot tingle up his arm.

"Thanks for the coffee and treats," he said at the door. "See you later."

Carrie barely had time to say goodbye before he was bolting across the hallway to his flat. As he set the bundle of cookies on the kitchen counter, he winced at his speedy—and ridiculous—departure from Carrie's presence.

Until that moment when she'd sat down beside him on the sofa and her leg had pressed against his and he'd watched that curl of hazelnut hair fall across her face, Joe hadn't fully realised just how pretty she was.

The electrified tingle that had raced up his arm when her hand touched his had left his head spinning.

Legging it out of her flat might have left Carrie baffled, judging by the look on her face when she'd handed him the bundle of wrapped cookies, but it was better to get out of there than to...

Than to what? Remain in the company of a pretty woman? Admit that he wouldn't have minded chatting longer with her? Risk liking someone who was only here for a few weeks and would be gone before he even took down his Christmas tree?

Yes—it was better to get out of there than do any of those things.

After endless disappointments when it came to romance, Joe knew what he was talking about.

Sinking down onto the sofa, he closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

“You're a twat, Joe,” he muttered to himself. “A complete and utter twat.”

CARRIE GLANCED up from her laptop and towards the window where sheets of heavy rain were hammering against the glass. While immersed in a project for a client, she hadn't noticed how dark it had become, and the small living area was cloaked in gloom thanks to the miserable weather. The crisp blue days they'd enjoyed at the weekend had given way to thick grey clouds and freezing rain as the new week began, with no sign of it letting up anytime soon.

Rising from the kitchen table, she turned on a lamp and crossed to the window to look out at the torrential downpour. It was so dark outside, the streetlights had already switched on even although it wasn't yet three in the afternoon, and the rain was so hard it was bouncing off the pavements and road surfaces.

Across the street, a dog walker hurried by, huddling beneath the hood of her raincoat as the dog at her side trotted at speed, clearly as keen to get out of the weather as its owner. A car pulled up at a house further down and the driver leapt from behind the wheel and sprinted for his front door, holding a folded newspaper over his head to ward off the rain as he navigated the deep puddles.

Another figure hurried along the street, weighed down by heavy shopping bags in both hands. When the figure drew closer and then pushed through the garden gate and towards the building, Carrie finally realised it was Joe.

She hadn't seen him or heard from him since their brief coffee together on Sunday three days ago. Although she'd

hoped the combination of the Foxglove Street meet-and-greet and the Christmas cookies she'd baked might have ushered in a thaw in their neighbourly relationship, his radio silence ever since had put paid to that hope.

Outside, Joe stood at the front door, rummaging in his coat pockets, apparently searching for his keys. Coming up empty, he dropped one set of shopping bags to the wet ground and dug around in his pockets some more.

Seeing his frustration at being unable to locate his keys and get inside the building, Carrie scuttled out of her flat and opened the main doors. Through the rain, Joe blinked in surprise.

"I saw you searching for your keys," Carrie said. "Hurry up and come inside before you get any wetter."

"Thanks." Joe grabbed the bags he'd dropped to the ground and stepped into the hallway. Rainwater ran from his coat in little streams and dripped to the floor. "I don't think I could get any wetter, actually. It's an absolute downpour out there. Trust my luck to get caught in it."

Carrie closed the main door on the hammering rain and dark skies. Joe dumped his shopping bags outside his front door flat and resumed rooting around in his pockets for his keys.

"Bloody hell, don't tell me I lost them somewhere?" he muttered, patting at his pockets in turn.

"Did you maybe drop them into one of your shopping bags?" Carrie suggested.

Joe's expression shifted at this idea, and he reached down and fished around inside one of the bags. Each bag was chock full and it took him a few moments to shuffle things around as his search continued.

"Gotcha!" Joe said at last, straightening up and holding a set of keys aloft in triumph. "I forgot I tossed them in there after they fell out of my pocket when I pulled out my wallet to pay for stuff. Thanks for the tip."

"No problem."

He unlocked his front door and moved to pick up all the shopping bags he'd set down on the floor.

"Let me help you," Carrie said, reaching for some of the bags and laughing as she hefted them into her hands. "Did you leave anything on the shelves?"

Joe chuckled and hauled himself and his bags inside the flat. "I might have gone overboard with my Christmas shopping. If I'd known it was about to start chucking it down out there, I would've taken the car and parked closer to the high street."

"Hindsight is always twenty-twenty."

They dumped the bags on the floor and Joe shrugged out of his coat. Grabbing a towel from the shower room, he scrubbed at his hair and face. Seeing his hair damp and scruffy from the towelling-down, and his cheeks flushed with the exertion of the rush home in the heavy rain, caused Carrie's gaze to linger longer than it should.

"Thanks again for the help," Joe said, tossing the towel aside.

"No problem."

Carrie turned for the door but before she reached it, Joe spoke again.

"Uh, can I make you a coffee?"

When she turned around, the look on his face was curious, as if he wasn't entirely sure whether he wanted to offer her coffee or not. His uncertainty made her uncertain in turn.

She was about to decline the offer when two of the stuffed shopping bags on the floor began sliding and toppling one against the other, spilling their contents to the floor. Carrie watched as the items tumbled out, spying boxed chocolates and gift sets and toys and more besides.

"I knew I packed those bags all wrong," Joe said with a laugh as he walked over to gather up the spilled purchases.

Two small plastic balls rolled across the floor and stopped at Carrie's feet. Picking them up, she saw they were covered

with embossed paw print shapes. She popped them down beside the shopping bag Joe was rearranging on the floor.

“Thanks again,” he said.

“You’ve certainly bought a lot of Christmas gifts,” she said, unable to resist peeking at his purchases. “Who are the little dog balls for?”

“It’s just a gift for Lulu and Peggy, the two dogs who were in the car crash last week,” he said. “I’m dropping by to visit them tomorrow for a check-up and thought it would be nice to take a Christmas present after everything they went through.”

“That’s very thoughtful,” Carrie said, touched by this gesture.

Joe pulled a box of chocolates from the bag and held them up. “I bought these for their owner, Mr Irving. Do these look okay?”

“They look delicious. I’m sure he’ll enjoy them. Are you two friends?”

“We only met for the first time at the scene of the road crash. As far as I can tell, he lives by himself and doesn’t have any family nearby. He was hurt just as badly as his dogs, and I felt sorry for him when I dropped his pets back off at his house last week. I thought an unexpected Christmas gift might cheer him up.”

“That really is incredibly kind of you, Joe,” Carrie said.

He gave an easy shrug, as if it was nothing, then gestured to the bags of shopping and let out another laugh. “Now all I have to do is wrap this lot up. I’ll be here until midnight, given my cackhanded ways with wrapping paper and sticky tape.”

“Do you want a hand?”

The offer was out there before Carrie realised she planned to make it. The look on Joe’s face when he glanced her way indicated he was as surprised as she was.

“No, I’m sure I can manage...” Trailing off, he looked uncertainly at the towering bags of shopping.

“I’m a dab hand at gift wrapping,” Carrie said.

“I couldn’t ask you to give up your time like that.”

“You’re not asking. I’m offering.” It occurred to her she was possibly being a little pushy. They barely knew one another, and maybe he wanted to deal with this task alone. “Unless you’d prefer to take care of it yourself?”

Joe grimaced. “I really, really *don’t* want to take care of it myself.”

Laughing, Carrie turned for the flat door. “In that case, give me a minute to check on the cats and turn off my laptop and I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, were you working? I don’t want to interrupt.”

“You’re not. I need a break anyway. Stick the kettle on and I’ll be back in a second.”

By the time Carrie returned, Joe had changed out of his soaked clothes and was spooning coffee into mugs on the kitchen counter. A few minutes later, they were perched on the edge of Joe’s sofa, mugs in hand, while he unpacked the Christmas shopping bags and spread everything out on the floor for inspection. Rolls of Christmas wrapping paper in various festive colours and designs were propped up against the coffee table, waiting to be put to use.

“These are impressive gifts, Joe,” Carrie said, scanning the items on the floor. “Maybe you could take care of my Christmas shopping, too.”

“I’m not going near another shop until Christmas is over and done with,” Joe laughed. “I’m traumatised from this afternoon’s efforts.”

“You should’ve paced yourself and bought a few things at a time, instead of doing it all in one go.”

“I realise that now. Actually, I was about to buy everything online and get it delivered to the flat already wrapped and ready to go, but when my sister Yvette caught wind of that plan, she told me off for not supporting local Hamblehurst businesses and helping to keep our high street on the go.”

“It’s always good to shop local. Judging by what you’ve got here, you bought something from every shop on the street.”

“Probably.” Joe gave a soft laugh and sipped his coffee. “I only planned to make a start and pick up things for my parents and browse ideas for my nephews, but once I got started, I found gifts for everyone.”

“It’s a lovely high street. There are so many different shops. You’re lucky to have such great options right on your doorstep. And I think it makes it much more fun to select Christmas gifts in person, rather than just clicking things on a website. It’s more personal.” She pointed to the gifts. “Tell me what you bought and who it’s for.”

Carrie listened while Joe summarised his haul of purchases. It was obvious that he’d selected the gifts carefully, based on what he knew people would enjoy.

There was a hardback book on cricket for his father and a curry cookbook for his mother, along with a goodie bag filled with wine and posh nibbles. For his sister Yvette, he’d chosen an indulgent bath gift set, and for his brother-in-law there was a board game based on a television series he enjoyed. For various aunts and uncles, there were scented candles and bottles of whisky. He’d bought a gorgeous blue pashmina for his Secret Santa gift at the veterinary surgery, along with boxes of luxury chocolates for each of the veterinary nurses, which would comprise his contribution to the gift bags handed out from the practice partners to their staff.

They were all thoughtful and well-chosen gifts, which Carrie felt sure would be appreciated by those who received them.

But it was the gifts Joe had purchased for his two little nephews that tugged at Carrie’s heartstrings.

There were sets of superhero figures, two for each boy, along with matching colouring books and packs of coloured pens. He’d also added annuals of the boys’ favourite comic books, boxes of miniature racing cars, beginner magic trick

sets, and two of the biggest festive selection boxes Carrie had ever seen.

“Your nephews will love those gifts,” Carrie said, admiring the metallic-painted racing cars and flicking through the comic annuals.

“I’ll get an earful from Yvette for giving them too much chocolate and setting them up for a Christmas morning sugar high, but I don’t care,” Joe laughed. “Kids deserve as much chocolate at Christmas as they can get.”

The love this man had for his nephews was obvious. As Carrie watched Joe inspect the gifts he’d bought for the little boys, she saw tenderness in his gaze, as if he were imagining the children opening the presents on Christmas morning and seeing the delight on their faces at what Santa had left for them.

Behind the tenderness, Carrie thought she caught a hint of something else, too. Was it sadness? That didn’t make much sense. Why would Joe be sad about the prospect of sharing these wonderful Christmas gifts with his two sweet nephews?

Feeling as if she’d suddenly caught him in an unguarded moment, Carrie pointed to a bag beside Joe, which contained yet another gift poking out of the top.

“What’s that one?” she asked.

Joe turned to the bag and pulled out a gift set of chutneys. “This is for Melissa and Stuart upstairs. They’re both cheese aficionados and I thought they might enjoy these over the holidays. And this...” He pulled another box from the bag and held it up. “This is for Leah when she comes back from her New York trip. It’s just some posh chocolates. I know she likes those.”

“She gives you chocolates and you give her chocolates,” Carrie laughed.

“It worked last year. Why changing a winning formula?”

He glanced back inside the bag, as if there was something else in there, but then pushed it out of the way behind the sofa.

“Is that everything, then?” Carrie asked.

“Just about.” He looked sheepish and a blush coloured his cheeks. “Yeah, that’s everything. Er, so, shall we make a start on this lot, then?”

Carrie wondered what had made him awkward all of a sudden. But a moment later, he seemed fine again, clearing the coffee table and unrolling a length of wrapping paper so they could get to work. When he started hacking at the paper with scissors, Carrie leapt to her feet.

“Eek, you need to cut nice straight edges or else the wrapping will look all messy,” she scolded him, taking the scissors away. “Let me show you. I’ll trim the paper. You cut the sticky tape.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

Carrie expertly measured and cut a square of paper, neatly wrapping it around one of the comic book annuals before folding down the flaps for Joe to apply the sticky tape. As they worked together, a grin appeared on Joe’s face.

“One down, only ninety-nine left to go,” he said.

“We’re up to the challenge,” Carrie laughed. “Right, let’s start the next one.”

JOE PASSED the second of the two comic book annuals to Carrie and watched in awe as she deftly cut the wrapping paper to size and folded perfectly straight edges across the top and bottom.

Despite being a skilled vet with steady hands and a talent for intricate and complex orthopaedic animal surgery, Joe was hopeless when it came to the mysteries of gift wrapping. He was grateful Carrie had agreed to stay and help with the task, not just because he hadn't much fancied tackling it all on his own, but because he enjoyed her company.

He wished he *didn't* enjoy her company. When he'd sprinted from her flat a few days ago, leaving his coffee almost completely untouched on the table, it was because he hadn't trusted the surge of emotion that had coursed through him when Carrie's leg brushed against his as she'd sat beside him on the sofa.

Her proximity had made him think things he had no business thinking.

Like what it would feel like to slip his arm around her and tilt her mouth to his and kiss her senseless.

Even remembering those thoughts that had seared through his mind as Carrie innocently showed him the wintry photographs she'd caught on her camera now made him want to hold her and kiss her even more.

And that, Joe knew, was a stupid thing to want and a stupid thing to think.

Carrie was only here in Hamblehurst for a few weeks. Once Christmas was over and Leah returned from New York, Carrie would leave. She'd be gone and he'd probably never see her again.

So why had he invited her into his flat for coffee?

Well, he'd done it to thank her for letting him into the building when he couldn't find his keys.

That sounded reasonable enough.

But why had he then asked her to stay and help him wrap up the mountain of Christmas gifts he'd bought? There was no need to do that.

And yet he'd done it. He couldn't seem to help himself. Carrie might have been the one who'd made the offer, but he'd been the one to accept it. She was probably only being polite when she'd offered to help, especially considering the size of the task ahead. There was a *lot* of Christmas wrapping to get through.

It struck him suddenly that Carrie had actually agreed to stay and help, despite the work involved. She could've easily wriggled out of the impromptu offer and explained she had work to get on with, cats to look after, laundry to do, or any number of other excuses.

Instead, she'd insisted on staying.

Perhaps she felt sorry for him, the sad single bloke in the flat across the hall who spent his time being grumpy and getting drenched in icy rain and losing his keys.

Carrie looked up from the comic book annual she'd just finished wrapping and gave him a smile so dazzling Joe felt his heart actually clutch inside his chest.

"What's next?" she asked, eyeing the pile of presents. "Shall we wrap your sister's gift set next and then that board game for your brother-in-law?"

"Sure."

Joe passed her the gift set and prepared the sticky tape while Carrie cut and folded the wrapping paper. The rain

lashed against the windows, the twinkle lights danced around the Christmas tree, and festive music played softly from the radio Joe had turned on in the kitchen. It felt snug and cosy as they worked alongside each other, and comfortable, too, as if they'd known one another forever, instead of only a few days.

Carrie folded down the edge of the paper and Joe ran the sticky tape over it. Their fingers brushed together, and Carrie let out a soft laugh before looking up into his eyes.

Joe returned her gaze, and for a long moment there was nothing else in the room except the two of them and the intimate and expectant look they shared.

Was *she* thinking what *he* was thinking?

What *was* he thinking, anyway? It seemed like his mind had gone completely blank.

A trilling noise pulled Joe's gaze from Carrie. On the coffee table, his phone was ringing. Saved by the bell. His sister's name flashed on the screen.

"Joe, how did the Christmas shopping go this afternoon?" Yvette asked when he answered the call.

"Uh, fine," he replied, watching as Carrie shifted on the edge of the sofa and occupied herself with the roll of wrapping paper.

"Are you back at the flat?" Yvette said.

"Yes. Why?"

"I forgot to ask you to sign the get-well card for Clive before you left earlier. I'm driving over to see him now and thought I'd swing by your place first."

One of their vet colleagues, Clive Moore, had fallen ill with a terrible dose of the flu. When Clive had called the practice that morning to say he wouldn't be coming into work, Joe had barely been able to make out what the man was saying. It was only when his wife took the phone from him that Joe realised how ill his colleague and friend was.

Yvette was the one who'd suggested signing a card to wish him a speedy recovery. As Joe had got caught up covering

Clive's appointments at the surgery in his absence, he'd forgotten all about the card before leaving for his afternoon of Christmas shopping.

"Come over and I'll sign it," Joe said. "Although you should keep your distance when you go over to see Clive, Yvette. The last thing we need is two vets ill in their beds."

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on going inside. When I spoke to Clive's wife earlier, she said he's been fast asleep in bed all day, anyway. I'll just drop off the card at the door and leave it at that."

"It sounds like he has it bad. I don't think we'll be seeing him back at the practice until next week at the earliest."

"We've already postponed some appointments and redistributed his work. What matters is that he gets better."

"Exactly."

"Anyway, I'll be with you in five minutes."

Yvette hung up. When Joe turned back to Carrie, she gave him a concerned look.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"One of my colleagues at the practice is ill with the flu. He was fine yesterday but it hit him sometime last night and today he's a wreck. My sister's coming round with a get-well card for me to sign."

"Poor guy. It's no fun being ill so close to Christmas." She gestured to the wrapped gifts on the floor. "Shall we move these out of the way?"

Joe waved a hand. "We've already wrapped Yvette's gift, but I'll stick it through in my bedroom anyway, or else she'll start interrogating me about what it is."

He carried the gift to the other room and when he walked back through the front doorbell rang. He buzzed Yvette into the building and when she arrived at his flat door she was already pulling the greeting card from her bag.

“We left space at the bottom of the card for your awful scrawl, Joe, and... oh, hello there! Sorry, I didn’t realise you had company.”

Yvette blinked at Carrie, who was sitting on the sofa with her coffee mug in her hands. After setting the mug down, she got up and held out her hand.

“Hello, I’m Carrie. I’m flat-sitting for Leah across the hall.”

“Right, I see. Well, hello.” With a warm smile, Yvette shook Carrie’s hand as her gaze took in the Christmas wrapping paper on the coffee table and the gifts, both wrapped and unwrapped, spread out on the floor. “He’s not got you dealing with his Christmas wrapping, has he? Have you no shame, Joe?”

Joe tutted. “Carrie offered to help.”

“I enjoy it, honestly,” Carrie said. “It’s nice making all the presents look pretty.”

Joe watched his sister’s gaze narrow as she looked between the two of them. He could almost see her brain working overtime as she sized up the situation.

“Let’s see this card, then,” Joe frowned.

Yvette passed him the card and he signed it at the kitchen counter. When he handed it back, Yvette was inspecting the gifts on the floor.

“The boys will love those superhero figures, Joe,” she said. “And are those little cars and magic trick sets for them, too?”

Joe nodded. “Will they like them?”

“They’ll love them.” She glanced again at the gifts. “Which one’s my present, then?”

“You’re not getting anything.”

She chuckled at this, then stepped further into the room when her gaze seemed to catch something near the sofa. Yvette pointed to the bag Joe had hurriedly shoved out of the way when Carrie had asked what was inside it earlier.

“What’s that?” Yvette asked, peering into the bag. “Is that my gift?”

“No!” Joe almost yelled as he stepped towards the bag and shoved it further behind the sofa.

Yvette gave him a surprised look but must have seen the way his gaze flicked to Carrie as he pushed the bag out of the way, because an annoyingly knowing look crossed his sister’s face.

The one remaining item inside the shopping bag was a glossy silver-toned photograph frame. When Joe saw it in one of the gift shops on Hamblehurst high street, the first thought that had come into his head was how perfect it would be for the photo Carrie had shown him of Foxglove Street bathed in sparkling white frost beneath a black wintry sky.

He’d bought the frame on impulse, thinking he’d give it to her as a Christmas gift. It was only as he’d marched home in the lashing rain that the stupidity of this idea became obvious to him.

There was no reason for him to buy a Christmas gift for a woman he’d only met a few days ago. If anything, it was wildly inappropriate. Maybe even a bit creepy.

But when he’d imagined himself presenting Carrie with the gift and explaining how good it would look framing the elegant Christmas noir photograph she’d snapped of the street, it didn’t sound creepy or inappropriate inside his head at all.

It sounded nice. Easy. Friendly.

Romantic.

Gah! Joe scowled at his sister, who was grinning at him as if she’d already worked this whole thing out in her head. She probably had, too. Yvette was too clever for her own good, and right now she was annoying the heck out of him.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Carrie looking between the two of them, no doubt wondering at the bizarre and immature behaviour he and his sister had suddenly descended into as they continued their ridiculous staring match.

“Anyway,” Joe said, frowning. “I’ve signed the card for Clive, so if that’s everything you came for, you’d better be off.”

As Yvette popped the card into the envelope and slipped it back into her shoulder bag, Joe corralled her towards the door. He swung it open, but before Yvette stepped into the hallway, she turned around again.

Of course she did.

“As Clive is sick in bed, his wife said they won’t be there for our Christmas party this Saturday,” Yvette said. “Even if he’s on the mend, he probably won’t want to go out for a big meal and drinks and dancing and so on.”

Joe shrugged. “Okay, well, that’s a shame, but it makes sense. Be sure to give them both my best wishes when you’re over there.”

“We’ve already paid the deposit for the meals. It would be a shame to waste the money. Why don’t you come along, Joe?”

Joe hadn’t expected this turn in the conversation, although he should have, considering this was his sister he was talking to.

“I said I’d cover the on-call on Saturday night,” Joe said.

Yvette dismissed this with an airy wave of her hand. “One of the vets over at the Elmbank practice wants to do it in exchange for us covering their turn on the rota on Sunday night. So, you’re off the hook and as free as a bird.”

“But—”

“Carrie, why don’t you come along, too?” Yvette said, offering her a bright smile.

Joe turned in slow-motion horror to see Carrie looking at his sister in obvious surprise.

“Me?” she said.

“Yes, you!” Yvette said. “It’s just our vet practice Christmas night out with a meal and a few glasses of wine and

some dodgy dancing to the DJ afterwards. We've got two spaces free and you're more than welcome to join us. In fact, I insist you come along!"

"Well, that's very nice of you, but I don't know anyone," Carrie said.

"Don't be daft, you know me," Yvette said. "And you know Joe, too."

At this, she gave Joe an evil grin and an evil wink to go along with it.

"Plus, you're new here in the community, so it's only right we make you feel welcome, especially as it's Christmas time," Yvette added. "Honestly, we'd love to see you there. The more the merrier."

"Uh, well..."

Carrie looked at Joe, as if seeking guidance on whether he actually wanted her to accept this invitation or not. The last thing he wanted was to embarrass her by making her think she wasn't welcome.

"You won't want to miss the sight of my sister getting drunk and making a fool of herself on the dance floor," Joe said at last.

Carrie laughed, the awkward moment successfully navigated, and Joe returned her smile.

"It does sound like fun," Carrie said. "Thanks, I'd love to come along."

"Terrific," Yvette said. "The table is booked for seven sharp, so don't be late."

"Thanks again for the invitation," Carrie said.

"My pleasure."

Finally, Yvette stepped out into the hallway. "You're welcome," she whispered to Joe with another evil grin before walking towards the main doors.

"What did you go and do that for?" he hissed as he followed her.

At the main door, Yvette turned and sighed. “Stop being a gigantic plonker, Joe,” she said.

And with that, she swept out through the doors, pulling up her hood against the rain before hurrying to her car parked out on the street.

Left speechless at the door, Joe could only stare as his sister drove off. When he went back inside his flat, Carrie gave him a cautious look.

“Listen, if you’d rather I didn’t tag along to your Christmas party, I completely understand,” she said. “Your sister sort of put you on the spot by inviting me.”

Joe watched her twist her hands together, her expression almost wincing. He hated the idea that she felt uncertain about whether she was actually welcome and whether Joe’s reaction had been sincere.

“I’d love it if you came along,” he said truthfully, then gave her a warm smile. “You’ll have fun, I promise. Nothing says Christmas quite like a bunch of drunk vets discussing the latest advances in flea treatments and singing tunelessly to *Mistletoe and Wine*.”

Carrie laughed, the sound bright like a festive carol on a crisp wintry afternoon.

Joe might not have had any intention of going along to the stupid Christmas night out, but now that his evil sister had set these wheels in motion and lured him—and poor Carrie—into it, he realised couldn’t Saturday come fast enough.

COCO AND PRALINE wound their way around Carrie's ankles as she stood in the bedroom trying to decide between silver hoop earrings and spangly diamante drops to accessorise the cranberry red wrap dress she'd chosen to wear for the Saturday night veterinary practice Christmas party.

"Which should I choose, Coco?" Carrie said to the little cat purring at her feet. "The hoops for understated elegance or the drops for a splash of glamour?"

"Meow."

"The hoops, you say?"

"Meow."

"Praline, what do you think?"

Praline stopped twisting around her ankles and leapt onto the bed, kneading her paws into the blanket as she purred.

"Hmm, does that mean you prefer the sparkly drops?"

Praline cut her a look before settling down on the blanket, her front paws tucked beneath her little body and tail coiled at her side. The little cat purred as she watched Carrie holding up the earrings, still undecided.

"I think I'll go with the spangly drops."

"Meow."

Carrie's phone rang and when she glanced to where it sat on the edge of the bed, she saw it was a video call from Leah.

“Carrie, you look terrific!” Leah said the moment she answered the call. “That cranberry colour looks totally amazing on you.”

“You don’t think it’s a bit much?” Carrie asked, poking at the v-neckline and silky fabric.

“It’s Christmas,” Leah replied. “There’s no such thing as too much at Christmas.”

“What about earrings?” Carrie held up the earring choice again so Leah could see the options on the screen.

“I say go with the simple silver hoops. Let the dress do all the talking for you.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Carrie balanced the phone against the mirror on the dressing table while she put on the silver hoops. Seeing her reflection, she knew they were the right choice.

“Carrie, I still can’t believe you’re going out on a date with *Joe*,” Leah said, her eyes wide on the screen. “I mean, how did that even happen?”

“I don’t think it *is* a date, Leah. It was his sister who invited me to the Christmas dinner thingy, not Joe. I got the impression he wasn’t even planning on going along until this colleague of theirs got sick and the spaces opened up.”

“Hmm, well, if it’s not a date at the start, it will be a date by the end. You look gorgeous tonight, Carrie, and Joe won’t be able to resist you.”

Carrie’s cheeks flushed as Leah cackled on the other end of the video call.

“I don’t think he’s interested in anything like that,” Carrie insisted. “Although, to be honest, he’s sort of hard to read.”

Carrie was only too willing to admit to herself that the two of them hadn’t got off to the best start as neighbours after their first few interactions, but although they’d managed a couple of reasonably enjoyable conversations since then, she still knew almost nothing about the man living across the hallway. His guarded demeanour made it difficult to know what he really

thought about things, such as whether he actually wanted her to come along to this Christmas party at all.

He'd said he did, but perhaps he was just being polite after his sister landed him in it by inviting Carrie along before he had a chance to stop her?

"I've lived across the hallway from Joe for over a year now," Leah said. "It's true that he's quiet and minds his own business. But I don't think he'd agree to bring you along to his Christmas night out unless he really wanted to. He's never dated anyone in all the time I've lived in Hamblehurst, at least not that I know of. I've certainly never seen any women coming or going from his place. My honest impression of him is that he's serious-minded and fairly private and probably doesn't want to waste his time with anyone who isn't worthy."

"Or maybe he's a nutter and no other woman will have him."

Leah rolled her eyes at this suggestion. "He's not a nutter. He's not as, er, socially out-going as some blokes, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing."

Carrie couldn't disagree with that. Like most women her age, she'd long ago had her fill of blokey, swaggering macho-men who only hung around long enough to get a girl into bed.

Still, there was something about Joe that puzzled her.

"He doesn't seem to be much of a fan of Christmas," Carrie said. "He only put up a Christmas tree and strung some lights around his flat windows to keep his little nephews and his sister happy."

"Men do Christmas differently to women," Leah said, not unreasonably.

"I know, but it feels like there's something else going on. When I first asked him if he planned to drop into the Foxglove Street festive meet-and-greet that Olive Nimmo arranged, he gave me a look as if I'd suggested he eat a bucket of cockroaches."

Leah laughed. "That's quite an image you've painted."

“And it sounds like he wasn’t planning on going along to his vet practice’s Christmas night out until his sister railroaded him into it.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to go if he didn’t have a date. Now he has a date. You.”

“It’s not a date.”

Another laugh from Leah. “Maybe you’re reading too much into all this. You told me Joe did actually turn up to the meet-and-greet the other day.”

“Only by accident. He was on his way home to his flat and ended up taking part by default.”

“Well, what about all the Christmas gifts you helped him wrap? He must enjoy Christmas at least a little if he was willing to go out and do all that gift shopping. Most blokes would just order stuff online or do a mad dash to the supermarket on Christmas Eve and hope for the best.”

“The gifts were lovely and thoughtful, it’s true. He obviously loves his family and wants to make sure his staff knows he appreciates them. But...”

Carrie trailed off, not entirely sure what she was trying to say. There was just something in Joe’s eyes that made her wonder about him, some hint of sadness that she couldn’t stop thinking about.

Was it even sadness she saw there? Was she imagining things?

Her phone beeped with a message from Joe, interrupting her thoughts.

I’ll be ready to go in five minutes if you are? his message read.

“I’d better hurry up,” Carrie told Leah. “Joe’s almost ready to leave and I still need to grab my bag and lipstick.”

“Have fun!” Leah said. “Oh, let me see the cats before you hang up.”

While Leah cooed at the cats curled up on the bed, Leah touched up her lipstick and tossed some make-up into her bag. After ending the call with Leah, she pulled on her smart winter boots with the cute heels and grabbed her coat from the hook.

“Goodnight, little kitties,” she told Coco and Praline as she turned for the door. “I’ll see you later.”

She was locking the front door just as Joe stepped out of his flat into the hallway.

“Hi,” he said with a smile. “I was just on my way to knock on your door to see if you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.”

“You look, um, you look great, Carrie.”

Glancing away as he locked his front door, it wasn’t easy to miss the colour climbing up his cheeks.

“Thanks. You look good, too. Joe.”

And he did. Beneath his thick woollen coat, which he hadn’t buttoned up, Carrie caught sight of a smart shirt and tie complementing dark trousers and shiny leather shoes. A spicy scent of aftershave carried across the hallway.

“Our taxi’s waiting,” Joe said as he opened the main door for her.

“Great. Lovely.”

“After you.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure, you’re welcome.”

She hoped they wouldn’t keep babbling like this to each other for the rest of the evening. First date nerves always left Carrie lost for words to begin with.

It’s not a date! she reminded herself.

But as Joe’s hand brushed the small of her back as he opened the taxi door for her, Carrie’s reminder suddenly rang hollow.

It was a date. A casual Christmas date.

And there was nothing wrong with that, was there?

* * *

This was all wrong, Joe thought as they climbed out of the taxi and walked into the hotel restaurant function room where the rest of his veterinary practice colleagues were already seated at a table near the back. Christmas music blared from the house system, waiters and waitresses scurried between tables, and spangly decorations festooned the ceilings and walls.

The function room, filled with many other festive group bookings besides the vet practice's, looked like an explosion at a tinsel factory. Some of the people there appeared to have hit the wine hard and early. On the small dance floor at the front of the room, couples mooched to the soppy Christmas ballad that was playing.

For a moment, Joe wished he was anywhere but here.

He should never have allowed Yvette to trick him into coming along to the Christmas night out, let alone allow her to invite his neighbour to accompany him.

Carrie wasn't even his neighbour. She was a *friend* of his neighbour's. He barely even knew his neighbour, and now here he was taking his neighbour's friend out to a Christmas party.

A Christmas party with his vet practice colleagues, all of whom were now turning to stare as he and Carrie approached the table. Yvette, seated at one end beside her husband, waggled her eyebrows at him and gave him one of her trademark evil smiles.

Joe scowled in response. He was returning that expensive luxury bath gift set he'd bought her for Christmas, he decided. No way was he presenting his sister with the special gift, considering what she was putting him through right now.

And now he was just being Mr Grumpy. Good old Mr Grumpy. Except this time, it was the Mr Grumpy Christmas Special.

As they neared the table, Joe imagined what his colleagues must be thinking.

He's brought a date!

This is the first time in ages that he's come to one of these things!

Has hell frozen over? That's more likely than Joe turning up for a friendly get-together.

If anyone was actually thinking any of those things, they didn't let on. Instead, his colleagues offered smiles and hellos, each of them greeting Carrie warmly as he introduced her. His parents, who were seated at the far end of the table, welcomed her with hugs and thanked her for joining their little festive shindig. Joe's parents had impeccable manners and managed to resist sending him meaningful looks and winks of approval until Carrie had turned away from them both.

Joe scowled at the hopeful expressions on his parents' faces and hoped they'd behave themselves. The only people more baffled than Joe about his continued bachelor status were his mother and father, and the sight of a beautiful young woman in his company might only encourage them. He was grateful when they seemed to get the silent message he was sending across the table, a message that could be summed up as, *Don't get any ideas into your heads!*

When they reached their place at the other side of the table, Joe pulled out Carrie's chair, and she turned and gave him a grateful smile. Taking the seat beside her, he nodded his thanks as a colleague passed a bottle of wine across the table. He filled Carrie's glass and then his own.

"Cheers," he said, tilting his glass in the general direction of his gathered colleagues and then towards Carrie.

"Thanks for inviting me along," Carrie said, her gaze passing across the group before settling on Joe. "It looks like we're set for a fun night."

Joe saw the sparkle in her eyes, the light in her expression, her ease in the company of his colleagues. Carrie clearly

wasn't overthinking any of this and was obviously just taking the night in her stride.

Perhaps he ought to do the same.

The meal was served soon after they arrived. Over prawn cocktails followed by roast turkey with all the trimmings, the conversation flowed, and the function room grew ever noisier as people competed to be heard above the music and each other.

Joe chatted with the veterinary nurse seated beside him, chatted with her husband, chatted with his vet practice partner seated opposite while Carrie was drawn into conversation with his colleagues on the other side of the table and with Yvette, too.

They were halfway through dessert before Joe finally got to talk to Carrie in any real depth. As they dug into dense wedges of Christmas pudding drenched in ice cream, Joe topped up Carrie's wine glass.

"These are nice people you work with, Joe," Carrie said. "I'm glad I got the chance to meet them all."

"They're a good team. We're lucky to have such good staff at the practice."

"Working alone and freelance has its perks, but I'd forgotten how much fun it is to have colleagues to spend time with."

"Have you always been freelance?"

Carrie shook her head. "I worked for a digital marketing agency for a few years after I finished college. When the agency was bought over by a bigger company, they made a lot of redundancies and I was one of them."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I was sorry, too. I liked my colleagues there and liked having other people to chat with about my work projects. I'm still in touch with a few people who I knew there, but only occasionally. Life just gets busy, you know?"

“Do you think you’ll always be freelance from now on? Or do you want to return to working for a company some day?”

Carrie finished her pudding and looked thoughtful. “I’d like to work for a company again, maybe part time so I can continue with my own clients and side projects. Not so much for the job security, because in my line of work there isn’t much of that anyway whether you’re an employee or a freelancer, but because I miss the camaraderie.” She waved a hand at the table around them. “I sort of envy you having these lovely people to work with every day.”

Joe glanced at his colleagues, enjoying their food and wine and one another. He was lucky to have these people working at the vet practice. They were a good bunch of folk and committed to helping the animals they cared for. They were all pretty good company too, as tonight only served to remind him.

Most of his colleagues had brought their wives or husbands or partners to the party. Joe watched a few of the couples lean in closer to each other, sharing an intimate laugh or comment as they finished their pudding and drained their wine glasses. Further down the table, one of the vets picked up a sprig of plastic mistletoe from the centre decoration and waggled it at her husband before lifting it above their heads. To the sounds of much good-natured cheering and encouragement, the couple kissed beneath the mistletoe and received a round of applause in response, the two of them laughing as they traded an intimate look with each other.

That look forced Joe to drop his gaze as an empty blast rolled through his chest. Carrie might envy him for having work colleagues in his life, but right now he envied *them*, the loved-up ones at least, for the love and companionship they shared at this most special time of the year.

“Hey, did you hear me?”

Joe turned to Carrie and realised she’d said something he’d missed.

“Sorry, it’s pretty noisy in here,” he said. Although it was true, it wasn’t the reason he hadn’t heard her.

“I asked if you happened to know if Beech Street is an okay place to live in Hamblehurst?” Carrie said.

“Sure, it’s a nice enough street. Why?”

Carrie tapped at her phone and tilted it towards him. “When I got chatting to one of your neighbours last weekend at the meet-and-greet, Jess Shepherd, she mentioned she was moving out of her flat next month to live with her boyfriend. I said I was looking for a new place to live after Christmas, and she suggested I ought to check out the flat she was leaving. She just sent through some photos for me to look at.”

Carrie flicked at the screen where there were photos of a flat on display, showing a small living room, tiny bedroom, and a postage stamp-sized kitchen. Joe stared at the images for a long moment, processing what Carrie had said.

“You might be interested in staying here in Hamblehurst?” he asked.

Carrie gave an easy shrug. “Maybe. It’s a gorgeous little town. I won’t deny being a bit smitten by the place since I got here. I have to find somewhere to live in the next few weeks or else I’ll have no choice but to travel up north to see my parents in Yorkshire and stay with them for a while.” She waved a hand at the phone screen. “It might not hurt to check out this flat tip-off from your neighbour, Jess.”

Joe kept his gaze on Carrie’s phone screen as she flicked once more through the photo images. Considering he hardly knew this woman, the idea of her staying on in Hamblehurst once her flat-sitting duties for Leah were finished was ridiculously appealing.

“So, Beech Street isn’t in some rough and tumble part of Hamblehurst, then?” Carrie asked.

Joe laughed. “Hamblehurst doesn’t have any rough and tumble parts. You’d be fine if you decided to live there.”

Carrie looked pleased with this information. “Obviously, I didn’t want to ask Jess something like that. I only met her that one time out on Foxglove Street and it would be rude to start

quizzing someone about whether the road they live on is a bit sketchy.”

“You should definitely check it out.”

“I think I might just do that.”

Carrie turned and gave him a smile that outshone everything else in the function room, which was quite a feat considering how much garish tinsel there was draped all over the place.

In that moment, Joe realised something that was as profound and surprising as it was stupid and ridiculous.

He had a crush on Carrie. A huge crush. A huge *Christmas* crush.

And not only had he not seen it coming, but he also hadn't the first clue what to do about it, either.

THE SMALL DANCE floor was crammed with sweaty festive revellers gyrating to Wizzard's perennial classic, 'I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day'. The music was too loud, the dancing was terrible, and Carrie was having the time of her life.

Yvette and her husband bopped around on one side of her while one of the practice nurses and his wife bopped around on the other.

Directly across from her on the dance floor, Joe shuffled from side to side, looking like he had no idea how to move his legs in time to the rhythm. Carrie couldn't help but smile at the sight of him, trying his best to join in with the awful dancing even although it was obvious that he'd rather have hid in his chair back at the table.

The song reached its final crescendo as everyone belted out the lyrics in a tuneless screech. When the song ended, everyone on the floor clapped their hands together and cheered.

"I need a drink," Joe announced, turning towards the bar on the other side of the function room that was crowded with party-goers eager to keep the booze flowing.

Before Joe could take a single step, the DJ started playing another song. When Carrie heard the first bars of Mariah Carey's 'All I Want For Christmas Is You', she let out a squeal.

“Ooh, I love this song! Stay and dance with me, Joe! We’re having such fun.”

“Yeah, stay and dance, Joe,” Yvette added as she shimmied on the dance floor. “I haven’t seen you look this animated since... well, I can’t even remember since when.”

“I’m knackered,” Joe complained. “I need a drink of water.”

“Stop whining,” Yvette said, giving him a playful slap on the arm. “Stay here and dance with us or I’ll tell mum and dad that you failed to obey their direct orders.”

“That’s very mature, Yvette,” Joe said.

He might be scowling, but Carrie saw the laughter in his eyes at his sister’s threat. During the short time she’d spent with the Whitaker clan tonight, it was obvious that they doted on one another.

Joe’s parents had left a short time ago to relieve the babysitter who was looking after Yvette’s twin boys, insisting that Yvette and her husband stay for a while longer and enjoy themselves. Before departing, Joe’s parents had embraced Carrie warmly and told her to make sure Joe took her up on to the dance floor at some point, and for more than just one dance, too.

She wasn’t sure who’d blushed more deeply at this suggestion, her or Joe.

As Mariah Carey warbled through the opening lyrics of the song blasting from the DJ’s speakers, Carrie held out her hand to Joe. “One more dance, and then we’ll grab some drinks.”

He gave a world-weary shrug and grinned. “Fine, but does it have to be Mariah Carey?”

Laughing at his quip and mock-exasperated expression, Carrie started dancing. As the song picked up pace, they were soon twisting and turning together, Joe twirling her beneath his arm and making her laugh.

“See, you’re pretty good at this,” she said. “I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. It’s only a matter of time before I accidentally stamp on your feet and break your toes.”

She laughed again, enjoying the festive fun of the song and the crush of everyone angling for space on the dance floor. Joe really was pretty decent at dancing, too, when he gave himself permission to let go and just enjoy himself.

Which he obviously was. Or at least, that’s how it looked to Carrie. As he gave her another twirl, a double one this time that turned her a little dizzy thanks to the effects of the wine and the disco lights, the sparkle in his eyes and the curve at his lips told her he wasn’t just doing this in order to be polite.

By the time the Mariah Carey song ended, Carrie was breathless and looking forward to glugging down an ice cold drink to quench her thirst. She was about to point towards the bar when the indefatigable DJ started playing yet another Christmas track.

This time, it was Wham’s ‘Last Christmas’. The slow tempo and tinkling festive tune had most of the couples who were still on the dance floor stepping into one another’s arms for a slow dance. Caught in the middle of the floor by suddenly smooching couples, Carrie glanced at Joe, assuming he’d be off like a shot.

When he instead gave her an embarrassed smile and a shrug before holding out his hand to her, she was more than a little surprised.

“In for a penny,” he said. “Shall we stay for one more?”

Carrie took his hand and stepped closer. “Why not? I always liked this song.”

They danced together in a clumpy shuffling motion that was more like a stilted jig than a cosy slow dance, but Carrie enjoyed it just the same. With his hand on her waist and a decent gap maintained between them, Joe remained the perfect gentleman.

When Carrie stepped a little closer and brought their clasped hands towards Joe’s chest, so they weren’t sticking out awkwardly and poking other couples as they rotated past them,

she saw the flash of surprise in his eyes at their sudden proximity.

It was nice being this close to him. She could smell the spicy scent of the aftershave at his neck and feel the firm expanse of his chest beneath their clasped hands.

And she could see the softness in his gaze as he looked down into her eyes as they swayed together.

For a long moment, she thought he would kiss her. He'd asked her to dance to this slow romantic Christmas song, after all. There'd been no need to do that. If he'd scuttled off the dance floor at the first notes of the eighties pop classic, she would've more than understood why.

And yet he'd asked to stay and dance to the song, an intimate song filled with longing and romance and...

"This always struck me as a pretty miserable Christmas tune," Joe announced, clearing his throat and leaning back a little, as if the closeness of their bodies had only just become apparent to him.

Carrie blinked. "Miserable?"

"Yeah, I mean, this guy is bleating on about how his girlfriend cheated on him last Christmas," Joe said with a shrug. "That's a pretty miserable subject for a Christmas song, if you ask me."

"Huh, I suppose you're right." Carrie thought about this. "But at the same time, he's also singing about how he wants to give his heart to someone special this Christmas. That's lovely and positive, don't you think?"

Another shrug. "If that's what he really wants, then why is he still thinking about the girl who cheated on him? He's still hurt about the whole thing, obviously. He might say he wants someone special this year, but he doesn't really mean it. He's still cut up about the one that got away."

Carrie knew the song had a melancholy edge, but this analysis put a whole new light on things. "I honestly never thought about it like that."

“It’s all in the lyrics. The guy wants what he can’t have and so Christmas is basically ruined for him.”

Carrie let out a rumble of laughter at that. “Then why are all these couples slow dancing to it and gazing into one another’s eyes?”

“I’m not saying it’s not a great song. It’s a catchy tune, no two ways about it. But let’s face it, most of these people are drunk. I’m not sure if they’re slow dancing or just holding each other up off the floor.”

His wry grin made her laugh even harder. By the time the song ended, Carrie had listened to every word George Michael sang, scrutinising the lyrics for meanings she’d previously failed to notice.

“Okay, you’re right,” she conceded as the song faded out. “It’s a sad song. Thanks for ruining it for me forever.”

“Happy to be of service.”

He grinned and gave her a wink that made Carrie’s stomach somersault, and as he led her off the dance floor towards the bar, she really wished he’d kissed her instead of deconstructing one of the greatest Christmas tracks of all time.

* * *

As Joe waited at the bar for drinks, he wondered what was wrong with him.

Had he really just plucked up the courage to ask Carrie to dance with him to one of the most brilliant Christmas ballads of all time... and then used the opportunity to lecture her about the song’s brutal and depressing true meaning?

Yes, that’s exactly what he’d done. He must have a screw loose. Either that or a cataclysmic case of verbal diarrhoea.

Sharing his unsolicited analysis had been a defence mechanism. As they’d moved together on the dance floor and Carrie had stepped closer into his arms and looked up into his

eyes, he'd been seconds away from drawing her closer still and kissing her.

He'd seen the look in her eyes, had felt the way her hand tightened around his when his gaze had dropped to her mouth.

A kiss had been very much in the offing... and so his brain had gone into overdrive and managed to ruin the whole moment before it had even begun.

He was a twat. A prize twat. A twat whose middle name was Coward with a capital 'C'.

Quite what Carrie must think about his ludicrous pontification was anyone's guess. She'd gamely gone along with him as he'd plunged down the rabbit-hole of conversational disaster, but Joe was smart enough to understand that when a woman accepted the offer of a slow dance, she didn't expect to be heckled about the intrinsic meaning of the song they were dancing to.

He'd had a chance to do something brave and kiss her, and he'd somehow managed to blow it.

"Well done, you utter twat," Joe mumbled to himself.

"Eh? What did you say?"

Joe realised the barman was looking at him, non-plussed. After waiting in the queue for ages, it was finally his turn to be served.

"A glass of red wine, a pint of lager, and two bottles of mineral water," Joe said.

When the barman returned with his drinks, he carried them back to the table and then glugged down half a bottle of water to quench his thirst after all the dancing. Carrie clinked her wine glass against his pint of lager.

"Cheers, and thanks for the drink," she said.

"Cheers." He sipped his pint and took a deep breath. "Listen, uh, sorry about prattling on about the lyrics to 'Last Christmas'. And I really hope I haven't ruined the song for you."

Carrie laughed. “Don’t be daft. It’s too good a song to be ruined and I was only joking, anyway.”

“I probably don’t even know what I’m talking about. Who am I to say what the song’s about? Don’t listen to me. I’m clueless.”

She laughed again. “I’m sure you’re not clueless.”

“See, the thing is... well, it’s just that...”

What was he trying to say? Carrie, see the thing is I only started twittering on about the song because I was dangerously close to kissing you, and because that was a pretty terrifying idea, it just seemed easier to morph into a giant blathering moron instead.

That just about summed it up, but thinking it was easier than saying it.

“Well, see, what I mean is...”

“Carrie! Just the person I wanted to speak to!”

Joe was interrupted by one of the veterinary nurses from the practice, plonking herself down in a spare chair beside them at the table.

“Yvette was telling me you’re a photographer and that you work freelance,” his nurse colleague continued. “Would you be free to come round to my house and do a nice family portrait of me and my lot standing in front of our Christmas tree?”

Carrie looked surprised at the question but was soon nodding. “I’d be honoured.”

“What do you charge, love? And I’m after one of those vintage-style effects. Can you do that?”

“Of course, and there are some other photograph effects that you might want to think about too...”

As Carrie was drawn further into the conversation with his colleague, confirming a date and time for the photo shoot and discussing other arrangement details together, Joe sipped his pint and sank bank into his chair. Soon, another colleague

from the vet's practice caught wind of the conversation and was also asking about the costs of having a set of festive family photographs taken.

Carrie was in her element, giving advice and reeling off her fees and agreeing booking times. Joe was thrilled to see her securing some work for her freelance business, even if the unexpected conversations with his colleagues meant he'd missed yet another chance to try to explain to Carrie...

Explain what? He couldn't even get the words straight inside his head never mind out of his mouth. It was probably better that he didn't say anything at all. He'd only end up embarrassing himself, just like he'd done with the whole 'Last Christmas' fiasco.

The upshot of it was he'd almost kissed Carrie on the dance floor, but the moment had come and gone and there was no sign of it returning, not with Carrie chatting with his vet practice colleagues about her photography work.

Joe sipped his pint and was grateful when one of the other practice vets started talking to him about the new range of canine arthritis drugs they'd begun prescribing for their clients. Joe nodded along, happy to be distracted by something other than the pretty lady in the stunning red dress who'd turned his brain into a pile of mush.

Hopefully the party would soon wind down and they could go home, and he could put his botched attempt at romance firmly behind him.

IT WAS ALMOST midnight when they left the hotel function room and stepped out into a winter wonderland.

“It snowed!” Carrie said, thrilled at the sight of a blanket of sparkling snow spread out across the car park and dusting the bare trees and evergreen shrubs.

“Now I wish I’d called a taxi sooner,” Joe said, frowning at his phone. “If I’d known we’d have snow to contend with, I would’ve booked something already. The app says they can’t pick us up for half an hour.”

A crowd of Christmas revellers poured out of the hotel and made their way towards the street beyond. “We could just walk home,” Carrie said.

Joe eyed her heeled boots. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll be fine. These boots are more comfortable than they look, and the heel isn’t too high. Plus, it’s a chunky heel, not a spike, and I have decent treads, too.” She glanced at Joe’s footwear in turn. “I’d be more worried about your shoes than mine. You might get cold in those sleek things.”

She hid a grin as he scowled at this remark. “My feet are fine. I can walk home in this weather if you can.”

“Then let’s go. It won’t hurt to get some fresh air into our lungs after being crammed into the party function room with so many other people.”

“Fair enough. By the time a taxi turns up, we could already be home, anyway.”

They trod through the snow towards the car park exit and the street beyond. Somehow, they’d ended up being the last of the vet’s practice group to leave the party, thanks to Carrie getting chatting with some of the nurses. She couldn’t escape the feeling that Joe would’ve liked to leave sooner, but she just kept getting caught up in conversations.

Being commissioned to do a few photo shoots for Joe’s colleagues was a surprising and welcome turn up for the books, and a lovely cherry on top of what had been a truly wonderful evening. The people who worked at his vet practice were all nice folk and no one she’d spoken to had anything but good things to say about Hamblehurst and how much they enjoyed working—and, in many cases, living—in the little town.

“Tonight has given me a lot of food for thought, Joe,” Carrie said as they walked along the pavement.

“Oh? In what way?”

“Well, between looking at those apartment photos Jess Shepherd sent me and chatting to your colleagues about how much they love Hamblehurst, I’m beginning to think I’d be mad not to do everything I can to stay here for longer.”

Joe’s gaze lingered on her for a beat as they walked side by side. A split second later, he lost his footing on the snow and his eyes flew wide in surprise as his leg flew out beneath him.

“Eek!” he yelled.

“Careful!”

Carrie grabbed his arm and stopped him from going head over heels. Joe let out an embarrassed laugh.

“You’re right,” he said. “It turns out I’m the one wearing the unsuitable footwear, after all.”

She chuckled and gestured to the snow underfoot. “The pavements were damp earlier. There are bound to be a few

slippery bits beneath the snow. But don't worry, I'll keep you upright."

Joe returned her smile and Carrie looped her arm inside his. It felt nice to walk more closely beside him, their arms touching as they picked their way through the snowfall. She liked the feeling of him next to her, his face still flushed from the heat of the function room and the after effects of the food and alcohol and dancing.

"So, you're seriously thinking about staying on here?" Joe asked.

Carrie nodded. "I am. I really like the look of the flat Jess Shepherd is moving out of. She told me how much rent she's been paying there and it's just about within my budget. And everyone I met tonight was so friendly and kind. After also meeting so many nice people at the Foxglove Street festive meet-and-greet the other day, it's hard not to come to the conclusion that this is just a nice place to live filled with nice people who I'd quite like to get to know better."

"By the sounds of it, if you moved here, you'd have plenty of potential customers looking to hire you for photo shoots."

"That was a surprise, for sure, having a couple of your colleagues book me to take photos of their families. I hope they like what I end up creating for them."

"I'm sure they will. You have a great eye for a striking image, judging by that photo you showed me of the morning frost on Foxglove Street."

Carrie was touched by this compliment, and even more touched that Joe had remembered the photo she'd shown him on her camera all those days ago. "Thank you. That's very kind, Joe."

He returned her smile and then looked a little bashful about it. "So, um, are you planning on visiting this flat you mentioned to see if it's what you're after?"

"I've already sent a message to the landlord asking to arrange a viewing. Fingers crossed I hear back from him soon."

“I hope it works out for you.”

“Me too. Listen, thanks again for letting me tag along tonight. I really enjoyed myself.”

“I’m glad. You were a big hit with my family and my colleagues. I think they like you more than they like me, actually.”

Carrie laughed. “I got the impression Yvette was especially pleased to see you at the party. She said something about how glad she was seeing you get into the Christmas spirit.”

“It was a fun night.”

She saw him frown as he said this, as if he wasn’t entirely sure what he’d said was true.

“You must be relieved there was another vet able to stand in and cover the on-call duties for your practice so you could enjoy the Christmas party tonight?” she asked.

“I didn’t mind doing it. I volunteered, actually. If it hadn’t been for...”

When he trailed off, Carrie nudged him. “What?”

He gave her a wary look before continuing. “Well, if it hadn’t been for the fact that you agreed to come along to the party tonight, I wouldn’t have gone.”

Carrie smiled. “That’s a sweet thing to say.” Still, that wary look remained on his face. “Why didn’t you want to go to the party?”

“Someone had to cover the on-call.”

“But you volunteered to do that. Even when Yvette said another vet was happy to provide the on-call cover, you still didn’t want to go. Why?”

Joe’s gaze was distant as they walked the dark pavements towards Hamblehurst high street. At last, he gave a slight shrug.

“It sounds stupid, I know, but the truth is I’m not such a huge fan of Christmas,” he said.

“Would it surprise you if I told you I’d guessed as much already?” she grinned.

Joe barked out a laugh. “I admit I’ve been a bit of a Grinch on occasion since you moved in across the hallway.”

“Why don’t you like Christmas?”

Another shrug, followed by a soft smile that looked almost sad. “It’s just that...” Joe looked at her and then cleared his throat. “Well, you know, it’s all so commercial these days, isn’t it? It’s all about spending money and buying presents and going overboard. I suppose I’m just not into all that stuff.”

Carrie watched his expression as he answered. There was a look in his eyes which told her this wasn’t the real reason behind his Mr Grinch behaviour. She wondered what the real reason was, and why he wasn’t prepared to share it with her.

It wasn’t her place to push him for answers. And his detours into Grinch-land were just that—detours. He’d clearly had fun tonight at the Christmas party. He’d gone above and beyond with all those Christmas presents he’d bought for his loved ones.

He wasn’t a miser or a misery guts. He wasn’t even that much of a Mr Grinch, either, come to think of it. He was...

...lovely and sweet, that’s what he was, and Carrie suspected a soft gooey layer could be found beneath that tough outer shell of his if he’d only let someone close enough to find out.

It would be nice if that person could be *her*, she thought. The idea was as surprising as it was alluring.

“Well, it’s true that things can get a little out of hand at Christmas when it comes to shopping and spending money,” Carrie said, not wanting to push the matter any further when it was obvious Joe was holding back the truth, whatever that truth was. “But I think most people want to enjoy Christmas for the right reasons and keep it in their hearts the way they ought to.”

Joe gave her a puzzled look. “Keep it in their hearts?”

“Yeah, like Ebenezer Scrooge at the end of ‘A Christmas Carol’. After denying the value of Christmas for so long, the three ghosts help Scrooge understand the true meaning of the season, and at the end of the story Scrooge promises to keep Christmas in his heart always and honour it all the year through. Instead of thinking of Christmas in terms of money and profit, old Scrooge realises at last that it’s all about love.” Carrie shrugged and gave him a shy smile. “I think most people believe that too and try to welcome Christmas with an open and generous heart.”

Beside her, Joe’s pace slowed and he gave her a thoughtful look. “That’s lovely, what you said.”

Carrie laughed. “It’s nothing original. Everyone knows that’s what Scrooge’s story is all about.”

“I like the way you said it, though. He goes from Mr Miser to Mr Generous.”

“That’s part of it. But I think the main message of the story is that he lets go of fear and allows love into his heart at last.”

Joe blinked at her. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Really?” She gave him a surprised look.

“I mean, I knew it was about changing your ways and all that stuff, but...”

He trailed off, as if he was still thinking about what she’d said. “He lets go of fear. Huh. I honestly never thought about it like that.”

“It’s been quite a night for revealing the true meaning of our Christmas cultural classics,” Carrie laughed. “First you explain the lyrics of ‘Last Christmas’ to me, and now I’m explaining the story of ‘A Christmas Carol’ to you.”

Amusement flickered in Joe’s eyes. “With all this textual deconstruction going on, this must count as one of the wildest Christmas nights out ever.”

Carrie let out a volley of laughter at that. Her gaze lingered on Joe for a long moment, taking in his wry smile and the tilt of his head as he gazed back at her.

There was an awful lot of gazing going on between them all of a sudden, Carrie realised as a warm tingle crept across her face.

Joe broke the moment first, nodding towards their turn from the high street onto Foxglove Street. “Watch your footing there on the corner. There’s a dip in the pavement you might not notice beneath all this snow.”

Glancing down at the ground, Carrie picked her way through the snow. Once she’d navigated the corner without falling foul of any unseen underfoot hazards, she looked back up.

The midnight view that greeted her along Foxglove Street was enough to steal her breath away.

Christmas lights twinkled and danced in the front gardens of the street for as far as the eye could see. The mix of bright white lights and cheerful festive colours of the illuminated bulbs as they reflected in the fresh snowfall made Carrie’s eyes light up in wonder and her heart soar with joy. The quiet and stillness of the midnight hour only added to the sweet December moment.

“Look! It’s so pretty!” she cried out, almost breaking into a run along the pavement. The sight of each and every house on the street lit up for Christmas and blanketed in soft white snow made her feel like a child again, caught up in the magic of the season.

“I can almost hear everyone’s electricity meter spinning,” Joe quipped, casting an eye around the place.

Carrie was about to tut at his remark when she saw that wry grin curling at his lips once more and knew he was joking. “The unreformed Scrooge look isn’t a good one for you, by the way.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Then, in a move so swift she hardly believed it had even happened, Joe scooped a handful of snow from the ground, swiftly patted it into a ball, and lobbed it straight at her.

The snowball landed with a *plop!* on her head before disintegrating, the fresh snow sticking to her woolly hat while soft puffs scattered into her hair.

“Oh. My. *God!*” Carrie hissed, wide-eyed with surprise. “I can’t believe you just did that!”

Joe chuckled and reached for another handful of snow. “You called me Scrooge! You deserved it.”

“Well, in that case, you deserve *this!*”

Before Joe could lob another snowball at her, Carrie scooped a huge wedge of snow into her hands and chucked it at him. The snowy chunk caught him smack in the face. Stunned by the surprise impact, Joe froze in place, blinking snowflakes out of his eyes and coughing thanks to the sizeable portion that had gone into his mouth.

Carrie couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of him, wheezing as he shook snowflakes from his coat collar.

“You play dirty,” he said, rubbing snow from his hair and once more reaching for a fresh handful of snow. “Well, let’s see what you think about this.”

Wiggling his eyebrows as he doubled the size of the snowball he was forming, Joe ran towards her. When Carrie saw the glint of mock revenge in his eyes, she shrieked and started running too, while trying—and failing—to make another snowball to fend him off. It wasn’t easy to grab the snow while on the move, and as Joe closed in on her, Carrie hunched her shoulders and braced for impact, already anticipating the chill of icy snow running down the back of her neck.

But instead of feeling the impact of a snowball, Carrie instead heard a muffled grunt followed by a crunching splat.

Turning around, she saw Joe splayed on his back on the ground, his eyes wide in surprise and with the snowball he’d made still clenched in his gloved hand.

“Ouch,” he wheezed, staring up into the dark sky, his eyes wide.

Carrie hurried to where he'd fallen. "Are you okay? Have you hurt anything?"

"My pride, mostly." He cut her a look, his eyes now twinkling. "I can see you trying not to laugh."

She let go of the pent-up laughter she'd been fighting to keep under control. "That was quite a silly noise you made when you fell over."

"I'm sure it was." Joe hoisted himself to a sitting position and flung the snowball he'd made before falling over. It clipped Carrie on the shoulder and the surprise impact sent her sprawling backwards from her hunched position and tipped her into the snow with a yelp.

"And that was quite a silly noise you made when you fell over, too," Joe said with a laugh.

"And you said I play dirty?"

Carrie brushed the snow from her coat and was about to get back onto her feet when an upstairs window was flung open in the house they were conducting their snowball fight beside.

"Keep it down, you idiots!" a gruff male voice shouted down. "Some of us are trying to sleep!"

"Sorry," Joe said and waved a hand in apology at the shadowy figure in the darkened window.

The man grunted and yanked the window closed.

"Now I feel bad for making a racket," Carrie said. "I'd forgotten how late it is."

"Let's get home before the police come to arrest us for breaching the peace."

Joe got to his feet and held out a hand to help Carrie up. Even through the gloves they both wore, Carrie still felt a delicious zing as Joe's hand clasped hers.

As he pulled her to her feet, the motion propelled her forward and she bumped up against his chest. Memories of their time on the dancefloor earlier that night swirled in

Carrie's head, the two of them shuffling and swaying to 'Last Christmas'.

Now, as they stood on the quiet, snow-covered street, with fairy lights twinkling all around them, Carrie found she couldn't stop looking into Joe's eyes.

His gaze pinned her even as she saw the surprise, and then the doubt, in his expression. The moment spun out. Fresh snowflakes began drifting down from the dark night sky.

Carrie's eyes dropped to Joe's mouth and she couldn't stop herself from tilting towards him. A sweet midnight kiss in the crisp winter snow would be the perfect romantic end to a perfect Christmas night out.

At the last moment, just before her lips met his, Joe blinked and stepped back.

"Uh, we should get home before this snow gets any heavier."

Carrie let go of Joe's hand and looked away, trying not to let embarrassment engulf her. "Good idea."

They were only a minute or so away from their house further along the street, but every second felt like an hour thanks to the sudden awkwardness between them. It was no fun putting yourself out there, making a move and angling for a kiss, only to realise you'd got the wrong end of the stick entirely.

But *had* she got the wrong end of the stick? Carrie wasn't so sure.

During their short-lived snowball fight, Carrie had been sure the frivolous fun had been a prelude to... something. Joe had been the one to start the snowball fight, after all. Starting light-hearted snowball fights on wintry streets beneath twinkling fairy lights wasn't exactly how you behaved if you had zero interest in someone.

If you had zero interest in someone, surely you just walked them home and said goodnight at the door?

“Well, goodnight,” Joe said when they reached the front door and he unlocked it before gesturing for her to step inside ahead of him.

Hmm, okay, so maybe she *had* got this all wrong after all.

“Goodnight,” she replied. “And thanks for a lovely night out.”

“You’re welcome. I had a lot of fun.”

Feeling suddenly deflated, and more than a little foolish, Carrie rummaged in her bag for her key to the flat.

“Er, would you like to come in for a coffee?” Joe said.

Carrie turned around. Joe stood outside his flat door, looking a bit bewildered. She knew just how he felt.

One minute he was instigating romantic midwinter snowball fights and the next he was repelling her attempt to take that fun to its inevitable conclusion by kissing him.

One minute he was bidding her a sombre goodnight and the next he was inviting her into his flat for coffee.

What exactly did he want?

Maybe he didn’t want anything. Maybe he was just trying to be polite to his new—and temporary—neighbour across the hall.

Maybe *she* was the one reading far too much into all of this.

“Coffee?” Carrie said pointlessly, because she’d heard him just fine the first time.

“Or tea. I could even manage a hot chocolate, if you’d like.”

Carrie considered him for a moment. She wasn’t quite ready for the night to be over. They’d had fun and she enjoyed Joe’s company, even when he was being weird and sending out mixed signals. After their chilly walk home and the excitement of their snowball fight, she was too energised to think about calling it a night. She’d probably stick the kettle on as soon as

she got inside the flat anyway, so why not just have a coffee with Joe?

“All right then,” she said. “A coffee sounds great, thanks.”

Joe smiled and pushed open his flat door, turning on the lights as Carrie followed him inside.

“COFFEE COMING RIGHT UP,” Joe said as he shut the flat door.

“Actually, let’s go crazy and have that hot chocolate you mentioned,” Carrie replied.

“Hot chocolate it is. Here, let me take your coat.”

As he helped her out of her winter coat, his fingers brushed the nape of her neck. It was an accident, obviously, or at least that’s what Joe tried to convince himself.

When Carrie turned around and he caught the look on her face, Joe wondered what exactly he was playing at here. Carrie’s gaze was dark and her smile was enough to make his heart clip-clop inside his chest in expectation.

In expectation of what? Joe had no idea.

Well, he’d been the one who’d invited her into his flat for a late-night coffee, and if he was about to try to convince himself he didn’t know why he’d done that, then he was either deluded or he was a twat.

Possibly even both.

They were either just two new neighbours sharing a late-night hot beverage to warm themselves up after a cold walk home, or they were testing the waters to find out if they might be attracted to one another.

But Joe didn’t have to test the waters to know he was attracted to Carrie. He’d worked that much out ages ago, even if he’d denied it to himself ever since.

He watched as Carrie unwound her scarf and hung it next to her coat on the hook beside the door, then pulled off her woolly hat. Her hair tumbled in glossy chestnut waves across her shoulders, the ends damp from where he'd clipped her with those snowballs out in the street.

Remembering the bright volley of laughter she'd let out when the snowballs had hit her made Joe's heart soar inside his chest. And that wasn't just a figure of speech—he could actually feel it lift up and float inside him, like a caged bird set loose.

He was in trouble here, Joe realised. Serious trouble.

Falling for the new neighbour across the hallway hadn't been part of his Christmas plans. And yet now look at what was happening.

Joe flicked on the Christmas tree lights and a table lamp, creating a cosy glow, before turning for the kitchen to make the hot chocolate. While he warmed milk in a pan and spooned hot chocolate powder into mugs—he kept supplies of the stuff on hand because his nephews enjoyed it when they visited—Carrie inspected the Christmas tree, admiring the decorations.

She looked gorgeous standing beside the tree wearing that stunning dark red dress. As the lights twinkled, illuminating the soft curves beneath her dress and the warmth of her smile as she studied the Christmas tree, Joe couldn't keep his eyes off her.

It was only the milk pan coming dangerously close to boiling over that snapped him out of his trance.

He poured the hot milk into the mugs and stirred, then carried them over to the sitting area.

“Oh, that looks delicious,” Carrie said when he handed her the mug.

“It might be a bit too hot, sorry.”

Carrie took a tentative sip of the frothy chocolate and winced. “Yeah, we might need to give it a minute.”

Joe gestured to the sofa. Once they were comfortable, both cradling their scorching hot chocolate and waiting for it to cool, Carrie gave him a smile.

“I had a lot of fun tonight, Joe.”

“Me too.”

A long beat passed, filled with silence.

“Shall I put some music on?” Joe asked, grabbing his phone from the table and flicking through some playlists.

“Good idea. Let’s have more Christmas music.”

He pretended to roll his eyes at this suggestion, which was met with a soft laugh from Carrie. When he found a playlist that promised ‘Easy Christmas Vibes’, Joe pressed play. The first song that tinkled through the speaker over on the shelf was Bing Crosby singing ‘White Christmas’.

“The oldies are the best,” Carrie said, glancing at the speaker. “And considering the snow we’ve had tonight, you couldn’t have picked a better song.”

“You can thank the clever robots at the streaming service who put together the playlist.”

“Thank you, clever robots.”

Joe laughed and sipped his hot chocolate, pleased to discover it was no longer like molten lava.

“So,” Carrie said, tucking a leg beneath her on the sofa. “Do you mind if I make a personal observation?”

The unexpected question put Joe on alert. “I’m not sure. Will I?”

She quirked her lips at this. “I hope not. It’s just that for someone who says they don’t like Christmas, you seem to enjoy it well enough when you give yourself the chance.”

“You mean the party tonight?” He gave a shrug. “Yeah, I enjoyed it. But...”

“But what?” Her voice was soft, her head tilted as if she was genuinely curious about what he’d been about to say.

“If I’d gone to the party by myself, it wouldn’t have been nearly half as much fun.”

Actually, it wouldn’t have been any fun at all, in Joe’s opinion, but he wasn’t about to say so. That would only make him sound like the unreformed Scrooge that Carrie had accused him of being right before their snowball fight had started, and Joe was smart enough to know she’d only been half-joking when she’d said it.

“Hmm, see, that’s what I don’t understand,” Carrie replied, warming to her theme. “You said you don’t like Christmas because it’s too commercialised and so on, and I get that, I suppose. But spending time with colleagues and friends who enjoy your company and want to share their festive celebrations with you... that’s not really got anything to do with any of that, does it? A night out with friends is just a night out with friends. What’s overly commercialised about that?”

Joe shifted on the sofa, knowing he didn’t have a good answer to her question. “Nothing, I guess. Well, actually, come to think of it, the hotel did charge an arm and a leg for the meal and I’m sure they ramped up their bar prices too, and...”

He trailed off at the expression on Carrie’s face. She wasn’t buying his story. Sure, the meal ticket was a bit on the high side, and the prices at the bar were a joke, but Joe understood that hospitality businesses had to make as much money as possible at this time of year to tide them over for the slow winter months ahead.

And anyway, the reason he hadn’t wanted to go along to the Christmas night out had nothing to do with the cost of the meal or the prices at the bar.

The look on Carrie’s face told him she’d already worked that out for herself. Quite how she knew he wasn’t giving her the fully story was a bit of a mystery.

Almost as much of a mystery as why she’d care about the real reason in the first place.

“The truth is, it’s not easy being alone at Christmas,” Joe said at last, the words surprising him even as they tumbled out of his mouth.

Carrie’s expression softened. “You’re not alone, Joe. You have a wonderful family, lovely work colleagues, and—”

“What I mean is it’s not easy being *single* at Christmas,” he clarified.

Her gaze held his for a long beat. “I suppose it depends on whether someone *wants* to be single or not. I’m guessing by the way you said it, you don’t.”

“I didn’t expect to still be single at this point in my life, no.”

A puzzled look crossed Carrie’s face. “Then why are you?”

“That’s a good question.”

“So, what’s the answer?”

Joe sipped from his mug and gave a shrug. “I never met the right person.”

Carrie’s puzzlement only seemed to deepen. “But why not? I mean, you’ve got a great job, great prospects, you’re kind, funny, handsome...” Her cheeks coloured as she added, “Well, I mean, you look great, er, you make an effort to look good and take care of yourself, and...” She let out a soft laugh. “Okay, you’re not ugly. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Wow, I’m not ugly. If I was on one of those dating apps, I’d definitely put that on my profile.”

Joe grinned as Carrie laughed, relieved they’d eased the awkward moment. The fact that she’d described him as handsome, along with kind and funny, well, that was something he’d look forward to thinking about later.

So far, Joe had assumed Carrie was just being a friendly neighbour, keen to make acquaintances during her short stay on Foxglove Street, but maybe the time she’d spent with him so far was about more than just friendship.

“Why haven’t you met the right person?” Carrie asked. “What happened?”

Joe gave a resigned shrug. “I just never met anyone who made me feel the things you’re meant to feel when you fall for someone. I’ve had plenty of dates over the years, a few short-lived relationships, if you could even call them that. But I’ve never...”

The words he wanted to say got stuck in his throat. Carrie waited, her attention all on him. When he stayed silent, she reached out and laid her hand on his.

The touch of her skin made his heart bump inside his chest. Her touch was as comforting as it was dizzying. Her gaze held his as she squeezed his hand.

“I’ve never fallen in love,” Joe said, his voice barely a whisper.

But as he looked into Carrie’s eyes and felt her fingers brush the back of his hand, he thought that might be about to change and that he might actually be falling in love right there and then.

That thought made him wonder if he was losing his mind. The idea that he might fall in love with a woman he’d only met half a dozen times was ludicrous. The idea that he might fall in love with a woman he’d only met half a dozen times, *and who was only staying here until Christmas*, was even more ludicrous.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’ve never fallen in love either,” Carrie said, giving his hand a friendly pat before settling back into the sofa once more.

That friendly pat—a sympathetic ‘there, there’ sort of gesture—convinced him he’d read altogether too much into what was going on here. Clearly, the alcohol he’d drunk at the Christmas party had done more damage than he’d realised. Taking a swift sip of hot chocolate, he attempted to gather his wits together before he made a total fool of himself.

Assuming he hadn’t already done that, of course, what with these admissions about his various emotional

shortcomings and pathetic bachelor life.

“Oh?” Joe said, determined to sound casual.

“Like you, I’ve had plenty of dates over the years and the occasional thing that might have turned into something more if the chemistry had been right. And I won’t deny there have been a few blokes who I missed for a while after things fizzled out and we went our separate ways. But as far as love is concerned...” She waved a hand, as if illustrating the bigger picture. “It hasn’t happened. But I can’t say I’m too worried about it.”

“Of course you aren’t. I mean, you’re still young.”

Carrie let out a wry chuckle. “I suppose that’s true, Grandpa.”

“What I mean is that you’re much younger than me,” Joe laughed. “What are you, twenty-six? Twenty-seven?”

“Twenty-eight.”

Joe waved a hand like she’d just made her point for him. “Exactly. You’ve got years and years ahead of you to find ‘the one’.” He did the air quotes, then added, “Unlike me.”

“What are you talking about? What age are you?”

He hesitated before answering. “Thirty-seven.”

“Pfft. That’s still young, Joe.”

“Nah, not really. Okay, so I’m not about to be pensioned off or carted away to the old folks’ home just yet. But most people I know who are my age are already married and most of them already have kids, too. I mean, some of them are divorced and getting married for a *second* time and starting a *second* family. I haven’t even made it out of the starting blocks.”

“It’s not a race.”

“No, but just about everyone in my social circle has been paired off already, and it’s impossible not to notice that and to feel...”

“To feel what?” Carrie pressed, her voice soft once more after their previous light-hearted banter.

“To feel like it’s too late and that I’m probably destined to be by myself now.”

Carrie nodded and gave him a sad smile. “You want a family? A wife, kids, the whole thing?”

“Yeah, that’s what I want. It’s what I assumed I’d have one day. I know it’s not for everyone, but it’s what I want. It’s how I always pictured myself in the future. I…”

Joe raked a hand through his hair and gave Carrie an apologetic grin. “Sorry, you don’t want to hear about any of this, I’m sure.”

“Of course I want to hear about it. We’re having a nice time, aren’t we? Just chatting and enjoying our hot chocolate and getting to know one another a little better?”

Joe gathered his thoughts and wondered how much more of them he ought to share. Yes, he was having a nice time, and yes, it was nice chatting with Carrie and getting to know her better. But if he kept talking, if he revealed his deepest feelings, it might only make Carrie wonder why he was all alone and make her question what was wrong with him.

Maybe it was the soft Christmas music playing. Maybe it was the fairy lights dancing on the Christmas tree. Maybe it was the way Carrie’s smile made him feel things he’d never felt before.

Maybe it was all those things that caused Joe to take a deep breath and keep talking.

“I always thought I’d find the woman of my dreams and we’d get married and have a family and live happily ever after,” Joe said. “I always thought I’d fall in love one day. The fact that it never happened makes me think there must be something wrong with me.”

“Of course there’s nothing wrong with you, Joe!” Carrie said with feeling. “You mustn’t think that. And just because it hasn’t happened yet doesn’t mean it never will.”

“Maybe. And I know it probably doesn’t help my chances being such a grump at this time of year, but the truth is... well, the truth is it’s hard seeing everyone looking so happy at Christmas, seeing them enjoying their spouses and enjoying their family time, when I don’t have anything to come home to except an empty flat.”

“I’m sorry, Joe,” Carrie said. “No one wants to feel like they’re alone, especially at Christmas.”

“I know I’m not completely alone,” Joe said. “There are people who are a lot worse off than me. I have my parents, I have my sister and her family, I have friends and colleagues at the vet practice. I have a lot to be grateful for. But I always thought I’d share my life with someone. I thought I’d have an amazing wife to wake up with on Christmas morning, and kids running into the bedroom all excited because Father Christmas had come and left them presents beneath the tree.” He laughed softly. “That all sounds like something out of some sappy Christmas film, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does. But that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with wanting those things. There’s nothing sappy about wanting love and family, and there’s nothing wrong with wanting the perfect Christmas with a family of your own. You’ll have those things one day, Joe. I’m sure of it.”

Carrie reached across and squeezed his hand again, her gaze intense as she looked into his eyes. “But if you give up on trying to find love, how will it ever find you?”

Her voice was tender, her words mingling with the soft harmonies of the Christmas music as her fingers brushed against his. Joe was spellbound beneath her gaze and scorched by her touch.

In her presence, he felt a mix of desire and comfort he’d never known before. The way she looked at him turned him inside out. His gaze dropped to her lips and all he could think about was kissing her and tasting her and burying his hands in her hair and skimming his fingers along her neck and down towards the curve of her hips beneath her dress.

A flash of understanding passed between them as Joe shifted on the sofa and Carrie leaned closer. Her eyes were bright as her lips parted and in that moment, Joe was lost.

Lost in a kiss that blew through his whole world like an exploding star, filling the darkness with a light so dazzling that it burned away every thought inside his head.

The dancing and dazzling lights from the exploding star in his mind were joined by a symphony of strings and trumpets and bells and...

“Joe, your phone’s ringing!”

Blinking, Joe realised Carrie had slipped from his embrace on the sofa and was pointing to his phone on the coffee table. He realised it was his ringtone he’d heard, not a celestial symphony inside his mind, but it made no difference to how he felt. Disoriented by the searing kiss, Joe could only shake his head.

“Ignore it,” he said, pulling her closer once more.

The phone stopped ringing just as Carrie’s hands grasped his shirt and her lips met his, the soft moan she let out only making him tuck her closer still.

Joe had only just begun to sink into the kiss when his phone started ringing yet again. Carrie opened her eyes and glanced towards the coffee table.

“Do you want to answer it?” she asked.

Joe really didn’t want to answer it. In fact, it was the last thing he wanted to do. But the combination of the late hour and the two calls in short succession made it impossible not to at least check the phone screen in case it was some sort of emergency.

Grabbing the phone, he checked the number display and frowned with concern when he saw the details on the screen.

The caller was Mr Irving, the man who’d been involved in the car crash with his dogs, Peggy and Lulu. When Joe had returned the dogs to Mr Irving once he’d been released from hospital, he’d told Mr Irving to feel free to call any time if he

had any concerns about the animals' recovery. He'd felt sorry for the man, healing from his injuries and worrying about his dogs' continued recovery too, and although he rarely gave his personal number to clients at the vet's practice, he'd done so this time out of sympathy.

So far, the elderly gentleman hadn't taken him up on the offer to call for advice or help. Seeing his number now on the phone screen, Joe knew he had to answer the call. Given the late hour, something must be wrong for Mr Irving to phone him.

"I'd better answer this," Joe said, giving Carrie an apologetic look as he tapped the phone screen. "Hello, Mr Irving. Is everything okay?"

"I'm sorry to phone you so late at night, Mr Whitaker," said the older man on the other end of the line, the panic in his voice unmistakable. "But I think my Peggy has taken a turn for the worse."

"Tell me what's happened," Joe said.

He listened while Mr Irving explained how Peggy had refused her food all day and had become more and more listless with each passing hour. Although the recuperating dog had been increasing her short visits to the back garden over the past few days, and had seemed very much on the mend, today Mr Irving had almost had to force the dog outside in order to go to the toilet. He'd first assumed it was just a minor setback in her recovery, but as the evening had progressed, she'd become glassy-eyed and ever more out of sorts. Having at first decided simply to keep an eye on his precious dog throughout the night before calling the vet in the morning, Mr Irving's hand was forced when Peggy had started whimpering and panting thirty minutes ago.

"I don't know what's the matter with her," Mr Irving said. "But I can't leave her like this all night."

"No, I agree."

"I'd already started dialling your number, Mr Whitaker, when I realised it was so late at night and I should have

phoned the surgery's emergency number instead, so I'd go straight through to the on-call vet."

"Don't worry about that, Mr Irving." Joe could hear the man's agitation on the phone. He could even hear Peggy in the background, whimpering and whining, and Joe didn't like that sound in the least. The animal was in distress.

"What should I do?" Mr Irving asked. "Should I phone a taxi to come and pick us up and take us to your vet's surgery?"

"No, I'll come to you. Keep Peggy as comfortable as you can and I'll be with you in fifteen minutes."

On the other end of the phone, Mr Irving let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, son."

They hung up. Joe turned to Carrie, but before he could say a word, she was already getting up from the sofa.

"You don't have to explain anything," she said, gathering her coat and bag. "I got the gist of things. That poor dog needs you."

Joe grabbed his veterinary bag, which he kept stocked and ready for emergencies, and pulled on his jacket. "I'm sorry to ditch you like this."

"You're not," Carrie said, pulling her phone from her bag. "Do you want me to call a taxi for you while you finish getting ready? I'm assuming you can't drive."

Driving was out of the question. Although he hadn't had anywhere near enough to drink at the night out to be drunk, he'd certainly still be over the driving limit. If it hadn't been for the multiple coffees he'd drunk at the hotel, followed by the long walk home and the hot chocolate he'd made at the flat, he would've ruled himself unfit to deal with a veterinary emergency at all.

He wondered briefly if he ought to just contact the on-call vet and ask him to attend to Mr Irving and Peggy. But he'd promised Mr Irving he'd be there and he felt a responsibility to the old man and his much-loved dogs.

Joe decided he'd contact the on-call vet if the situation required it. In the meantime, he'd find out for himself what the situation actually was.

"I don't want to wait for a taxi turning up," Joe told Carrie. "Mr Irving doesn't live far away. By the time a cab arrived, I could already be there."

Carrie nodded and moved to the door. Joe kicked off his dress shoes in exchange for sturdy winter boots that would make his walk through the snow much easier. Once he locked his flat, he turned to Carrie in the hallway and gave an apologetic shrug.

"Sorry I'm rushing off like this."

"There's nothing to be sorry for." She smiled and gestured to the main door of the building. "Hurry up and get yourself over there to help that poor dog."

Despite his urgency, Joe paused for a beat, his eyes locked on Carrie's. He wanted to pull her into a goodnight kiss but knew that one brief touch of his lips against hers wouldn't be enough. After the moment they'd shared in each other's arms before his phone rang, he knew he'd want more than just a hurried kiss goodbye in the hallway.

Carrie waving him towards the main doors helped propel him on his way.

"Good luck with the poorly dog," she called out as he left. "Let me know how it goes."

Joe returned her wave and rushed out into the dark snowy night. The cold air hit him as he crossed the path towards the pavement, the shock of the icy blast dispelling any lingering effects of the alcohol he'd drunk during the night out.

Turning his attention to the work that awaited at the other end of his short journey, Joe picked up speed and hoped poor Peggy hadn't deteriorated any further by the time he reached her.

MR IRVING FLUNG open his door as Joe barrelled up the front path to the house. The old man's eyes were filled with fear.

"Thanks for coming so quickly, son," he said.

"No need to thank me. I'm happy to help."

Joe stamped the snow off his boots and caught his breath. He'd jogged most of the way from his house, finding the faster pace easier in the fresh snowfall now that he wore proper boots on his feet. Shrugging off his coat, Mr Irving took it from him and hung it on a hook in the hallway.

"Peggy is through here in the sitting room," Mr Irving said as he shuffled off, his motion awkward as he navigated with the walking stick he was using while recovering from his injuries sustained during the car crash.

Joe followed the older man into the small sitting room. After the frosted chill of the night air, the heat in the room hit Joe like a freight train. Peggy lay on an oval dog bed in front of a blazing gas fire, whimpering and panting. Her eyes darted towards him as he entered the room, but she made no attempt to get up.

Lulu, the little terrier, hurtled towards him, her tail wagging. Joe leaned down to pat the dog, who licked his hand in greeting before scurrying off to resume her sentry position beside Peggy.

"She hasn't got up from that spot beside the fire in hours," Mr Irving said, resting his walking stick against the sofa and wringing his hands together. "I'm worried sick about her."

Joe crouched down beside the panting collie and inspected her healing wounds. There was no sign of infection and the surgical incisions appeared to be healing even faster than Joe hoped. The other nasty cuts and scrapes the dog had sustained during the car accident also looked clean and much improved since his last visit to check up on progress.

And yet Peggy was whimpering and panting, her eyes rolling. Something was wrong.

Joe was about to get the animal onto her feet for a fuller examination when Peggy suddenly lifted her head, half-rolled from her side onto her tummy, and began retching. Seconds later, the dog expelled a thin stream of watery vomit onto the floor.

“Oh, Peggy!” Mr Irving cried out, limping towards her. “My poor girl!”

Peggy threw her head back down onto the bed while Lulu sniffed at the puddle of vomit on the floor and backed away, looking anxious.

“Has she been sick any other time?” Joe asked.

The old man shook his head. “No, but she hadn’t been eating her food. I can’t even get her to drink any water.”

When an animal stopped drinking, that was always a danger sign. Joe carefully ran his hands over the dog’s body, feeling for any signs of some internal injury that might have been missed after the accident and which was only now causing problems. Using his stethoscope, he listened to Peggy’s heartbeat, watching how the animal continued to pant all the while.

A bead of sweat ran down Joe’s face as he conducted his examination. It struck him just how hot it was in the house. Peggy wasn’t the only one panting, either. Sitting beside her on the edge of the dog bed, Lulu was also panting, albeit less pronounced. Glancing at the blazing gas fire, Joe got up from his crouched position beside the dog bed and walked to the radiator on the far wall. When he touched it, the searing heat burned his fingers.

“It’s very hot in here, Mr Irving,” Joe said. “I think Peggy’s panting might be because she’s overheating.”

Mr Irving frowned. “I don’t want her to be cold. It’s freezing outside tonight and the last thing I want is for her to be shivering.”

There wasn’t much chance of anyone shivering in this house. Joe was ready to unbutton his shirt to try to cool down.

“You’re right that it’s important to keep Peggy warm while she heals, but if she gets too hot, it will only make her feel uncomfortable,” Joe said. “I think we should turn off this gas fire, or at least turn it down. It’s probably a good idea to lower the thermostat on your central heating, too.”

Mr Irving didn’t look convinced, but he did as Joe asked. Joe pushed open the sitting room door to let some air circulate from the cooler hallway beyond. Within minutes, Peggy’s panting ceased.

“Well, I can’t believe it,” Mr Irving said, his expression pained. “I thought I was doing the right thing keep the heating on at full blast. Has this all been my fault?”

Before Joe could answer, Peggy lifted her head and was sick again on the floor. When she dropped back onto the bed, her exhausted state was only too obvious.

“I doubt her sickness is down to her being too hot. If she’s not eating or drinking, there’s something else going on, too. The heat has only made things feel a little worse for her.” Joe thought about things for a moment, considering the options. “Has she been okay with the painkillers and antibiotics we prescribed?”

Mr Irving nodded. “She’s been fine. I’ve mixed them up in her food and she’s eaten everything without any complaint, at least until today. She wouldn’t eat her breakfast this morning, and hasn’t eaten anything at all since, but she’s been fine every other day. I thought her appetite was almost back to normal. As she hasn’t eaten today, I’ve been worried about her not getting all the medicine and pills she needs.”

“Let me see her medicines.”

Joe followed Mr Irving into the kitchen and studied the batch of medicines set out on the counter, reminding himself of the regimen they'd prescribed after discharging Peggy. After a moment spent inspecting the labels, he turned to Mr Irving and held up one of the bottles of liquid.

"Are you still giving Peggy this every day?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. That's what it says on the label, doesn't it?"

Joe tried not to wince. "I'm afraid not, Mr Irving. This medicine was only supposed to be used for the first few days after Peggy got home. It's a strong painkiller, only meant to help her through the first week post-surgery. After that, we wanted you to switch to the lower strength painkiller instead."

Mr Irving looked ashen-faced. "I thought I was supposed to give her both of those painkillers at the same time."

Once more, Joe tried not to show his reaction. It was obvious from the old man's face that he'd simply got confused, but it was clear now that he'd been accidentally overdosing his dog.

"It says here on the label to stop using this liquid medicine after day four," Joe said kindly, holding up the two sets of medicines. "And if you look at this packet of pills, we prescribed these to be used in its place from day five."

"Dear God, what have I done?" Mr Irving's eyes filled with horror. "Have I killed my poor Peggy?"

Joe was eager to calm the terrified man. "Of course not. She just has too much painkiller in her system. That's why she's been listless today and why she's stopped eating. I'm only surprised she hasn't been sick before now. She's obviously a sturdy dog and it's taken several days for the excess dose to take its toll."

"Will she be okay?"

Joe gave the man a reassuring smile. "She'll be fine. Now that we know what's wrong, it's just a case of correcting her medicine dosage. I do want to get her drinking, though. That will help flush her system and rehydrate her."

Joe spied a set of dog bowls on the kitchen floor beside the fridge. Picking up the water bowl, he freshened it at the sink and carried it through to the sitting room. He set the bowl on the floor beside Peggy's bed.

"Come on, girl," Joe said, encouraging the dog. "Have a good drink."

Peggy only glanced at the water bowl before looking away. Joe removed a small plastic syringe from his bag and sucked up the drinking water before gently angling the end into Peggy's mouth and slowly depressing the plunger.

Peggy resisted to begin with, flicking her tongue against the water. But when Joe repeated the procedure a second time, the cool liquid on the dog's lips had the desired effect and Peggy began lapping the contents of the syringe as he emptied it into her mouth.

When Lulu began lapping at the water in the bowl, it was the final push Peggy required. The collie hauled herself up onto her belly and dipped her tongue into the bowl. The two dogs drank together, their tongues lapping up the water.

Joe felt relief flood through him. If Peggy was interested enough to drink by herself, that was a very good sign. After taking her fill, the collie rested her head once more on the dog bed.

"I think we might have solved the mystery, Mr Irving," Joe said with a grin.

But when he looked up at the older man who was sitting on the edge of the sofa, he saw how distraught he still was.

"This was all my fault," Mr Irving said. "I'm a daft old fool."

"No, don't say that. You just made a small mistake with Peggy's pills, that's all. Considering how many different medicines she has, it's not surprising."

"She relied on me to get it right and I've made a total mess of things. And look at what's happened!" Mr Irving gestured to his dog lying on her bed, his voice thick with frustration.

“She’s been out for the count all day and has ended up being sick! Peggy’s never been sick in all the years I’ve had her.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself. We should probably have printed off an additional set of instructions for you, so you weren’t just relying on the medicine labels.”

Joe made a mental note to have the veterinary practice review the medicine instructions they provided to their clients. Although they’d done everything in accordance with best practice in this case, it was clear that Mr Irving had still ended up confused. Perhaps there was something they could do in future to help elderly clients—or anyone, for that matter—who were dealing with multiple medicine prescriptions for their pets and to avoid another incident such as this one.

For now, though, the priority was stopping Mr Irving beating himself up about what had happened.

“Peggy is going to be fine, Mr Irving. Her injuries are healing and she’s well on the way to making a full recovery. This is just a minor setback and, as you can see, Peggy’s already getting over this, too.”

Mr Irving only scowled. “I should’ve done better by her.”

It was clear the older man intended to punish himself for the mistake he’d made with the dog’s painkillers. Joe felt badly for him. The car accident in which Mr Irving and his dogs had been involved had been bad enough without a medicine mix-up complicating things further.

“Tell me where you keep your cleaning things, and I’ll clean up this dog vomit from the floor,” Joe said, wanting to make himself useful.

“I’ll take care of that, son,” Mr Irving said, turning for the door.

Joe reached out and placed his hand on the older man’s shoulder. “Please, let me do it. I’d like to help and I think Peggy would rather you stayed here and kept her company.”

The older man glanced towards the dog stretched out on the floor and nodded. “Yes, okay. Thank you, that’s very kind.

You'll find bottles of cleaner and whatnot underneath the sink, son."

Joe returned to the kitchen and gathered up the cleaning supplies he'd need. Cleaning up dog mess wasn't usually part of his job description, but tonight he was only too happy to go the extra mile to help his bewildered client and his beloved dog.

The living room had hard flooring, which made the process easier. While Joe scooped the puddle of dog vomit into a wad of paper towels, Peggy looked away, her expression one of unmistakable canine embarrassment at the mess she'd made. After spraying the floor with cleaning spray and scrubbing it dry, Joe tied the smelly paper towels into a plastic bag which he carried outside to the wheelie bin.

Back inside the house, he was about to collect his jacket from the hallway when he was struck by the sight of Mr Irving perched on the edge of the sofa as he ran one hand over Peggy's flank while the other rested on Lulu's little head. The scene brought an unexpected lump to Joe's throat. Although his work here was done, he didn't want to leave the old man alone.

"If it's okay with you, Mr Irving, I'd like to stay for another fifteen minutes or so, just to keep an eye on Peggy and make sure she continues to stabilise," Joe said.

The old man looked up, relief etched on his face. "I'd certainly appreciate that, son."

"How about I pop the kettle on," Joe smiled. "I could use a nice cup of tea after all this excitement."

Mr Irving got to his feet. "I'll deal with the kettle. It's the least I can do to thank you for rushing over here to deal with me and my stupid mistakes. I feel terrible for dragging you out of the house on a cold night like this."

"I already told you it was no trouble to come over and help, Mr Irving."

A sudden thought must have crossed the older man's mind because he gave Joe a horrified look. "I must have got you out

of bed, too.”

“You didn’t. I was wide awake. Stop trying to find things to punish yourself about.”

Mr Irving grunted out a humourless laugh and picked up his walking stick. In the kitchen, he filled the kettle and dropped tea bags into the teapot. While the water boiled, he removed a tin from the cupboard and lifted out a selection of mince pies and chocolate biscuits, which he arranged on a plate.

“Fetch the milk from the fridge, son,” Mr Irving said.

Joe handed him the carton of milk and helped him set mugs on a tray. Once the tea was brewing, Joe carried the tray through to the sitting room. Lulu scampered around the coffee table, peering with interest at the plate of mince pies and chocolate biscuits until Mr Irving tossed her a few dog treats from his pocket to keep her happy.

Peggy showed no interest in the food, either human or canine.

“Should I try to feed Peggy, do you think?” Mr Irving asked. “I know that when a dog is sick, you’re supposed to starve them for a day or so to help soothe any stomach upset, but if this whole thing was all down to me giving her too much painkiller, rather than an upset caused by a bug or whatever, then I’m wondering whether I ought to try to feed her now?”

“I suggest waiting until tomorrow morning before feeding her a proper meal. It’ll help for her stomach to settle down and if she wouldn’t usually eat a meal at this hour of the night, then there’s no point starting now.”

“I don’t like the thought of her being hungry, though.”

“She won’t be hungry, and even if she is, it won’t do her any harm while her stomach settles. But it won’t hurt to leave a few dog biscuits beside her bed for her to eat if she wants them.”

Pleased with this compromise, Mr Irving set some crunchy bones on the floor within Peggy’s reach. When Lulu tried to snaffle them, Mr Irving clicked his fingers and called the small

terrier away. Lulu snorted in protest but left the biscuits alone. Joe smiled at how the little dog had understood the instruction and knew the treats were for her friend, not for her.

Mr Irving poured their tea and insisted Joe take a mince pie. The older man nibbled on the edge of a plain digestive before setting it aside only half-eaten.

“What a night this has been,” Mr Irving said. “I’ve been out of my mind with worry.”

“It’s not easy seeing our pets suffering. You’ve all had a hard time of it lately. How are your own injuries?”

“Mending slowly. Once you get to my age, it takes longer to heal. It’ll be a few weeks more before I can even think about getting back out for my usual walks. Peggy and Lulu and I used to do a few miles each day before that wretched car crash.”

“Once the new year comes, you’ll soon be back to your old routine. Peggy should be able for more exercise by that point.”

“I hope so, son.”

Mr Irving turned contemplative as he sipped his tea. Joe glanced around the room, taking in the few Christmas cards on the mantelpiece. There were only a couple more sitting there than there had been when Joe had come by last week to check up on the dogs’ progress and drop off the small Christmas gifts he’d bought for the older man and his pets.

He saw those token wrapped gifts sitting beside the table-top Christmas tree that stood in the corner. Noting there were no further gifts added to the small pile, Joe wondered about the older man.

“What are your plans for Christmas Day, Mr Irving?” Joe asked. “The last time we spoke, you said something about visiting your sister.”

“Unfortunately, I won’t be able to see my sister this Christmas after all,” Mr Irving replied. “I’m not able to drive until my leg is fully mended, and with my car written off after the accident, it will be next year before I can think about buying a replacement, anyway. My sister had said she’d drive

down here from Birmingham to collect me and take me up to her place for the Christmas holidays, but the truth is she's had some serious health problems of her own these past few months, and I don't want her to exert herself on my account. Better that she stays at home and looks after herself and keeps off those blasted dangerous roads. Her daughter, my niece, doesn't drive, or she'd no doubt offer to come down and pick me up, but as it is..."

The older man trailed off and waved a hand in the air before giving Joe an overly bright smile.

"Well, it'll be nice having a bit of peace and quiet by myself this year, truth be told," he said. "And with Peggy still facing a lot of recovery ahead of her, it's probably best that we just stay here and hunker down."

Joe nodded in understanding. "Have you any friends or neighbours you can see on Christmas Day and perhaps share some Christmas dinner with?"

Mr Irving waved his hand again and shrugged. "Most of the neighbours will be away this year, I think, visiting family elsewhere. As for Christmas dinner, well, I know how to peel a potato and roast a bit of chicken in the oven. Nothing to it." Another hand wave followed before he added, "Anyway, people make far too much of things at Christmas. It's just another day, when all is said and done."

Joe watched the older man's face. His expression told a different story to the one he'd just relayed about not minding keeping a quiet Christmas by himself, and Joe felt a pang of sympathy at the idea of the man spending the day here alone, instead of with his sister and extended family.

He knew how it felt to be alone and to wish for something that was out of reach.

"Why don't you join me and my family for Christmas Day dinner?" Joe found himself saying. The unexpected invitation felt as right as it did surprising as the words tumbled out.

Mr Irving gave him a startled look. "Well, that's very nice of you to offer, son, but I'll be just fine here."

“Please, we’d love to have you. I’m not about to let you spend the day alone and I won’t enjoy my mother’s Christmas turkey if I’m thinking about you here by yourself and eating alone. That wouldn’t be right.”

Mr Irving waved a hand. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You won’t be. It’s always a big gathering with my sister’s lot there, and there are usually a couple of other relatives and friends of the family at the dinner table, too. You’ll enjoy yourself, I promise.”

Mr Irving looked torn. “It’s very kind of you, but it wouldn’t feel right leaving my dogs at home alone on Christmas Day. I’ve never done that before.”

“Bring them along. They’ll have fun meeting my father’s dogs. Given our line of work, my family are all happy to be around animals.”

It was obvious the older man wanted to accept the invitation, unexpected though it was, but something still held him back.

“With my car out of action, and me unable to drive anyway, I don’t think I could find a taxi service willing to allow my dogs into the vehicle for the journey to wherever your parents live.”

“I’ll pick you up and drop you off,” Joe said with an easy shrug. “So, what do you think? Can I let my mother know we’ll have one extra guest on Christmas Day? She makes the best turkey stuffing you’ll ever taste, I promise.”

Mr Irving studied Joe for a long moment before his face broke into a smile. “I’d love to come along, son. That’s really very nice of you. Thank you.”

Joe returned the older man’s smile and finished his mince pie and mug of tea, feeling a warm glow settle inside him that was caused by much more than just the hot festive snacks. The two men kept watch on Peggy for a while longer. When the collie lifted her head and sniffed at the dog biscuits Mr Irving had set out on the floor beside her bed, before gently snaffling

them into her mouth and crunching them down, Joe knew the poorly animal was going to be just fine.

The sight of Mr Irving, grinning from ear to ear on account of Peggy's consumption of the dog biscuits and with relief bringing tears to his eyes, confirmed for Joe that this was one of the most satisfying house calls he'd ever made in all the years he'd been practising as a vet.

He'd done more than just help a sick dog tonight. He'd offered the hand of friendship to an old man who'd gone through a tough time and who needed a little kindness in his life.

Joe hadn't expected to be the one to offer that kindness, not like this, anyway. But that's what had happened. That it had happened at all was a minor miracle.

Just a few weeks ago, the idea of Christmas filled him with dread. Now here he was inviting people to his family's Christmas Day dinner. He thought of the person responsible for the transformation.

Carrie.

And he thought, too, of how his heart leapt inside his chest whenever he thought of her... and just what he planned to do about it.

* * *

After finishing his tea, Joe bade Mr Irving good night and set out for home, still thinking of the Christmas dinner invitation he'd extended to the older man.

Joe knew his parents would be only too happy to welcome one more guest into their home, especially one who would've been alone otherwise and missing his family while recovering from a nasty accident that had caused a great deal of upset and pain. That this man was also a client of the veterinary practice only made the invitation even more fitting.

Joe had a deep sense that he'd done the right thing. It would've been easy for him to put on his coat and leave Mr

Irving to his own devices, once Joe was certain that Peggy was in no immediate danger. He'd stayed because the older man's upset and misfortune touched him and made him want to help.

A few weeks ago, he would've envied Mr Irving the opportunity to spend Christmas Day alone, despite the circumstances. For so long, Joe had thought of Christmas as a time for grinding his teeth and enduring other people's happiness and merriment in the season, all the while aching inside for the things he wanted in life and yet couldn't seem to find.

Love. Romance. A wife and children to cherish and spoil at Christmas.

With every year that passed with those things still absent, Joe had retreated further inside himself. It was only lately he'd come to realise just how hard-hearted he'd become each December.

Carrie had been the one to show him the true reflection of what he'd turned into and Joe hadn't like what he'd seen. She hadn't done it with malice or ill-intent, but with a warm smile and words that stopped him short.

He thought about what Carrie had said when they'd walked home tonight from the Christmas party, just a few short hours ago, when she'd talked about the story of Ebenezer Scrooge.

He lets go of fear and lets love into his heart at last.

For too long, Joe had lived in fear that he'd never have the things he so desperately wanted. Fear had caused him to push away the very things he ached to have. He hadn't realised it until tonight, when he'd listened to Carrie talk about the lonely old man in the age-old Christmas story and realised just how much like him he'd become.

Tonight, he'd taken a risk when he'd pulled Carrie into his arms and kissed her. Chances were she'd be leaving Hamblehurst soon, once Leah returned from New York.

And yet his mind turned again and again to what Carrie had said about possibly staying on in the town if she could

find somewhere to stay. Perhaps she'd take one look at that rented flat she'd mentioned and decide it was the perfect place for her and then Joe could go ahead and fall head over heels in love with her...

Because that was what was already happening. Crazy though it was, considering they'd only met a few weeks ago, Carrie had bewitched him.

After so many dead-end relationships and time spent wondering if there was something wrong with him because he'd never fallen for a woman before, Joe now realised he'd simply had to wait for the right woman to come along.

He trudged through the crisp snow, amazed and terrified and excited in equal measure at the attraction he felt for Carrie and how he couldn't wait to see her again.

Perhaps Christmas miracles really did happen after all?

And perhaps this Christmas miracle would transform his life forever?

CARRIE'S PHONE pinged with a text message on Sunday afternoon as she was dealing with the unedifying task of cleaning Coco and Praline's cat litter tray. After finishing the grim job, she grabbed her phone to read the message, and felt a bump of joy at seeing Joe's name on the screen.

Hope you've recovered from last night's Christmas party, Joe's message read. Wondered if you have any plans for today?

Carrie tapped out a reply. *All fine after a night of dancing and eating far too much! I've got no big plans. Got something in mind?*

She pressed send, already excited at the idea of spending more time with Joe. Last night had been a revelation and the kiss they'd shared at the end of it had turned her knees to jelly.

Actual jelly. It was a wonder she'd been able to cross the hallway back to her flat afterwards without falling down. Had it not been for the veterinary emergency Joe had been called away on, Carrie was sure the night wouldn't have ended with only one brief kiss.

She blushed at the passionate images that flooded her mind as her imagination ran wild with thoughts of what might have been.

Another message pinged through from Joe. *Thought I'd walk over to the shops and finish my Christmas shopping. Interested in joining me?*

Carrie's thumbs flew over the phone screen. *I'd love to. Tell me when you're leaving and I'll be there.*

They exchanged several more messages to confirm timings. After clearing away the cat litter things and tidying up the kitchen, Carrie touched up her lip gloss, brushed her hair, and pulled on her coat and woolly hat. The wintry afternoon was sunny and bright, but the temperatures were icy cold after last night's snowfall.

As she said goodbye to Coco and Praline, she thought of the late night walk home she'd shared with Joe after the party at the hotel and the snowball fight that followed. His eyes had been bright with fun, his grin irresistible. It was hard to believe he was the same person she'd first met just a few short weeks ago.

The more she got to know him, the more it felt like she was peeling back layers of grumpy self-protection to reveal the real man beneath the wary façade.

When she stepped out into the hallway, Joe was coming out of his flat too. Seeing him again after last night's passionate kiss brought heat and colour to Carrie's cheeks, along with a delicious feeling of excited expectation.

"Hi," Joe said, locking his flat door and stepping towards her.

"How did things go last night with the poorly dog you went to look after?" Carrie asked.

"All fine. There was a minor mix-up with the medicines we prescribed, but it's all sorted now. I phoned Peggy's owner this morning, and everything is looking much better today."

"That's good news. I couldn't stop thinking about the poor thing last night and hoping she'd be all right. You promised you'd let me know how it all turned out, and when I didn't hear from you, I feared the worst."

Joe winced at her words. "Sorry, I completely forgot that you asked me to give you an update, although to be fair, it was pretty late when I got back home. I doubt you would have appreciated me sending you text messages at two in the morning."

“I wouldn’t have minded,” Carrie said truthfully. “Things must have been scary for the dog’s owner to call you so late at night, and I hated thinking about what might have happened to the poor animal.”

Joe smiled. “It’s sweet of you to take an interest.”

They stood for a moment in the hallway, smiling at one another and fiddling with their keys. Carrie knew it was stupid to feel this sort of discombobulation in his presence, but she couldn’t help it. His warm smile and soft expression made her go all gooey inside.

Considering she’d found him to be rude and downright abrasive just a couple of weeks ago, the change was nothing short of staggering.

“So,” Carrie said. “More Christmas shopping? There can’t be much more for you to buy, judging by the piles of presents I helped you wrap up the other day.”

“I need a few more stocking fillers,” Joe said. “Also, with one of our practice vets still out of commission and ill at home recovering from the flu, I promised to take care of the presents he was supposed to contribute to the gift bags we give to our nurses and other staff.”

“Then let’s get cracking.”

“Maybe once we’re finished, I could buy you a coffee?”

“I’m up for that.”

They left the building and stepped out onto Foxglove Street, where children were building snowmen in front gardens and snowball fights were taking place up and down the pavement amongst groups of noisy teenagers. Seeing the snowballs flying through the air, Carrie turned and grinned at Joe, remembering their own late night fun in the fresh snowfall.

The smile he gave her told her he was thinking the same thing.

When they reached the high street, they found the road bustling with shoppers and brimming with the buzz of festive

commerce. From the southern end of the high street drifted the merry tunes of a festive brass band playing Christmas carols and even from a distance Carrie could see people gathered in the small pedestrianised area of the street and enjoying the music.

“We ought to walk down and listen to the carols once we finish your Christmas shopping and before we get coffee,” Carrie said.

“It’s a deal.” Joe pointed to a gift shop, its windows decked out with twinkle lights and bright tree baubles dangling on silvery strings. “My veterinary practice colleague hadn’t picked anything out yet for gift options, but when I was doing my own shopping last week, I saw some fancy soap gift sets in here that might do the trick as an addition to the staff goodie bags. I’ll pop in and check them out.”

Carrie followed Joe inside the pretty gift shop. He made a beeline for the aisle with the handmade toiletries, and Carrie picked up some of the beautifully wrapped soaps, inhaling the scents of lavender and rose. She couldn’t help noticing the price tags attached to the luxury soap sets as Joe stacked several boxes in his arms and carried them to the check-out desk.

Joe and his family and the other practice partners clearly went the extra mile to indulge and reward their staff at Christmas time. Remembering the expensive boxes of chocolates she’d helped him wrap last week, and which were his own contribution to the staff goodie bags, she couldn’t help admiring his generosity and desire to look after the people who worked in his business.

And to think she’d imagined him a Grinch and a Scrooge when she first met him. First impressions really could be dangerously deceiving.

Carrie selected a few Christmas purchases of her own from the shop, and once they’d bagged their items, they stepped back out onto the high street.

“Anything else you need to buy?” Carrie asked Joe.

“I’m all done.” He nodded towards the brass band further along the street. “Shall we go and have a listen to that lot before we warm up with a coffee?”

Carrie nodded and slipped her arm into his as they navigated the busy high street. He smiled as her hand looped inside his elbow and once they reached the clutch of people enjoying the brass band, he shifted his arm and scooped her hand inside his own.

His gaze raked across her face, looking for her reaction to this move. Carrie squeezed his fingers and Joe’s smile at last reached his eyes.

To the sweet sound of the brass band playing ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’, Joe brushed a kiss across Carrie’s forehead, the gesture so tender it brought a lump of emotion to her throat. Together, they listened to the Christmas carols drifting across the snowy street while twinkle lights danced in the windows of the surrounding shops and the midwinter sun dipped beneath the rooftops.

Carrie looked up into Joe’s eyes in a sweet moment that felt frosted with the magic and romance of Christmas.

Something lovely is happening here, Carrie thought. And I’m loving every second of it.

After enjoying more carols from the brass band, Carrie and Joe dropped money into the charity collection cans arrayed around the musicians and then wandered off to find a café. Most of the coffee shops on the high street were jammed with shoppers taking advantage of the last weekend before Christmas to shop and treat themselves, and they eventually found themselves in one of the cobbled lanes that ran off from the main road, where they found a tearoom with one empty table going free. Making themselves comfortable, they shrugged off their coats and ordered gingerbread lattes and added spiced cranberry muffins when the waitress explained they were the house special.

When the drinks arrived with towering whirls of whipped cream on top, along with muffins that were easily twice the

size of any muffin Carrie had ever seen before, her eyes widened in delight.

“This looks amazing,” she said, taking a sip of the delicious spiced coffee. “I’ll have to go for a ten-mile walk after consuming this lot.”

Joe smiled across the table, then laughed as his gaze dropped to her nose. “You’ve got cream on your face.”

Blushing, Carrie wiped the tip of her nose. “Did I get it all?”

Joe’s smile deepened as he leaned towards her and gently grazed his thumb over her nose, his eyes on hers. “All gone.”

“Thanks.” Carrie felt suddenly shy beneath Joe’s dark gaze. His hand cupping her face as he’d wiped away the cream brought memories of his hands on her body last night when they’d kissed.

The moment ended when someone shimmying past their table knocked against them with the over-stuffed shopping bags they held in each hand. As apologies were issued and assurances given that no harm had been done, Carrie returned to her coffee and muffin, determined not to get any more foodstuffs smeared across her face.

Delicious though it was to have Joe’s hands against her skin, this cosy tearoom wasn’t the place to let her thoughts run away with her.

As they drank their gingerbread lattes and ate their cranberry muffins, they made small talk about the party the night before and the fun they’d had. Inevitably, the conversation came around to the time they’d spent alone together once the party was over.

“I’m sorry I had to rush away last night to help Mr Irving and his dog,” Joe said. “Well, what I mean is, I’m obviously happy I was able to help the dog and make sure the animal was okay, because that’s my job. But I was sorry I had to leave when I did.”

“Me too,” Carrie said, swirling the coffee in her mug.

Now it was Joe who had colour creeping across his cheeks, his expression suddenly hesitant. He glanced around him, as if to check whether anyone could hear them, but everyone else gathered in the little tearoom was too immersed in their own conversations to pay them any attention.

He reached across the table and took her hand in his. “It wasn’t a great moment to get a phone call from a frantic dog owner.”

Carrie laughed. “No, it wasn’t.”

“Last night when we kissed... it was special, Carrie. It wasn’t what I thought would happen when we set out for the party, although...” He blew out a breath and ran his thumb over the back of her hand, making her shiver. “I’d be lying if I said some part of me didn’t secretly hope it might happen.”

“Even although we were only supposed to be there together as friendly neighbours?”

“Even so. I have Yvette to thank for giving me a boot up the backside and forcing me to go last night, because I hate to think I would’ve missed the chance to spend that time with you. And I hate to think I would’ve missed the chance to...”

Before he could finish, another customer shuffled past their table, giving it another jolt so hard it almost knocked their mugs to the floor. Once more, apologies were issued, reassurances of no harm done were exchanged, but after the shuffling customer departed, so too had the intimate moment Carrie and Joe had just shared.

Joe let go of her hand and blew out a breath, giving her a wry look. “I’ll get the bill and then maybe we should get out of here?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Carrie drained the last of her coffee. The cranberry muffins they’d ordered were long gone. She was only too happy to leave the busy tearoom and get out into the crisp winter afternoon again.

“How about a stroll around Peartree Park?” Carrie suggested once they were back outside on the narrow cobbled

lane. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I’d have to walk ten miles after stuffing my face with that amazing muffin.”

Laughing, Joe nodded and they began walking towards the end of the lane and the high street beyond. “If you need to walk it off, then I do, too.

They picked their way across the snowy cobblestones and up along the high street in the direction of the park. The afternoon light was fading from the sky as another December evening approached, and the fairy lights in the shop windows along the high street looked even prettier than they had earlier.

As they walked side-by-side, Carrie thought about what Joe had been about to say back in the tearoom before they’d been interrupted by the customer squeezing past their table.

I hate to think I would’ve missed the chance to...

What? Get to know her a little better? Throw a snowball at her face? Kiss her senseless?

Carrie hoped he’d meant the last one. Well, the first one, too, obviously. Joe getting to know her better had gone hand-in-hand with kissing her, after all.

And if she was being honest, the snowball throwing had been a key part of the whole thing, too. Actually, the snowball throwing had been wonderful. Flirty and festive and fun... and completely wonderful.

They reached the top of the high street, leaving behind the hum and bustle of the shopping crowds. Soon after, they reached the far side entrance to Peartree Park. A grand spruce tree stood at the entrance gates, draped in bright white lights, and they passed beneath its warm glow as they followed the path into the park, where more white lights were draped around the trees and park railings.

The late afternoon air was still and cold, the grass verges frosted white. A robin sang high up on the bare bough of a tree, its sweet music floating above them as they walked along the snow-covered path. Dog walkers bundled up in thick coats passed by, nodding hellos as their dogs romped around the empty flower beds in pursuit of scampering squirrels.

Carrie reached for Joe's hand. As their fingers intertwined, he gave her a smile that made her sigh with pleasure at the sweet loveliness of the moment—the singing robin, the white-frosted park, the dark gloaming of the midwinter afternoon.

When they reached the duck pond further across the park, where the water reflected the deep blues of the clear December sky and the soft lights that lined the pathway, they paused to take in the scene.

“It's lovely and quiet here,” Carrie said, enjoying the peace of the park after the bustle of the busy high street.

Joe nodded, his gaze on the ducks swimming serenely across the pond. “My parents used to bring my sister and I here on Sunday afternoons when we were kids. We'd ride our bikes along the path and around the pond, racing one another.”

Carrie smiled at his shared memory. “Who won the most races?”

“Yvette, obviously,” Joe grinned. “I wasn't allowed to win. If I won, she flew into a stinking big huff about it and accused me of cheating by cutting across the grass instead of sticking to the path.”

“And did you cheat?”

“Of course.”

Carrie laughed. “It sounds like you had a lot of fun together, even if you were cheating.”

“We did have fun. Although I remember this one time, I insisted my dad bring us here to play on our bikes even although it was December and there had been this huge freeze after heavy rainfall. The roads and pavements were like ice rinks, but I insisted I wanted to come and play on my bike. I managed one lap around the pond before my wheels lost their grip and I came crashing to the ground.” Joe shook his head and laughed softly. “My father says he sometimes still shudders when he remembers the shriek I let out when I hit the pavement.”

“Ouch. Did you hurt yourself badly?”

“Broke my wrist. Needed a couple of stitches on my forehead where I cracked my stupid skull on the ice.”

Carrie winced. “That sounds painful.” She peered at his forehead. “I don’t see a scar from the cut or the stitches.”

“Really?” Joe prodded at his hairline. “You can’t see the line, right here?”

Carrie peered more closely. “Nope, can’t see anything.”

“Huh. I always thought people could see it. I thought it made me look super macho, as if I’d been in a few tough scrapes in my life and had come out on top.”

He was frowning hard and it took Carrie a moment to notice the twinkle in his eyes and realise he was joking.

“You know, now that you mention it, I can definitely see a scar there. It’s very cool and definitely super macho.”

His expression dissolved into a grin. Laughing, Carrie reached up and ran her fingers across his forehead where he’d touched it a moment ago.

“Yep, definitely a serious war wound,” she said.

But the moment her fingers touched his skin, Joe’s laughter faded into an intense gaze that held her pinned in place before him. Her fingertips caressed his forehead before moving down to his cheek, and Carrie sucked in a breath when Joe laid his hand on her hip and moved closer.

For a long moment, he looked into her eyes as if seeking the answers to some deep question there. His dark eyes searching hers set Carrie’s pulse racing, set her heart clip-clopping, and made her ache for what was coming next.

Joe lifted his fingers to her chin and tilted her mouth to meet his own.

Carrie closed her eyes, savouring his kiss that was hot and sweet and slow. He tasted of gingerbread and cranberry and desire.

The kiss was so wonderful, Carrie thought she’d melt into a puddle on the icy pathway beneath her feet. Between the

frosty air and the sweetly singing robin and the glow of the fairy lights around the park, it was the most romantic Christmas moment she'd ever had in her life.

When Joe ended the kiss with a lingering brush of his lips across her mouth and she opened her eyes, the whole twilight world was spinning around her.

Carrie wanted to speak, but no words would come out. In a silent beat as they looked into one another's eyes, she felt as if they said everything they needed to say about what had just happened and how they both felt about it.

"I didn't expect any of this to happen," Joe said softly as they stood in the wintry park, arms wrapped around each other. "I didn't expect to feel this way about someone I only just met."

"How do you feel?" Carrie asked.

"Like this is wonderful, and I want to spend more time with you. Ever since..."

"Ever since what?" she pressed when he trailed off.

Joe looked thoughtful, and then a small smile lifted his mouth. "Ever since you threw that plastic box at me in the back garden, I've wanted more."

"You wanted me to throw more things at you?" Carrie wriggled her eyebrows. "Gosh, Joe, I'm not really into that sort of kinky stuff."

Joe let out a rumble of laughter. "I wanted more of *you*, not more of your physical assaults with heavy objects."

"Phew." Carrie made a mock gesture of wiping her brow. "Glad we cleared that up."

Joe's soft laughter and the amusement in his eyes made her heart skip a beat. If he wanted more of her, she wanted more of him, too. He kissed her again, soft and sweet, before they resumed their walk around the pond, hand-in-hand.

"Were you serious last night when you said you might consider staying on in Hamblehurst once Leah comes back

from New York?" Joe asked. The hope in his expression was unmistakable.

Carrie nodded. "I've already heard back from the landlord of the flat that Jess Shepherd is vacating next month, and I'll be going to view it the day after tomorrow."

"And if you like what you see?"

"If I like what I see, then I think I'll probably rent the place. The photographs look nice and the rent is just about within my budget. I haven't had any luck with any of the other rental places I've checked out over the last few days. And anyway, I'd quite like to stay here for longer in Hamblehurst." She looked across at Joe, wanting to make sure he understood. "Not just because it's a pretty little town. There are other things that make me want to stay."

"Yeah?" he said, his voice quiet and his gaze intent.

"Yeah. I had a lot of fun with you last night, Joe. I'm having a lot of fun with you right now, too." Pausing, she bit her lip and drew in a breath. "Maybe there's a chance for something between us?"

His intense gaze slipped into a wide grin. "I hope so."

As they walked through Peartree Park and back towards the gates, Carrie thought about what Joe had told her last night as they'd curled up together on his sofa. He'd talked about how he'd never fallen in love, how he'd never found someone who sparked those feelings inside him, and how he feared not only that there might be something wrong with him, but that he might be destined to be alone forever.

After only a few stolen kisses and mere hours spent in one another's company, Carrie knew it was far too soon to think about whether this might be love.

And yet, even as this thought registered, another one joined it.

It's not love, not yet. But I'm falling, I know that much. I'm at the top of the rollercoaster and I'm about to plummet over the edge, and I can't wait for the thrill and wonder of what I'll find and what I'll feel once I land at the other end of the ride.

Joe squeezed her hand and smiled. Did he know what she was thinking just by the look on her face? Carrie wouldn't be surprised. She must have 'smitten' written across her forehead in flashing neon lights.

"It's getting dark already," Joe said, nodding towards the sky overhead where the light was swiftly disappearing and stars were already twinkling like tiny beacons against the deep blue velvet. "Let's head home. I could cook us dinner later if you liked. I can just about manage a decent spaghetti bolognese if I put my mind to it."

"That sounds good. I'll be your sous chef."

"Perfect."

They shared another smile as they left the pond behind and headed towards the park exit. Carrie reckoned she must look like a bit of a dolt, walking around with a mile-wide grin on her face, but she couldn't help it.

What a weird and wonderful weekend it had been. With Christmas only a few more days away, Carrie wondered what the rest of the festive season might hold in store.

JOE SAID goodbye to Carrie at the door of his flat later that night with a kiss and a promise to see her again the next day.

He desperately wanted to ask her to stay for longer. Actually, he desperately wanted to ask her to stay for the entire night. The idea of her curled up in bed beside him was irresistible.

But he sensed it was too soon for that. Things had already moved at lightning speed between them. It was only a few days ago that Carrie had helped him wrap up all those Christmas gifts and they'd finally broken through the ice of their previously awkward neighbourly relationship. It was barely twenty-four hours since they'd shared their first kiss. The last thing Joe wanted was to scare her off by asking her to spend the night already.

When Carrie had drained the last of the wine he'd served with the spaghetti bolognese and said she really ought to get back to the cats and prepare for work the next day, Joe had taken it as a cue to slow down and keep his wits about him.

Still, it wasn't easy saying goodnight to her and watching her cross the hallway to the flat on the other side. The knowledge that she was so close by needled in his brain as he washed the dishes and cleared away the dinner things. Remembering the afternoon they'd spent together, with their romantic wintry walk and searing kisses in the park, made him realise how much had changed in only a few short days.

He'd never felt anything like this before now. Not once in his life had a woman caused this sort of reaction and made him feel the things he was now feeling. It excited him as much as it scared him.

Was he really falling in love? Was he ready for this? Did he even know what he was supposed to do? Everyone else had figured this stuff out years ago. He was still completely clueless. What if he messed this up because of his own emotional incompetence?

It felt as if the pieces might all be falling suddenly and quickly into place. When he'd first begun to suspect his true feelings for Carrie, he'd known they were surely hopeless because she would be leaving Hamblehurst as soon as Leah returned from New York and moved back into the flat.

Now, though, with Carrie checking out rental options right here in town, Joe couldn't help but let his thoughts carry him away.

He imagined what might happen between them if Carrie stayed. Already he knew he'd be helpless not to fall all the rest of the way in love with her. After waiting his whole life to feel this way, to feel something even *close* to this way, all he wanted now was to fling himself head-first into whatever was coming next.

It was insane. And it was beyond wonderful.

As he finished washing and drying the spaghetti pots and pans, his phone rang. Grabbing it from the kitchen counter, Joe saw his father's number on the screen.

"Hello, son. How's things?" his father, Bernard, asked when he answered the call.

"All good, Dad. What about you?"

"I'm fine. Your mother wants to know if you had a nice time last night with that lovely young woman you brought along to the Christmas party."

"I did have a nice time, Dad, and so did Carrie."

“Your mother says you two looked good together. She wants to know if you’ll be seeing more of each other.”

“Why isn’t Mum on the phone asking me these questions?” Joe asked with a laugh.

“She’s still nursing a headache from all the wine she drank last night. She’s been popping paracetamol all day. Honestly, I can’t take her anywhere.”

On the other end of the phone, Joe heard his mother object to this statement.

“She’s busy dealing with some sort of paperwork for the Hamblehurst history museum, which is why she can’t come to the phone and ask you these nosy questions herself,” Joe’s father informed him. “There’s some sort of deadline for a funding competition they’re applying for and the committee only realised late this afternoon that they’re missing some key documents. Honestly, quite why your mother got involved with that mad lot over there at the history museum is anyone’s guess.”

Joe heard another volley of words from his mother on the other end of the phone before his father relayed the message once more.

“She says if we don’t all muck in and do our bit for the local charities and societies, we’ll be a much worse place for it because everything will shut down and then where will we be?” Bernard sighed down the line. “No doubt I’ll be getting conscripted in a minute to lend a hand with all these blasted forms that need to be dealt with. Anyway, why did I phone you?”

“I have no idea, Dad,” Joe laughed. “Why did you?”

“Oh, yes, I remember now. Had a senior moment just then.” Bernard chortled then said, “I phoned because we’ve got a bit of a problem at the vet surgery and we need your help.”

“What’s the problem?”

“With Clive Moore out of commission with this flu bug that’s going around, it means he can’t go along to that

veterinary conference up in Manchester tomorrow. We'd all forgotten about it until Clive phoned me earlier today to remind me. What with covering for Clive's absence at the practice and then getting distracted with the Christmas party last night, it just completely fell off the radar."

"Understandable, considering the circumstances and the busy time of year."

"Well, that's another thing, of course. Quite why they decided to hold a conference this close to Christmas is anyone's guess. It's a stupid time of year to expect people to fit in something like that. But that's not the point. The point is the vet practice paid for Clive's conference ticket and accommodation and whatnot and we'll lose the money if someone doesn't go in his place. More importantly, the whole reason Clive wanted to go to this conference in the first place was because it's focused on new advances in the treatment of feline cancers. There are new therapeutics and medicines coming onto the market that we don't know enough about, and going to this conference was supposed to be about getting up to speed and talking to the reps from the pharmaceutical manufacturers and treatment specialists. This could be a key part of our business over the next few years and help us offer hope to cat owners when they face a difficult cancer diagnosis for their pets."

Joe let his father wrap up the hard sell. "So, you want me to go in Clive's place to this conference?"

"Exactly. I know it's short notice, son, and far from ideal. But I'd rather not endure the Christmas crush to make the train journey up north and Yvette doesn't want to leave the boys when they've got so many school things happening at this time of year, what with their school nativity play next week and so on. The other vets are all busy, too, with family stuff and whatnot."

Unlike me, Joe thought, but didn't say. His father wasn't saying anything that wasn't true.

He understood it was important for the practice to send someone to the conference. Joe had chatted with Clive last

month about the event and what he hoped to get out of attending it. The conference would help the practice make new contacts, talk with vets who'd used some of these new drugs and therapeutics in trials, and make a head start on incorporating the new treatments into their own practices.

"It would be a shame to lose the money already paid out for the conference ticket and so on," Joe said. "And I agree that it's too good an opportunity to pass up, which was why Clive signed up to go along in the first place. I can take his place."

On the other end of the line, Bernard let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, son. We all appreciate it. And of course we'll make sure all your patients next week are reassigned while you're away. You won't have to worry about sorting out anything like that."

"Cheers, Dad."

"I'll email over the tickets that Clive had booked for the train and the hotel, so you'll be good to go. He was booked on a six-thirty train out of Hamblehurst tomorrow morning, so you don't have a lot of time to get organised. Sorry about that."

"I'll make it work."

They chatted for another few minutes about the conference and various work-related things the other vets would need to be aware of in Joe's absence.

Joe was about to hang up when he thought of his emergency visit to Mr Irving's house the night before. "By the way, I've invited an extra guest to Christmas Day dinner. I hope you and Mum don't mind."

There was a long pause on the line. "A guest? Of course not. The more the merrier. Who is it? That lovely girl you were with at the Christmas party last night?"

Joe felt a sudden pang. Pleased though he was to invite lonely old Mr Irving to his family's Christmas festivities, he realised he wished it was Carrie he'd invited instead. Or as well as. No reason they both couldn't be there.

Now *there* was an idea.

“Son? Are you still there?” Bernard asked.

“Yes, sorry. Uh, no it’s not Carrie I invited to dinner. It’s Mr Irving, the vet practice client whose dogs we helped the other week after that late night road accident.”

Another pause down the line. “Well, of course the man is welcome if he’s your guest, but what made you invite him?”

Joe quickly explained about the house call he’d paid to Mr Irving on account of Peggy the collie’s deteriorating condition. After reassuring his father that the dog was perfectly fine and summarising what had transpired, he mentioned his concerns about the old man spending Christmas Day alone and feeling bad about the idea.

“Well, good for you, son,” Bernard said. “You did the right thing. I’ll let your mother know to set an extra place. But what about that young lady of yours? Any chance you might invite her along, too?”

Now that the idea was in Joe’s head, he found he couldn’t get rid of it. He didn’t know what Carrie’s Christmas Day plans were. Perhaps he ought to find out?

Or would that seem like too much too soon?

The only way to know would be to take the risk and find out. Carrie was new to Hamblehurst and probably hadn’t got to know anyone well enough to spend Christmas Day dinner with them. Maybe it was his neighbourly duty to invite her to his parents’ house, just as he’d invited Mr Irving.

He decided he ought to bring it up casually with her and make it seem like no big deal. Assuming he could pluck up the courage to risk rejection.

“I’ll let you know if I’m bringing anyone else along, Dad,” Joe said.

“Fair enough, son.”

“I’d better go and get ready for tomorrow’s trip.”

They said their goodbyes and once he'd hung up, Joe walked to his bedroom and began packing clothes into a small suitcase. As he folded shirts and jumpers into the case, he frowned at the unexpected trip he was about to make.

It had to be done, he knew that. But it was just his bad luck that his colleague's illness and the conference emergency had come up *this week*.

When he'd said goodbye to Carrie at the door earlier, all he could think about was seeing her again the next day. Now that he'd agreed to go to the conference in Clive's place, he wouldn't be back until late on Wednesday evening.

Which, he realised with a start, was two days before Christmas Eve.

A few weeks ago, he would've jumped at the chance to get away from things for a few days before Christmas. In fact, when he first heard that Clive had volunteered for the conference and was keen to go, he was almost jealous, considering when it was taking place. He'd even considered offering to swap with Clive, but Clive was the one who specialised in veterinary oncology and it made sense for him to be the person who went along to a conference focused on feline cancer treatments.

Now, just when he'd met someone he couldn't wait to spend more time with, he was having to leave.

Joe walked through to the living area to organise the work bag he'd take with him and in which he'd put his laptop, charging cables, and other things. Once his bags were sorted, and he'd checked the email from his father, which included the travel arrangements and tickets he'd need tomorrow, he glanced at the time and saw it was almost eight-thirty.

He didn't want to leave it any later to cross the hallway and tell Carrie he'd be gone for a few days.

Joe was about to head over there when he heard the muffled click of the front doors of the building open. When he glanced out the window, he saw Carrie hurrying down the steps and off along Foxglove Street in the direction of the

town centre. Bundled up in her coat and scarf, she clutched her professional digital camera in her hands, the cord looped around her neck.

Joe guessed she was taking advantage of the crisp winter's night to get out and take some photographs. Wondering how long she'd be gone for, he only hoped he hadn't missed his chance to see her before he left tomorrow morning.

He'd hate to have the chance to say goodbye.

CARRIE WAS BOILING the kettle for coffee and pouring breakfast cereal into a bowl the next morning when she realised she'd missed several texts from Joe.

Last night, when she'd gone out to take advantage of the crisp wintry scenes around Hamblehurst and to snap as many photographs as possible, she'd turned her phone to silent to avoid being distracted while capturing the perfect shots. Between the snowy streets and the festive lights in the shop windows and the wonderful Christmassy-ness of the little town now that it was covered in so much white snow, it was too good a chance to miss to stock up on digital images for her business.

While it was now too late to add any more products to her little online store, she couldn't miss the chance to collect photos and images for next year's Christmas season. She'd spent almost two hours roaming around Hamblehurst, taking photograph after photograph of snowy scenes, frosted trees, and Christmas lights and decorations reflected in slushy puddles on slick pavements. There was no telling how long the snow would last before it melted, and she was already kicking herself a little for not getting out yesterday and taking full advantage of the winter wonderland and the picture compositions it had offered.

Not that she regretted that decision too much. As she'd spent most of the day with Joe, it hardly counted as a complete waste of time.

Seeing unread messages from him on her phone this morning made Carrie realise she'd forgotten to switch the device out of silent mode when she got back to the flat last night. There was also a missed call last night, too, also from Joe.

She opened the first of the two messages he'd sent and read it.

Hi Carrie, let me know if you've got a minute to spare tonight. There's something I want to let you know about. Cheers, Joe.

Hmm, curious. Wondering what he'd wanted to tell her about, Carrie flicked to the second message he'd sent, which had arrived early this morning.

Hi Carrie, sorry I didn't get a chance to speak to you last night. I wanted to tell you that I've had to cover for a colleague at the last minute and travel to a conference up in Manchester. I'll be gone until late on Wednesday. These things tend to be busy and full-on, so I might not get a chance to talk to you while I'm away, but hope we can get together when I get home? Sorry not to see you before I left this morning to catch the early train. Joe x

Carrie noted the little kiss mark he'd added at the end of the second message and wondered if he'd paused before including it. She imagined him frowning, his fingers hovering over the phone screen, trying to make up his mind about whether it was the right way to end the message or not. Although they'd only just begun to get to know one another, she knew instinctively that the 'x' at the end of the message had probably taken Joe longer to type than the rest of the long text had. That knowledge brought a warm smile to her lips.

But the smile didn't last long. As Carrie re-read Joe's message, she realised with a jolt that she was sorry he'd had to leave at short notice and that she'd miss him while he was gone.

How was it possible to miss someone she'd only just started to get to know in any meaningful way? She'd spent the

first few weeks here on Foxglove Street actively irritated by the grumpy neighbour across the hall.

And then everything had changed so fast it made her head spin.

In the space of only a few days, her opinion of Grumpy Grinchy Neighbour Joe had transformed beyond all recognition. After the time they'd spent together at the Christmas party on Saturday night, followed by the sweet Sunday they'd shared walking around the snowy streets of Hamblehurst before enjoying a meal together back at Joe's cosy flat, she now couldn't wait to be with him once again.

When they'd parted yesterday evening, they'd promised to get together today after work. Realising that wouldn't now happen made Carrie sigh with regret.

She dialled Joe's number and he answered after a couple of rings.

"Hey, I just got your text messages," she explained after they said hello. "I turned my phone onto silent mode last night while I was out taking some photographs and only realised I hadn't turned the thing back on a few minutes ago."

"Sorry I missed saying goodbye before I left," Joe said down the crackling phone line. "I thought about knocking on your door this morning, but I was catching the six-thirty train and didn't want to wake you if you weren't up yet."

"I would've been a bit bleary-eyed but happy to say goodbye." She thought about how that must sound. "Well, not happy as in, 'Thank God he's going away and won't be around anymore'. Happy as in, it wouldn't have been an interruption or an inconvenience to answer the door so early in the morning."

What on earth was she babbling on about? She sounded like a total moron.

"I figured it might not..." Joe's voice faded away as the line crackled. "...but I was wondering..." More crackling on the other end of the line, and Carrie could barely piece together what he was saying.

“Joe? I can’t hear you.”

“Sorry... we’re going through some tunnels... what I wanted to ask is...”

There was a beeping noise and then the line went dead. Carrie stared at the phone screen and saw the call had cut out, no doubt thanks to the patchy network coverage as Joe’s train hurtled north.

She redialled his number, but it just went straight through to voice mail. Carrie left a few quick words about the line dropping out and said they could chat later once he was no longer travelling.

Ten minutes later, as she was finishing her breakfast and carrying her dishes to the sink, a text pinged through from Joe.

Sorry we got cut off. I’ll give you a phone later tonight. Hope you have a great day. Cheers, Joe.

No little ‘x’ for a kiss this time, Carrie noted. Not that it mattered. Maybe he’d just forgot to add it before sending the message. Or maybe he’d wondered whether he ought to be adding ‘x’ marks at the end of his messages in the first place.

In the absence of an ‘x’ on his text message, Carrie settled for remembering the kiss they’d shared yesterday in the park. The memory brought a blush to her cheeks.

And put a smile on her face that lasted for the rest of the morning.

* * *

Carrie spent a busy day working on design projects for clients who were all keen to see their commissioned portfolios submitted before everyone finished for the Christmas holidays. In the late afternoon, she went out to visit the first of the two veterinary practice nurses who’d hired her during the Christmas party to take family portraits. After spending the visit arranging the family around the Christmas tree set up in the sitting room, adjusting her lighting, and wrangling the menagerie of dogs and cats who were also to be included in

the portrait, Carrie finally clicked off a solid sequence of beautifully composed shots that had her nurse client squeaking with delight.

She spent so much of her time working remotely with clients, and only ever communicating online or on the phone with them, that it was a treat for Carrie to see her new client's excitement and satisfaction up close. Carrie promised to send through a digital package from which the veterinary nurse could choose her selection of images.

While the family members and household animals had been arranging themselves in front of the Christmas tree, Carrie had snapped many candid shots that captured the fun of the moment, as well as more tender shots between the nurse and her husband, and the mischief-making amongst the children and pets. Charmed by these relaxed photographs and the soft festive nostalgia they evoked, the nurse asked if Carrie could put together a Christmas photograph album for her, something in a special book that they could treasure as a keepsake. Thrilled that the nurse loved her work so much to ask for an additional product, Carrie was only too happy to oblige.

Carrie left the house satisfied with a job well done. She'd focused so much on selling her work online that she'd forgotten how nice it was to interact with actual people who wanted to purchase her photographic services.

As she walked back towards Foxglove Street in the darkness, she wondered if she ought to pivot her business a little and include more of the type of work she'd just done. The numbers would have to add up, obviously, and the investment of time required to do portrait work would have to be worth it. The industry was competitive enough without moving into a time-intensive activity that didn't pay enough.

It was something to think about, anyway.

An idea for the future.

* * *

Later that night, Carrie sat on the sofa in the flat's sitting area, her laptop on her legs and Coco and Praline curled up beside her while she worked. The flat was warm and toasty, the flickering flames on the little fake wood-burning stove adding to the cosy vibes while the cats' gentle purring created a gentle soporific effect.

Carrie didn't realise she'd dozed off, her fingers resting on the laptop keys, until she was awoken by the chirping of her phone on the coffee table.

Blinking, she grabbed the phone and saw Joe's name on the screen.

"Hello," she said when she answered, the greeting swallowed up in an unexpected yawn.

"Sorry, I didn't wake you up, did I?" Joe asked.

"No, I just dozed off on the sofa for a second." Carrie glanced at the time and saw it was only nine-thirty. "I had a busy day, that's all."

"Me too. It's been non-stop since I arrived at the conference. All very useful but completely non-stop. I hoped to phone you earlier but I haven't had the chance."

"Are you finished for the day now?"

"Not quite. I'm chatting with a few other vets in the hotel bar and one of them just went off to dig out some data from research work they did recently on the new medicines we heard about today. I'm keen to take a look at the numbers, and so are a few other of the conference delegates, so we decided to order coffee and get stuck in."

"It sounds like you're working hard."

"I want to make the most of the trip, now that I've found myself here."

On the other end of the line, Carrie heard someone call out Joe's name and ask a question.

"Better make mine a double shot espresso if we're about to start studying spreadsheets," Joe said with a laugh to whoever

he was speaking to. “Sorry about that,” he added for Carrie’s benefit.

“You’d better get back to it,” Carrie said.

“I’d hope to chat for a bit longer.”

“Don’t worry about it. Like you said, you might as well make the most of your time there at the conference.”

There was a long pause before Joe spoke again. “I know, it’s just that... after the great time we had yesterday, I wish I was still there in Hamblehurst.”

“You’ll be back before you know it and we’ll catch up then.”

Another long pause. “Uh, Carrie, there was something I wanted to ask you, about Christmas Day, uh...”

When Joe didn’t say anything else, Carrie wondered what was wrong and whether the line had gone a bit wonky again. “Joe? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m still here. Listen, everyone’s back at the table and the coffees are arriving. I ought to go and join in.”

“Of course you should. Speak soon?”

“Yes, speak soon.”

“Goodnight, Joe.”

His voice softened on the other end of the line as he said, “Goodnight, Carrie.”

They hung up. Carrie wondered what he’d been about to ask her when he’d mentioned Christmas Day before trailing off into silence. He had a habit of doing that, starting something up and then biting back whatever he’d been about to say.

On the one hand, it was sort of endearing. On the other hand, Carrie wished he’d just say whatever he wanted to say. She *wanted* him to open up.

Perhaps he had good reason to be reticent. As things stood, Carrie would be leaving soon. Joe had been honest enough to

share his regrets about never having met the right woman and never having fallen in love. After the whirlwind of what had happened between them during the last few days, it was easy to see they might have got carried away. With Joe now in Manchester, perhaps the space between them had given him time to gather his thoughts and regroup?

Carrie thought of the flat she was scheduled to view with the landlord tomorrow evening. The current tenant, Jess Shepherd, had sent her a message earlier to say she would be working and unable to be there during the viewing, but would leave the place in pristine condition for her.

If the flat was everything Carrie hoped it would be, she'd be mad not to jump at the chance of renting it. She wanted to stay here in Hamblehurst a little longer if she could.

And, most of all, she wanted to find out if there was the chance of something more with Joe.

As Carrie closed her laptop and cuddled Coco and Praline closer beside her on the sofa, she crossed her fingers for good luck and a fair wind tomorrow at the flat viewing.

THE LANDLORD WAS LATE TURNING up for the flat viewing.

Carrie checked the time on her phone as she stamped her feet to ward off the chill from the snow-covered pavement. He should've been here ten minutes ago. As Carrie had arrived ten minutes early, excited at the prospect of seeing the flat and not wanting to keep the man waiting, she was frozen to the bone after waiting so long.

She blew on her hands to warm them up, annoyed at forgetting her gloves, and glanced around Beech Street, where the small block of flats was located. Although she'd walked down the street several times already in preparation for today, scoping out the location, she had nothing better to do right now than give it yet another once-over.

Beech Street was about a twenty-minute walk from Foxglove Street, and comprised a mix of housing types, including the squat three-storey modern block in which the rental flat was located. The brick-built structure which appeared to date from the 1970s wasn't much to look at, but seemed in decent enough repair from the outside. A cherry tree stood on one side of the cracked pathway that led to the communal front door and Carrie saw Christmas decorations brightening up the inside of most of the windows visible from the street.

Across the road there was a block of small terraced houses, two-up-two-down. On the corner with the junction stood a small newsagent shop and an Indian takeaway.

Beech Street was no patch on Foxglove Street, but it was still a lovely, attractive street. The longer Carrie stood waiting on the pavement the more she could picture herself living there, coming and going from the small block of flats, running to the corner shop for a pint of milk, settling in and becoming a proper part of the Hamblehurst community.

Spending more time with Joe.

That thought kept her going as she waited on the street, shuffling to keep warm and wondering where on earth the landlord had got to.

Twenty minutes after their agreed appointment time, and thirty minutes after she'd arrived, a car came screeching to a stop next to the pavement where she stood and a frowning man who looked to be somewhere in his early sixties hauled himself out from the driver's seat with a grunt.

"Sorry I'm late, love," he said, hurrying over and pulling an enormous set of keys from his jacket pocket. "I got delayed sorting out a problem at one of the other rental flats I own."

"It's fine," Carrie said, not wanting to get grumpy with the landlord considering how much she wanted to rent this flat. "I'm Carrie. Nice to meet you."

He shook her outstretched hand. "Paul Wood."

After twisting a key in the front door, he waved her inside ahead of him. Carrie surveyed the shared stairwell with its hard linoleum flooring and industrial grey paint on the walls. It was clean if not exactly homely. She followed Paul Wood to the first floor where he unlocked another door off the landing and once more waved her inside.

"Here we are," Paul said, glancing around the space. "The young lass who lives here, Jess, keeps the place nice and tidy. It comes furnished. If you've got questions about exactly what bits and pieces of furniture belong to the flat, and which belong to the current tenant, just let me know."

The flat wasn't much bigger than Leah's flat over on Foxglove Street. It comprised a small open plan sitting and kitchen area, a tiny bedroom with just about enough space for

a double bed and a chest of drawers, a decent storage cupboard, and a smart and modern shower room. The cooker in the kitchen looked like it had seen better days, the flooring was badly scuffed in places, and the walls could use a fresh coat of paint.

But the flat was better than Carrie could have hoped for. Remembering the photographs Jess Shepherd had sent her, Carrie was pleased to discover no unpleasant surprises lurking anywhere. When she thought of the monthly rent Jess had said she was paying, Carrie decided it was a good deal.

A great deal, actually.

She glanced around the space a few times and made a show of inspecting the appliances in the kitchen and shower room, but her mind was already made up.

The flat was perfect. She could imagine herself living here, all too easily. Now that she'd seen the place for herself, she was ready to commit.

She'd stay here in Hamblehurst. She'd rent this little flat and make a home here, for a while at least.

And she'd find out if there was something more waiting in the future between her and Joe beyond the sweet Christmas romance that had sparked between them over the last few days.

"I'll take it!" Carrie announced with a wide grin as she turned to where Paul Wood stood by the window.

The older man smiled, clearly pleased with the speedy decision she'd made. "Lovely. Well, I'm glad you like the place."

"I think it'll be perfect. I'm already excited about moving in."

"You do know that the current tenant doesn't leave until the start of January?"

Carrie nodded. When Carrie and Jess had exchanged brief messages about the flat viewing, Jess had told her she planned to spend most of the Christmas holidays with her boyfriend,

Darren, at his cottage. If Carrie needed a place to stay between Leah arriving home from New York and her tenancy officially beginning, Jess said she'd be welcome to stay at the flat as her guest.

Touched by that invitation, Carrie had reciprocated by offering to help Jess with any packing assistance she needed as she prepared to move out. The mutual offer of help between the two young women had struck Carrie as a good omen for the future.

"I'm happy to wait until the new year before moving in," Carrie told the landlord.

Once more, he looked pleased. "Good. Well, that settles it. I'll sort out the paperwork for the tenancy agreement and we'll take it from there."

"Brilliant!"

Carrie beamed, her heart rattling inside her chest in excitement at how nicely things were falling into place.

"Oh, I probably should've mentioned this when we booked the viewing, but the monthly rent is increasing. I hope that's okay."

Carrie's smile froze in place before disappearing altogether. "What? By how much?"

The landlord told her the new rental price. Carrie's eyes almost popped out of her head.

"What? That's almost twenty per cent more than the current tenant is paying!" Carrie exclaimed.

"I'm having to increase the rents on all the properties in my portfolio," the landlord said with a shrug. "All my maintenance costs are increasing, insurance costs are going up, and other fees besides. It can't be helped."

"But I can't afford that much rent!"

Another shrug from the landlord. "I'm sorry, love. It's my mistake for not letting you know about the rent increase before you came here to look around."

Carrie glanced around the little flat, already aching with loss at the idea she might not get to live here after all. She cast about for some way of turning things around.

“Look, I can probably afford a tiny increase on the rent, five per cent, tops. If you agreed to that, I’ll shake on it now and that means you don’t have to go looking for another tenant. Surely having someone lined up to live here and paying rent straight away is better than trying to find another tenant at this time of year?”

She hoped this argument would convince the landlord, but he only gave a shake of his head and let out a gruff laugh.

“I’m sorry, I can’t accept less than the new rental price I’ve set. And I won’t have any trouble finding another tenant. I’ve got a list of people waiting to view this place in the event that you weren’t interested. As it happens, I gave you first refusal because the current tenant has been a good one and I’ve had no trouble from her, and she vouched for you. In my experience, young single women are always the best tenants and they almost never cause any damage or give me any grief. I was glad to give you first refusal, which I’ve done. But if you can’t afford the new rental price, then I’ve got no choice but to offer the place to the other prospective tenants on my waiting list.”

Carrie found herself fighting back hot tears that were threatening to spring into her eyes. After spending the last few days poring over the photos Jess Shepherd had sent through of the flat, and then anticipating the viewing, and then walking through the door today and knowing it was the right place for her, Carrie was utterly crest-fallen at the realisation that it had all been for naught.

She couldn’t afford the rental price increase on this flat any more than she could’ve afforded it for the room in the shared house where she’d lived in Winchester. No amount of massaging of her finances would make it possible.

This flat wasn’t going to be her new home, after all. She’d got her hopes up for nothing.

The landlord checked his watch. “Look, if you aren’t going to take this place, then we should leave so I can phone the other prospective tenants and set up new viewings.”

Carrie nodded and turned for the door, pausing only to take one last look around the flat. It would’ve been perfect for her and from the moment she’d stepped through the doors, she’d been imagining herself living there, imagining a *future* there.

But now that future had disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Carrie trudged down the stairs and back outside. The landlord said goodbye and gave her another apologetic shrug before getting into his car and driving away. Standing on the pavement outside the block of flats, Carrie looked up at the building one last time before setting off along the street.

After so many weeks spent searching for a new place to stay and coming up empty, she thought she’d finally landed on her feet. Instead, the ground beneath her had fractured and turned into rubble and left her in free-fall down a slippery slope and with no place to live when she finally skidded to the bottom.

Carrie headed back towards Foxglove Street. There was only one option left now. Perhaps it was time she finally accepted that and do what had to be done.

“HELLO, love. This is a nice surprise. I didn’t think I’d chat to you again until later in the week.”

Carrie listened to her mother’s lilting voice down the phone line, already feeling a little better about things following the disappointment of the flat viewing. Her mother, Andrea Dixon, was Yorkshire born and bred, and the years she’d spent living in Bath with Carrie’s father and raising their family before returning to her home county hadn’t blunted her accent in the least. Andrea’s melodious voice always made Carrie feel comforted, which was just one of the many reasons for phoning her right now.

“I had a spare minute and wanted to give you a call.” Carrie heard a hissing noise in the background. “What are you up to?”

“I’m trying out a new recipe and browning some vegetables in the pan for a spicy chicken casserole,”

“Sounds delicious.”

“We’ll see how it turns out. There will probably be far too much in the pot but I’m sure it will freeze just fine. It’ll be handy having a few meals ready on standby for when your father and I get back.”

Carrie frowned. “Get back from where?”

“Oh, I forgot you haven’t heard our exciting news yet. We’ve booked a last minute winter holiday, leaving the day after Boxing Day. We’re off to the Costa del Sol for two weeks!”

Her mother's excitement down the line was unmistakable. "Wow, that's fantastic, Mum. You and Dad have been talking about treating yourselves to a Christmas getaway for years."

"Well, we decided to stop talking and actually do it this time. We saw a last minute deal in the window at the travel agent's, and as you're flat-sitting for your friend over Christmas and won't be coming back up here to visit us over the holidays, we decided we might as well take advantage of the chance to get away. I'm really excited about it!"

"I can tell. I'm thrilled for you, Mum."

Despite being genuinely pleased that her parents were at last treating themselves to a proper winter sun holiday, Carrie must not have done a very good job of masking her own sliver of disappointment at what that now meant for her personally, because there was a moment of silence on the phone before her mother spoke again.

"Are you sure about that, Carrie? You don't sound too thrilled. Is something the matter?"

"No, of course not."

"Carrie Dixon, this is your mother you're speaking to. I can tell by your voice that you've got something on your mind. Better just spit it out and save me the trouble of wheedling it out of you from hundreds of miles away down a phone line."

Carrie laughed again. "I *am* thrilled for you, honestly. You both absolutely deserve a fantastic holiday in the sun instead of freezing yourselves silly up there in Yorkshire. It's just that..."

"It's just that what?"

"Well, the thing is, I was hoping I could travel up the day after Boxing Day and stay with you and Dad for a few weeks. I've had no luck finding a new place to stay once Leah gets back from her New York trip, and I thought I could sweet-talk my way into your guest room while I figure out what to do next."

There was another brief silence while Andrea digested this. “Well, love, first of all, I’m sorry you’re having trouble finding somewhere to stay. I know it isn’t easy down there in the south, what with house prices and rental prices being what they are. Second of all, of course you can come and stay here! Just because your father and I are jetting off to catch a bit of winter sun doesn’t mean you can’t stay here while we’re gone.”

“It seems weird, though, arranging to come up and visit you when you won’t even be there.”

“Don’t be daft. This is your home whenever you need it, Carrie. If you need to stay in the guest room for a bit, then that’s what you’ll do.”

Carrie chewed her lip. “I really hoped I’d have sorted out somewhere to stay by now. When I offered to cat-sit for Leah, I thought it would give me time and breathing space to find somewhere after having to move out of my last shared house. But it’s been impossible trying to find a decent place I can afford. All the places I *can* afford are either filthy or overcrowded or both.”

“Well, your father would have a fit if he thought you were living in some grubby flat and feeling miserable about it just because it was all you could afford when there’s a perfectly good spare room here at our house. So, you’re coming here and that’s the end of it.”

Carrie gave a soft laugh and sighed. “I feel like a bit of a failure, Mum. Still scrambling around to get a roof over my head and having to rely on my parents to help me out of a tough spot.”

“That’s what family’s for. And everyone goes through tough spots from time to time. Making ends meet down there can’t be easy for a freelancer like yourself, Carrie. Haven’t you ever thought of moving up here permanently?”

“Actually, the thought has crossed my mind lately. I don’t see how I can afford rent down here any longer with the way the prices keep shooting up. I went to see a flat today and thought it would be perfect until the landlord told me he was

jacking up the monthly rent. Even sub-letting a room in a decent house-share feels miles outside my budget now.”

“Oh, love, I’m sorry. I know how much you love living in Hampshire. When your father and I decided to move north to Yorkshire, the biggest worry that almost stopped me doing it was knowing you were settled down south and probably wouldn’t want to follow us up here and that we’d see much less of you in the future. But maybe these problems you’ve had with finding a new place to live is a sign that you ought to come up north and bless your old ma and pa with your lovely presence? We miss you, you know.”

Carrie sighed softly. “I miss you both, too. And I’d love to see more of you. Of course I would. It’s just that...”

Carrie thought of Joe and the time they’d spent together these past few days. With the possibility of the Beech Street flat now gone, she felt like the flickering romance that had sprung up between them both was doomed to disappear, too.

“I met this lovely bloke and although we’ve only seen each other a few times and barely even know each other yet, I had a funny feeling in my stomach that something nice might be happening. There won’t be much chance of it going anywhere if I move up to Yorkshire.”

“Oh, that’s rotten luck, Carrie. I’m sorry. But maybe a few weeks spent here in our house will give you a bit of breathing space to work out your next steps. And, who knows? Maybe something will crop up in the new year, a new rental opportunity or whatnot somewhere close to where you’re living now, and you’ll be able to move back down again and see more of this new fella.”

Carrie appreciated her mother’s determination to look on the bright side, even if the scenario she’d painted was unlikely. If she moved up to Yorkshire, she might not move away again once she settled into life near her parents, who she certainly missed not seeing more of. And if she found somewhere to live up there that didn’t cost an arm and a leg, it might put things in a whole new light. No matter how much she loved

her life here in Hampshire, practical financial realities might keep her up north.

And with only a few sweet cosy hours spent in Joe's time so far, it was unlikely things would ever go further between them if they were living at opposite ends of the country.

"Maybe you're right," Carrie said. "Anyway, if you don't mind me staying at the house while you and Dad are off on your winter sun holiday, I'd be very grateful, Mum."

"Of course we don't mind. I'm only sorry we won't be here to enjoy the time with you. If I'd had any idea you planned on coming up here to see us, I never would've booked that holiday in the Costa del Sol. Maybe we should cancel it?"

"Don't you dare. You deserve that holiday, Mum. If you cancel it, I'll fall out with you, I mean it."

"We are excited about getting a bit of sunshine about us, I must admit."

"There you go, then. It's settled. You and Dad go off on your lovely holiday and I'll look after the house while you're gone. Maybe that could be my new job, actually. Professional house-sitter for people who are jetting off to more exciting destinations. First Leah, and now you and Dad."

Her mother chortled at this, and then there was a sudden hissing sound down the line. "Oh, heck, my spicy chicken is catching on the bottom of the casserole. I'd better go, love, before I ruin the whole recipe."

"Off you go, Mum. Oh, and send me that recipe when you get a chance. I might give it a go."

"Will do."

"Love you, Mum."

"Love you too, sweetheart."

Carrie hung up and sighed. At least she'd figured out her impending accommodation problem. Although she was sorry her parents jetting off on holiday meant she wouldn't get to see them for a few weeks once she arrived in Yorkshire, she'd just look forward to seeing them once they got home instead.

Perhaps by then she would've figured out a more permanent solution to her housing crisis. Carrie rubbed at her eyes, feeling a bit fed-up with things. She made decent money at her job, and yet no matter how hard she worked it never seemed to be enough to keep up with her living expenses, which weren't exactly extravagant to begin with. It didn't seem fair.

"No, you're not allowed to have a pity-party," Carrie told herself. "It's just a bump in the road, that's all. You'll figure it out."

Coco and Praline wandered over to where she was sitting on the sofa and wound themselves around her feet, rubbing their heads against her legs and purring. Their cute faces immediately cheered her up.

"It will all work itself out, won't it, kitties?"

"Meow."

"Yes, that's a lovely idea, Coco. A nice big mug of comforting hot chocolate will cheer us up, won't it?"

"Meow."

AFTER TWO AND a half days filled with conference panels and seminars and networking and enough terrible hospitality catering to knock a person sideways, Joe stepped off the train at Hamblehurst station and breathed a sigh of relief.

The veterinary conference had been engaging and endlessly useful, and he'd enjoyed catching up with other vets from around the country and making new contacts, but it was good to be home. There had been the inevitable winter delays during the train journey south, but he'd made it back at last.

When he saw that the snow-covered streets he'd left behind a few days ago had now turned to slush, Joe hopped into a taxi waiting at the station to take him the short journey to Foxglove Street and save his suitcase and his shoes from a thorough soaking.

As the taxi pulled up outside his house, Joe saw warm light flooding out through the windows of the flat across the hallway, and his mind turned to Carrie. Although it was fair to say she'd never been very far from his mind to begin with while he'd been gone.

He'd missed her.

It seemed impossible he could miss someone he'd only spent a few hours with in total. And yet he *had* missed her. The soft glow from the windows of her flat contrasted with the darkness seeping from his own empty house, the image a clear reminder of what she'd so quickly come to mean to him.

Light. Warmth. Hope.

As Joe paid the taxi driver and hauled his suitcase inside his flat, he wondered how he'd ended up this far gone this quickly on account of the girl across the hall. The time spent apart and far away at the conference had only confirmed how much he couldn't stop thinking about Carrie and how much she would upend his life if he let her.

A few minutes later, when Carrie appeared at his flat door with a warm smile that made his heart tumble, Joe realised he wouldn't just *let* her upend his life—he'd *welcome* it with open arms.

“Welcome home, Joe!” Carrie said and held out a covered plate. “I saved some dinner for you. I thought you might be hungry and in need of a hot meal after your long journey home.”

“Thanks, that's kind of you. All they had on the train were some dodgy sandwiches, which looked well worth avoiding.” He opened the door wider. “Come on in.”

Carrie stepped inside his flat and set the dinner plate on the counter before turning to him. He reached for her and pulled her close, inhaling the sweet vanilla scent of her as he brushed a kiss across her lips.

“I missed you,” he murmured, the words escaping before he realised it.

When he looked into her eyes, he saw hesitation there. He was coming on too strong, saying things that were too deep, much too deep. After a lifetime spent without ever feeling the things he now felt for Carrie, he was at risk of letting himself get carried away.

And he was at risk of scaring her off.

“I missed you, too,” Carrie said and stepped out of his arms towards the dinner plate she'd left on the counter. “Shall I zap this in the microwave for you?”

The moment felt suddenly awkward. His unguarded outburst had caused her to parrot his words back at him, whether she meant them or not. Joe realised it was time to pull himself together.

“Sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk yesterday,” he said, taking the dinner plate from her and placing it in the microwave. “Day two of the conference was even busier than day one, and today was even more manic because the panels kept running over their time slots and we barely had any free moments between sessions.”

“It sounds like it was all very productive,” Carrie said.

“It was, and I’ve got loads to feed back to everyone at the vet’s practice and plenty of information to sort out before we start using these new therapeutics. I might have to run a few short seminars of my own to bring everyone up to speed. Some of the medicines are fairly advanced and need careful monitoring once prescribed because of the possible side effects.”

Now he was just babbling. Carrie didn’t want to hear about any of this dull veterinary stuff. The microwave pinged and Joe removed the plate of food.

“This looks good,” he said. “Smells even better.”

“It’s spicy chicken casserole. My mum was trying out a new recipe and gave it the thumbs up. She sent the recipe to me and I thought I’d give it a bash, too. There’s sweet potato in the sauce, too, so you don’t need any rice or pasta or whatever.”

“Do you want to share this with me?”

Carrie shook her head. “I ate earlier.”

Joe dug into the meal and sampled the food, which was delicious. “This is excellent.”

“I thought it was pretty good, too. My mum’s an expert at finding great recipes. She mentioned her plans to freeze the casserole leftovers, and I decided to do the same thing. I figured I could whip a portion out of the freezer for my Christmas Day lunch and save myself wrangling with any turkey nonsense.”

Joe’s fork stopped halfway to his mouth. The idea of Carrie eating Christmas Day dinner alone made his heart ache—actually ache, as if he’d been stabbed in the chest.

“Listen, there was something I wanted to ask you,” he said. “Actually, I meant to ask you before now but what with rushing off to the conference and us not having time to chat, I haven’t had a chance, but...” He looked over at Carrie and dug around inside himself for some courage. “I was hoping you’d join me and my family for Christmas Day dinner.”

Carrie blinked, obviously surprised. “Oh, well...”

“I mean, only if you want to. Maybe you’d rather spend the day doing something else, or...”

“I’d love to come along,” Carrie smiled. “Thanks, that’s a lovely invitation.”

Joe blew out a breath. “Good. I’m glad. Really glad, actually.”

Although Carrie was smiling, Joe still saw that odd hint of hesitation in her eyes. “Are you sure you want to come along? There’s no pressure to say yes.”

“No, I really mean it. I’d love to. It’s just that...” Now it was Carrie who was blowing out a breath and looking even more awkward than before. “Well, there’s something I maybe should have told you before you invited me.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I won’t be staying here in Hamblehurst for much longer, I’m afraid. The flat I went to view the other day won’t work out after all, and I haven’t found anything else. Once Leah gets back from New York, I’ll be going up to stay at my parents’ house in Yorkshire until I can figure something out.”

Joe stared for a long beat, processing what he’d just heard. “But I thought the flat you were viewing was perfect for you? That’s what you said.”

“It would’ve been, but the landlord is jacking up the rent and I can’t afford it. I’ve hunted around non-stop during the past few weeks trying to find something and it’s ended in complete failure. I don’t have any options left.”

“But couldn’t you stay with Leah for a bit longer once she gets home?” Joe knew he was grasping at straws but couldn’t

seem to help it.

“When I spoke to Leah last night, she said I could kip on her sofa for as long as I need to, and although I’m grateful for the offer, it isn’t really an option. These flats are made for one person, or perhaps a couple at a push who are sharing a bed anyway, and I don’t fancy sofa surfing and outstaying my welcome when there’s a perfectly good spare room at my parents’ house that I can go to while I try to figure out something else.”

“But... you can’t leave.”

Carrie’s expression softened. “I don’t want to leave. But I don’t have any choice.”

Joe almost swept an arm around his own flat and towards his bedroom and told her she could stay here with him, for as long as she wanted, for forever and ever, if that’s what she’d like.

He caught the words before they got out. Saying something like that would be incredibly stupid. They hadn’t even spent a night together. He couldn’t invite her to *move in with him*.

Even if that’s what he knew in his heart he wanted more than anything else in the world.

“Anyway,” Carrie said, her tone artificially bright. “I’d love to come along to Christmas Day dinner with you and your family, Joe. But it didn’t seem fair to accept the invitation without being honest about what’s going on in my life. I wish I didn’t have to go away. I want to stay here. I want to find out if...” She waved a hand between them both and gave him a soft smile. “I want to find out if there’s something here between us. But I also need to make sure I have a proper roof over my head, which means heading up to Yorkshire and staying with my parents for a little while at least. It seems only fair to tell you that in case you want to take back that Christmas Day dinner invitation.”

Joe shook his head. “No, of course I don’t want to take it back. I want you to be there. But... I hate that you’re leaving.”

“Me too.” She gave a little shrug. “But who knows? I’ll keep house-hunting and maybe something will crop up around Hamblehurst or somewhere nearby sooner rather than later and I’ll be able to come back.”

“I hope so.”

But as they stood there in the quiet flat, exchanging solemn glances with one another, Joe had a horrible feeling that once Carrie left, she’d never come back.

The thought made him shudder and made him say something he knew had no business saying.

“You could stay here, Carrie. With me.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with hope.

Empty hope. Joe didn’t even have to see the look in Carrie’s eyes to know that.

“No, I can’t,” Carrie said, her voice almost a whisper. “You know I can’t. We only just met, Joe.”

Yes, he knew that. Knowing it didn’t change what he felt inside his heart.

Carrie’s phone pinged just then. She glanced at the screen and frowned. “I lost track of time. I’m booked to visit one of the nurses at your vet’s practice this evening to take the family Christmas photographs she asked me for.”

Joe nodded. “I already heard through the grapevine that the other booking you did went well.”

“Yes, it did. I’m grateful for the work, to be honest, and I had fun taking the photographs, too.” She gestured towards the door. “I ought to go and get my camera stuff together or I’ll be late.”

Joe walked her to the door. They paused, each wondering whether a kiss was still okay considering what now lay in the immediate future. Carrie was the one who finally stepped closer and reached up to kiss him.

Her mouth was soft and warm, the kiss so tender that Joe wished it didn’t have to end.

But end it did.

“See you later,” Carrie said and crossed the hallway before disappearing into the flat on the other side.

With a sigh, Joe closed the door and faced his empty flat. The meal cooling on the counter held little attraction now. He closed his eyes and thought of the kiss he'd just shared with Carrie.

And wondered if might have been their last.

CHRISTMAS EVE ARRIVED, cold and crisp and with a bright lemon sun skimming across a wintry blue sky.

Carrie closed her laptop at twelve noon on the dot and breathed a sigh of relief. After working non-stop for the last two days, she'd completed all her client design portfolios that were due before the start of the holidays and cleared out her email inbox. She'd sorted out some admin and paperwork, dispatched the last Christmas orders from her little online shop, and even found time to put together some quotes for new design commissions that might come her way in the new year.

All that remained was to deliver the Christmas photograph album ordered by the veterinary nurse for whom she'd done the first photo shoot several days ago. So pleased had the new client been with the chosen images and album layout that Carrie had put together, that she'd insisted on paying extra for express printing and delivery of the physical album. A delivery driver had dropped it off this morning, and after checking the quality and finish of the product, Carrie had let the nurse know she could bring it over to her house in the afternoon so she could share it with her family over the holidays.

With her laptop work completed, Carrie was looking forward to getting out and enjoying some of the sights and sounds of Christmas Eve in Hamblehurst. A dusting of fresh snow had fallen overnight, making Foxglove Street look appropriately festive once more, and outside the window

Carrie saw children attempting to make snowballs from the thin layer of white stuff on the ground.

As she watched the kids playing and having fun, the flying mini snowballs reminded her of the snowball fight she'd had with Joe as they'd made their way home from the Christmas party last Saturday.

It had only been a week ago, and yet it felt like another lifetime. In the space of just a few days, they'd lurched from awkward neighbours to hopeful lovers and then back again. Whatever had been blossoming between the two of them had withered and died in the face of Carrie's imminent departure from Hamblehurst once Christmas was over.

She hadn't even seen Joe since the evening he returned from his conference trip.

They'd exchanged phone messages. That much was true. Things had been perfectly civil as they'd texted hellos back and forth, along with snippets of casual chit-chat. There had been no dramatic falling out, no anguished splitting up.

Not that 'splitting up' was an actual possibility when they hadn't really been 'together' to begin with. All they'd ever shared were a few walks in the snow, a few dances at the Christmas party, some stolen kisses and far too many long, lingering looks.

But when Carrie had invited Joe over to the flat for hot chocolate and more of her signature festive cookies, he'd turned her down, citing a busy workload at the veterinary practice that was keeping him occupied from early in the morning until late at night. When Carrie had heard Joe leaving his flat first thing yesterday morning, she'd scurried to the door to try to catch him in order to say a proper hello in person, but by the time she'd reached the hallway, Joe was already barrelling out the front door and towards his parked car.

Carrie had pulled on her boots and hauled a jacket over her pyjamas and raced outside, but Joe was gone, zooming off along Foxglove Street and out of sight.

It was almost as if he was avoiding her. That thought hurt Carrie deeply.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her ringing phone and an international number appeared on the screen.

“Merry Christmas Eve!” Leah said when Carrie answered the call.

“Merry Christmas Eve!” she replied, cheered by the sound of her friend’s buoyant tone. “You’re up and about early. It’s only noon here, which makes it, what? Seven in the morning in New York?”

“I didn’t want to miss a single minute of Christmas Eve in the Big Apple. The office is closed today and my placement is officially finished and so I’ve got a whole day planned to make the most of my time here before I fly home. I’m meeting with some other girls from the charity’s HQ office, and we’re going shopping at Macy’s in the morning, followed by lunch at some amazing diner they know, and then ice skating at Rockefeller Center.”

“That sounds amazing, Leah. You deserve a fun day after all the hard work you’ve put in on this placement.”

“What have you got planned for Christmas Eve?”

“I just finished the last of my work tasks, and now I’m about to visit one of the nurses from Joe’s veterinary practice to drop off the Christmas photograph album she paid me to design for her. And after that, who knows?”

“You don’t have plans with Joe later on?”

Carrie hesitated before answering. “He’s been busy with work. We haven’t seen much of each other since last weekend, actually.”

“But I thought you said there’d been a bit of cheeky snogging and so on between the two of you?”

“Well, there was, but... the truth is, ever since I told him I’d be leaving Hamblehurst once you got back from New York, I think he’s been avoiding me.”

“What a jerk!”

Carrie couldn't help but laugh at Leah's outrage on her behalf. "I don't think he's being a jerk so much as... I think he's just trying to protect himself. He probably just doesn't want to get involved any further, now that he knows I won't be here much longer."

"Do you think there might have been something serious between you if you stayed?"

"Maybe. Probably."

"Then why don't you just stay on at my flat for a while longer, Carrie? You're more than welcome to sleep on the sofa. I know the flat is tiny, but we'd make it work until you found somewhere else to stay."

Carrie smiled, touched that her friend was making the offer once more. "Thanks, Leah. You're so kind to say that. But I need to be realistic. I've spent weeks looking for somewhere to stay and haven't found anything. There's no reason to believe that will change and I'd hate for us to get crabby because we're under each other's feet. I won't outstay my welcome and risk our friendship. It's best all round if I go up to Yorkshire and stay with my parents while I figure out what to do next."

"But what about Joe?"

Carrie let out a sad sigh. "Maybe it just wasn't meant to be."

"That makes me sad."

"Me too. But it is what it is."

Carrie didn't want the conversation to turn maudlin. It was probably costing Leah a fortune to phone her from New York. The least she could do was not spend the time feeling sorry for herself.

"Look, forget all that stuff," Carrie said. "It's Christmas Eve! It's time for festive fun and happy things. You've got an amazing day in New York lined up, so off you go and enjoy it."

"Okay, fair enough."

Leah sounded reluctant to drop the matter, and so Carrie spent a few moments updating her about Coco and Praline's antics before they said their goodbyes and hung up.

Once she'd gathered the bag containing the Christmas photograph album for her vet nurse client, Carrie waved goodbye to the cats and left the flat.

In the hallway, she glanced at Joe's door. She'd sent him a cheery Christmas Eve text message this morning, but hadn't heard back from him. Carrie pondered that for a moment as she locked the flat door.

Crossing the hallway, she knocked on his door. When there was no answer, she knocked a second time and got the same response.

She thought back to the first time she'd done this, when she'd knocked on Joe's door to give him the Christmas present from Leah. He'd answered in his pyjamas and with his hair sticking up all over the place and proceeded to be more than a little rude and grumpy with her. Not that she'd understood the reason why at the time.

That memory made her laugh now, but it was a sad laugh, tinged with thoughts of what might have been.

A new thought sprung into her head as the memory of her first meeting with Joe disappeared.

The more time that passed without them seeing each other, the more Carrie realised how weird it would be for her to join Joe and his family tomorrow for Christmas Day dinner.

Perhaps it would best all round if she ducked out of the invitation altogether? The last thing she wanted was to spend an awkward day with Joe, the two of them tiptoeing around the relationship-that-never-was. Christmas only came once a year, and it wouldn't be fair to insert herself into his family's festive celebrations if doing so would only leave Joe feeling uncomfortable.

Carrie made a decision and unlocked the flat door again and went back inside. While Coco and Praline hurried to greet her unexpected return, she moved to the coffee table where

she'd put the Christmas cards that had been left over from the batch she'd written and sent to friends and family.

She chose a card featuring a cheerful snowman surrounded by cute penguins and quickly wrote a note inside it.

Dear Joe

You've been so busy at work these past few days and I'm sorry we've not had a chance to see each other. I'm so grateful you invited me to Christmas Day dinner with your family, but maybe it's better if I don't join you after all. The last thing I want is to hurt you or make you uncomfortable, and since I told you I'd be leaving Hamblehurst, I think that's what I've done. I'm sorry. I really do wish you a Happy Christmas, Joe, and hope we'll have the chance to say goodbye before I go.

Your friend always, Carrie.

She read it over a few times, wondering if the tone was right—too serious, not serious enough; too brief, too long, too *stupid*—before finally shoving the card into the envelope and sealing it. Leaving the flat for a second time, she crossed the hallway and slipped the card beneath Joe's door.

Straightening up again, she felt a sharp pang of longing as she imagined the Christmas Day they might have spent together and found herself wishing for a festive miracle to give her what she wanted but just couldn't have.

“If only there were such things as Christmas miracles,” Carrie murmured and turned for the front door on a long sigh.

“YOU’RE SUCH A PLONKER, JOE.”

Joe blinked in surprise and looked up from the paperwork he was dealing with in the office at the veterinary surgery. On the other side of the desk, Yvette sat scowling at him.

“Thanks very much, Yvette,” Joe said. “I spill my guts to you about how I feel about Carrie and how upset I am that she’s leaving, and you respond by calling me a plonker? Is that your idea of moral support?”

“You don’t need moral support,” Yvette replied. “You need a kick up the backside.”

“Who needs a kick up the backside?”

Joe turned towards the door and saw his father walking into the office carrying a sheaf of paperwork.

“*Joe* needs a kick up the backside,” Yvette told their father, still scowling. “He’s acting like a complete and utter plonker.”

“Yvette, if you call me that one more time, there’s going to be trouble.”

“Fine, you’re not a plonker. You’re a twat. Do you like that word better?”

“Right, that’s it.”

Joe jumped up from his chair and rounded on his sister, grabbing her in a head lock and roughing up her hair. It was a move perfected in childhood, one he hadn’t used in a long time admittedly, but still effective. He wasn’t physically

hurting her—Joe knew where the lines were drawn—but Yvette hated having her hair messed up and he took great pleasure in seeing it yanked out of her ponytail and flying every which way.

“Get off me, you idiot!”

“Stop calling me names!”

“Stop giving me a reason to call you names!”

“*Enough you two!*” Bernard bellowed. “Joe, let go of your sister this instant! Yvette, stop calling your brother childish names. I mean it, the pair of you!”

Joe let go of Yvette’s head, satisfied to see the mess he’d made of her perfect ponytail. Yvette scowled as she shrugged him off, before raking her fingers through her hair in an attempt to tame her wayward locks back into the scrunchie Joe had loosened.

“Good grief! What on earth’s going on here?” Bernard demanded. “Why are you both acting like silly children?”

“He started it!” Yvette protested.

“You started it!” Joe took his seat with a huff and risked a glance towards his father, whose face was thunderous.

“You’re both old enough to know better than to behave like this,” Bernard hissed. “I’ve never seen the likes of it. I’m shocked, utterly shocked. What’s got into you?”

Joe exchanged a murderous look with Yvette before turning to his father. “I made the mistake of confiding in my so-called *sister* about something, but instead of offering me a kind word and a bit of advice, she turned nasty.”

Yvette started to say something, but Bernard held up a hand. “Choose your words carefully, young lady, unless you want me to go and get your mother from the front reception and let her sort this out. I assure you she will be far less forgiving than me to discover you two are squabbling like this here in our place of business.”

Chastened by the idea of his mother getting involved in their argument—she wouldn’t think twice about giving them

both a clip around the ear and docking their wages for disorderly conduct in the workplace, not to mention subjecting them to a stern talking to they'd be unlikely to forget anytime soon—Joe threw a glance towards Yvette.

The look they exchanged confirmed a truce, at least a temporary one, in order to avoid their mother's wrath.

“Joe,” Bernard said. “Tell me what you were talking to Yvette about. What's troubling you, son?”

Joe let out a long breath. “Do you remember the girl I brought to the Christmas party last weekend? Carrie?”

“Yes, of course I remember her. Your mother and I both thought she was smashing.”

“Me, too,” Joe said. “We were both getting on great. Better than great, actually.” He cleared his throat, embarrassed at sharing these feelings with his father. “I was, um, well, the truth is I was well on the way to being head over heels for her.”

Bernard's eyes widened, and then a broad smile appeared. “Wonderful! That's great news, son. I knew it was only a matter of time before you met the right girl.” His smile suddenly vanished, as if he'd just remembered the fight he'd interrupted and what might have caused it. “So, what's the problem?”

“She's leaving,” Joe said. “Carrie was only house-sitting for her friend here in Hamblehurst until after Christmas. She'd hoped to use the time to find a new place to live, but she hasn't found anywhere around here that she can afford. So, once my neighbour Leah returns from New York on Boxing Day, Carrie plans to go and stay with her parents in Yorkshire until she figures out what to do next.”

“Oh, well, that's too bad, son. I'm sorry.” Bernard frowned. “But that doesn't mean things necessarily have to end between the two of you, does it? You could have one of those long-distance relationship things. People have those all the time, don't they?”

“See?” Yvette yelled from the other side of the desk, throwing her arms up to drive the point home. “It doesn’t have to end just because Carrie’s leaving.”

“We hardly know one another,” Joe said evenly. “How do you build a relationship with someone you only just met and who’s about to move hundreds of miles away? It’s impossible.”

“And so it’s easier just to ignore her until she leaves?” Yvette asked, then cast her gaze up towards their father. “Because that’s what he’s doing, Dad. He as good as admitted it to me. He’s ignoring Carrie, pretending he doesn’t have time to see her, and barely even responding to her phone messages. Which, in my book, makes him a plonker.”

“Now, son, I didn’t raise you to treat a woman, or anyone for that matter, so shoddily,” Bernard said with a frown. “You can’t just ignore her, surely? Not if you like her the way you say you like her.”

“I’m just trying to make it easier, Dad. If we spend time together between now and the day she leaves, then I’m just going to...” Joe sighed and closed his eyes. “Bloody hell, I’m just going to fall in love with her. There, I said it.”

“So instead of falling in love, you’ve decided to make yourself miserable,” Yvette put in.

“Better that than heartbroken,” Joe said, which earned him an eye roll from his sister.

“Do you have any idea if this Carrie girl feels the same way about you as you do about her?” Bernard asked.

Joe shrugged. “Maybe. I know she would’ve liked for us to have more time together. She said so. But as for... *love*...” He threw his hands up at the word, as if the idea of it was ridiculous, which, he thought, it sort of was, considering the speed with which this had happened to him. “Who knows what might have happened between us? But now that Carrie is leaving...”

Joe shrugged, his point made, or so he thought.

Yvette leaned over the desk. “Where did you say she’s moving to? Antarctica, is it?”

“Yorkshire,” Joe replied.

“Oh, right, so she’s only moving a few hundred miles away?” Yvette said, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “For a minute there, I thought she was going off to the other end of the planet. Yorkshire’s only a few hours up the road in the car, Joe. You could at least try to make a bit of an effort.”

“And do what? Ask Carrie if it’s okay if I go up there and visit her? We hardly know each other. What if she thinks that’s a bit creepy or desperate?”

“What if she thinks it’s fantastically romantic?” Yvette countered.

“Your sister makes a good point,” Bernard said. “You say you want to spend time with Carrie and see what might happen between you, so why aren’t you doing it?”

It was a good question. Why wasn’t he doing it? Why wasn’t he already asking Carrie where exactly she’d be living in Yorkshire and making plans to drive up there and visit her once she’d got herself settled?

He knew the reason why. Because he was on the edge of falling for her, and falling hard, but because he’d never experienced those feelings before, he was clueless. Add Carrie’s imminent departure into the mix, and he was basically a bloke who might as well have endured a lobotomy for all the cognitive or emotional function he had available to him right now.

But there was more to it than that, too.

What if he asked Carrie about visiting her up in Yorkshire... and she said no? What if she thought of this as no more than the flirty, festive, romantic piece of fluff it appeared to be?

What if he’d finally found the woman he knew he would fall in love with, only to discover she didn’t feel the same way?

“I can’t take time off to go gallivanting up and down the country,” Joe said gruffly. “We’re too busy here at the veterinary practice.”

“We’re not so busy that staff can’t take time off for things that are important, son,” Bernard said.

“And by my reckoning, you’ve got almost three weeks of holiday time still to take before the end of March,” Yvette said, tapping at the keyboard and peering at the computer monitor.

“See, look at all that holiday time you’ve still to use up,” Bernard said. “As senior partner here, I insist you take at least some of that time in January. We can’t have staff accumulating all those days off and then not taking them. It’s not right.”

“There, I’ve booked you two weeks of holiday time starting January the first,” Yvette said, rattling the keyboard. “No more excuses.”

Joe glanced between his sister and his father. “You really think I should ask Carrie if she’d like me to drive up there and visit her once she moves?”

“Yes, that’s what we think, you silly great oaf!” Yvette said. “You have to take a chance, Joe. Just because you’ve only known Carrie for a few weeks doesn’t mean you should just let her drift out of your life. Tell her how you feel! Tell her what you want! Find out if that’s what she wants, too!”

“You’re right, Yvette.” Joe rose from the desk chair. “It kills me to admit it, but you’re right.”

Yvette grinned and glanced at their father. “At last, he realises I’m the real genius in this family.”

Laughing, Bernard turned to the coat hooks behind the office door and grabbed Joe’s jacket. “Don’t waste another minute, son. Go and find this girl before it’s too late.”

Joe grabbed his jacket and car keys. “Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Yvette.”

He was halfway out the office door when he remembered the appointments he was booked to deal with before they

closed the practice at two o'clock so everyone could get home to start their Christmas celebrations.

“Eek, I’ve still got animals to see,” he said. “Mrs Hanover wants us to examine her dog’s dodgy knee before the holidays, and Beaky the Parrot is booked for a check-up and—”

“Yvette will take care of your appointments, son,” Bernard said, corralling him back out the door.

“Oh God, not Beaky the Parrot,” Yvette muttered as Joe hurtled along the corridor towards the doors. “I hate that bloody parrot! He’s a biter! You owe me big time, Joe Whitaker!”

Laughing at his sister’s parting words, Joe hurried outside and jumped into his car. With his heart hammering at a thousand beats a minute in excitement and anticipation and total abject fear, he sped towards Foxglove Street and home, hoping and praying he’d find Carrie there when he reached the other end.

THE WINTRY AFTERNOON light was already fading by the time Carrie made it back to Foxglove Street, the festive twinkle lights in the windows and front gardens bringing Christmassy warmth as twilight fell.

When she'd visited the veterinary nurse for whom she'd compiled the festive family photo album, the woman had been so thrilled with the end product that she'd insisted on inviting her inside for tea and mince pies. They'd enjoyed chatting about the gorgeous album Carrie had designed, and the nurse—who had taken the day off work to celebrate Christmas Eve with her husband and young children—assured her she'd be spreading the word about Carrie's fantastic photography skills and drumming up more business for her.

It had almost pained Carrie to explain that she would be leaving Hamblehurst in just a few days' time and might not be back. The kind nurse had wished her well and made her promise to let her know if she ever found herself in this neck of the woods again, because she knew many people who'd love the family photograph album Carrie had so expertly put together for her and who'd be sure to want to buy their own.

As Carrie had wandered the high street picking up a few final bits and pieces before the big day arrived, she'd thought about what her lovely nurse client had said. She'd been genuinely thrilled with the album Carrie had created for her, that much was clear, and charmed by the bespoke illustrations and motifs and personal touches she'd included. While it was easy enough for people to order photograph albums online by

simply uploading their own photos, Carrie wondered if there might be a market for something a little more special and luxurious, combining professional photography with her own unique design features to create a one-of-a-kind album.

It was worth thinking about. Perhaps once she was settled in her parents' house up in Yorkshire, she could do more research into the market and figure out if there was a little money to be made by giving people something wonderful that they'd want to cherish forever.

Anything that helped add to her income was welcome. If she wanted to find more stability in her housing situation at last, then perhaps she'd have to bite the bullet and work even harder than she already was?

If so, at least she'd still be doing something she loved. The time spent taking the photographs for the two nurses and capturing the character and tone of their families had been both creatively and personally satisfying.

Carrie walked along Foxglove Street, mulling all this over as she once more enjoyed the festive lights strung up around the street, which looked even more magical now that Christmas was almost here. While running her final errands on the high street, she'd treated herself to some festive goodies at the deli along with a nice bottle of wine, and once she got back to the flat, she planned to settle down with her treats and watch a Christmas film or two. At the pet shop, she'd bought some festive turkey-flavoured cat snacks, so that Coco and Praline wouldn't feel left out.

Christmas Eve on the sofa with two cute cats for company and plenty of yummy treats to devour—it wasn't a bad way to spend the night.

Carrie's mind filled with thoughts of Joe, and what it might have been like to spend Christmas Eve with him, instead of by herself. She pushed the thoughts away. There was no point even thinking about anything like that. He still hadn't responded to her message from early this morning, wishing him a Merry Christmas Eve.

Maybe he was just busy at the veterinary practice.

Or maybe he was just a jerk after all, like Leah had said on the phone when they'd chatted.

But Carrie didn't believe that. Joe wasn't a jerk. She'd caught a glimpse of the man behind the mask and that man was sweet and passionate and funny and...

... and she had no choice but to leave him behind.

"Hello Carrie! Are you alright? You look about a million miles away."

Carrie glanced up and saw that she was passing Olive Nimmo's house, where the older lady was stepping out of her front gate. Her wandering thoughts had left her distracted, and she'd almost walked straight into the other woman.

"Sorry, Olive, I was lost in my thoughts for a minute there." Carrie smiled as she took in the older lady's smart appearance, from her bright red woollen coat to her sparkling holly-shaped brooch and her silk scarf featuring jaunty robins. "You look lovely, Olive. Are you off somewhere nice?"

"I'm meeting a few friends from my ladies' lunch club for a slap-up Christmas Eve evening meal at the pub," Olive grinned.

"Good for you. That sounds like fun. I'll walk you along the street for a bit if you like. I've just come from the high street via a detour to the park to enjoy the Christmas lights one last time on my way back to the flat."

Olive nodded. "It's a lovely evening to see the twinkle lights, that's for sure."

They fell into step together. After a moment, Olive gave her a thoughtful look. "Are you sure you're alright, dear? You look a little wistful."

"Oh, I'm fine." At Olive's quizzical eyebrow, Carrie laughed. "Actually, that's not entirely true. I'm feeling a little sad, Olive. I hoped I might find somewhere around Hamblehurst to live, but I've had no luck, which means that once Christmas is over, I'll be going up to Yorkshire to stay with my parents for a while."

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Olive said. “But I’m sure you’ll enjoy spending time with your parents.”

“Yes, I will, but... well, this might sound a bit daft, but I’ve sort of ended up with a silly, mad crush on my neighbour across the hallway from Leah’s flat and I wish I didn’t have to say goodbye to him.”

Olive’s eyes widened. “You mean Joe Whitaker? The vet?”

Carrie gave an unhappy nod. “We only spent a few hours together in total, but I couldn’t help but feel that there might have been something more between us if I was staying here and we had more time.”

“Wait, didn’t my neighbour from further down the street, Jess Shepherd, mention something to you about the flat she was vacating when we were all enjoying the Christmas Lights extravaganza a couple of weeks ago?”

“She did, and I went to look at the flat and was about to sign on the dotted line when the landlord announced he was increasing the rent. I couldn’t afford what he was asking.”

“Oh dear, that’s a pity.”

Carrie gave a shrug. “This is a lovely little town and to be honest, I think I was pushing my luck trying to find something here. Everything’s too pricey. At least I’ve got my parents’ house to go to, but I wish I could’ve stayed here and got to know Joe a little better.”

“Hmm, well, that really is very sad.”

Olive turned and gave Carrie a comforting pat on the arm. The older lady smiled, and then her smile turned into a curious and speculative expression.

“I wonder...” Olive said and then glanced down the street. When she turned back to Carrie, her eyes were bright. “How do you feel about the idea of having housemates, Carrie?”

“I’ve always had housemates in the past. Why do you ask?”

“And if you happened to find a nice, pleasant housemate here in Hamblehurst, would you stay?”

Carrie didn't have to think about the question for long. "Yes, I'd stay. Absolutely. But I haven't found anyone around the town who's looking for a housemate. Do you know something I don't know?"

"I think I do, yes."

"Are *you* looking for a housemate, Olive?" Carrie asked, wondering if this was what the older lady was talking about.

Olive let out a laugh and shook her head. "No, I'm not looking for a housemate, dear. But I know someone who is. Shall we go and see them?"

"Yes!" Carrie couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Let's go!"

* * *

"So, this is the spare room. What do you think?"

Carrie looked around at the gorgeous bedroom with its beautiful geometric wallpaper and pristine double bed and soft velvet curtains in a sweet shade of rose pink and tried not to burst into tears.

"You're really looking for a housemate?" she asked, her voice almost a whisper. "For this room?"

Ellie Jones laughed and exchanged a look with Olive. "Yes, I'm really looking for a housemate for this room. Well, I should say I'm looking for the *right* housemate for this room. I'm not willing to share my house with just anyone, which is why I haven't bitten the bullet yet and put it about that I'm actually looking for a lodger. The last thing I want is to find myself with a noisy, messy, horrible person living under my roof."

"I'm not noisy or messy or horrible, I promise," Carrie said.

Ellie laughed. "I didn't think you were. When we chatted at the Christmas Lights get-together earlier this month, you seemed like a sensible sort. If I'd known you were still

searching for a place to live, I would've spoken to you already."

"Well, it's a good job I bumped into Carrie when I did," Olive said. "She's just about to pack up and move into her parents' house up in Yorkshire, because she can't find anywhere to rent around here that's within her budget. When Carrie told me this, I thought of you immediately, Ellie, after what we chatted about this morning."

Olive turned to Carrie and explained further. "I was returning my books to the library today and checking out a new batch to keep me going over the Christmas holidays, and while Ellie was stamping my books, we got talking, as we usually do. She mentioned that, after a lot of wavering, she'd finally decided to look for a lodger to help out with her household bills, but that she wasn't too happy about it, being a private person and someone who values keeping a clean and tidy house. I wished her good luck and promised to keep my ear to the ground in case I heard of anyone who might fit the bill."

"And then I appeared outside your house looking glum and proceeded to share my tale of woe," Carrie added, still stunned at the turn of luck.

"Indeed. And here we are," Olive finished with a laugh. She turned back to Ellie. "Carrie is house-sitting for Leah, who I know has her head screwed on right and wouldn't let anyone stay in her flat and care for her sweet cats if she didn't trust them completely. And so I think you young ladies will find yourselves to be two peas in a pod and the perfect housemates."

"This is a beautiful house, Ellie," Carrie said. "If I was living here, I'd take care of everything in the place as if it was my own. I'm sure Leah will give you a proper reference if you need one, and the tenant I sub-let a room from in the house where I was living in Winchester would do the same, too."

Ellie smiled. "Good, that sounds fine. And you're okay with the lodger's room rate I mentioned?"

“Absolutely. It’s more than fair and definitely within my budget.”

“I ought to let you know that, for now at least, I’m only planning on renting the room for six months at most. I need a little extra cash to cover my bills but beyond that...” Ellie raised her hands and gave a shrug. “Well, it’s possible that me and my boyfriend might want to make the leap and start living together at some point next year.”

Olive clapped her hands at this news. “Really? Oh, Ellie, that’s wonderful. You didn’t seem nearly so sure the last time we chatted.”

“I’m not ready to move in together right now, and neither is Jeff,” Ellie said. “But a few more months down the line? Things might be different then. In fact, I’m sure they will be.” Ellie smiled and turned back to Carrie. “So, if you’re okay with this just being a short-term lodging arrangement, maybe we can help each other out?”

“Yes, I think we can.”

Carrie couldn’t keep the smile from her face. She reached her hand out towards Ellie to shake on the deal, but at the last minute pulled the other woman into a clumsy hug. “Thank you, Ellie! You don’t know what this means to me!”

Ellie laughed and hugged her back. “You’re helping me as much as I’m helping you. I’m just glad I don’t have to go searching for a non-messy, non-crazy housemate. If you’re a trusted friend of Leah’s, then that’s good enough for me.”

“Ooh, it’s a little Christmas miracle!” Olive beamed. “And I rather like the idea that I played my own part as the magical Christmas fairy in this lovely piece of serendipity.” She glanced at her watch. “Now, ladies, I must be off or I’ll be late for my Christmas Eve meal with my friends.”

After agreeing to sort out all the other lodging details later, and to meet for coffee and a proper chat as soon as possible so they could get to know each other better, Carrie said goodbye to Ellie and followed Olive back out onto Foxglove Street.

“Thank you for your help, Olive,” Carrie said. “I’m completely over the moon to think I’ll be staying here in Hamblehurst after all.”

“Good,” Olive replied. “I’m so glad I took the chance that you and Ellie might be a good fit as housemates. I hope it works out for you both.”

“I know it will. I’m clean, tidy and completely house-trained.”

Olive laughed. “And I suppose there is another added benefit to this wonderful stroke of Christmas good luck that has meant you can stay here after all.”

Carrie’s mind was so preoccupied thinking about the beautiful house she would soon be sharing with her sweet and kind new housemate that she couldn’t work out what Olive meant.

Seeing her confusion, Olive laughed again. “Now that you’re staying here in Hamblehurst, there’s nothing stopping you from finding out if there really is the chance for something between you and that handsome Joe Whitaker after all.”

“Oh! You’re right,” Carrie said as this delicious idea erased every other thought inside her head.

With a wink goodbye, Olive hurried off towards the high street. When Carrie got back to the flat a few minutes later, she saw Joe’s car parked in its space on the driveway and felt a bump of excitement as she thought of the news she could now share with him.

News that might just change everything.

FOR THE UMPTEENTH TIME, Joe re-read the Christmas card he'd found on his doormat when he'd returned to his flat two hours ago.

In looping cursive, Carrie had wished him a Merry Christmas but told him she wouldn't be there for Christmas Day dinner with his family after all, adding that she hoped she'd see him again before she left for Yorkshire because she wanted to say a proper goodbye.

When he'd first read the words written inside the card, Joe's spirits had flagged. After actively avoiding Carrie for days on end, she'd clearly had enough of him. No wonder she was now declining the invitation to Christmas dinner.

Joe realised he'd probably well and truly blown it by being a complete plonker, just as Yvette had warned him. After so many days of radio silence, perhaps it was now too late to invite himself up to Yorkshire in order to spend time with Carrie once she was settled there.

He hoped not. But as there was no reply when he'd knocked on her door across the hallway, he didn't know for sure.

When he'd pulled out his phone to call her, he'd noticed the 'Merry Christmas Eve' message Carrie had sent earlier that morning. In his rush to get to the veterinary surgery to clear the decks before closing for the holidays, he'd missed the message altogether.

Joe cringed to think of how rude this must make him seem. He *was* rude, he corrected himself. He was rude and stupid and clearly out of his mind to have blown things like this. When he'd dialled Carrie's number to speak to her and try to straighten things out, it had gone to voice mail, making him wonder if she was now avoiding him the way he had avoided her.

He couldn't blame her. But that didn't stop him wanting to talk to her and to try to put things right.

And so he'd waited and kept watch out of the window for any sign of Carrie returning, re-reading her Christmas card every ten minutes and punishing himself for making what might turn out to be the worst mistake of his life.

He'd tried to protect himself by putting distance between himself and Carrie, but all he'd done was hurt himself and, worse, he'd hurt Carrie, too.

Joe glanced at the Christmas tree standing in his window and then out to the lights he'd strung up around the outside frame and garden shrubs. The lights twinkled in the twilight as Christmas Eve night descended. After so many lonely Christmases spent wondering what was wrong with him and why he couldn't find the love he craved and couldn't find the woman to make his dreams come true, he'd stumbled upon both those things this year when he'd least expected it.

The thought of now losing those things—of losing Carrie—made him ache.

And so when he at last caught a glimpse of Carrie walking along Foxglove Street and turning towards their building, his heart performed such a colossal somersault inside his chest that it actually made his head spin.

Unable to stop himself, Joe rushed outside to greet her. Flinging open the front door and running down the steps, he covered the distance to where Carrie had stopped in astonishment at the sight of him barrelling towards her.

“Carrie!” he said in a breathless rush. “Carrie, I'm so glad you're here!”

Her eyes were wide with a mixture of surprise and possibly alarm at his animated behaviour. “Joe, hi, listen I was just about to—”

“Wait, before you say anything, please hear me out,” Joe said, fearing the strained look on Carrie’s face and what it might mean. He had to say what was in his heart, right now, and hope it would be enough to convince her not to tell him to get lost, which was no more than he deserved. “I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch these last few days. The honest truth is that the idea of you leaving just about killed me. I don’t want you to go and so I pulled back and tried to make it easier to accept that you *had* to go. But that just made things worse.”

“Well, I guess that makes some sense, sort of, although—”

“Please, let me just say this, Carrie,” Joe begged. “Just let me say what I need to say before you tell me I’ve been a proper twat and that I should just sod off.”

Her lips quirked at this, not much, but enough to give him encouragement. “Okay, I’m all ears,” she said.

“I acted like a fool and I’m sorry. When I got home this afternoon and found your Christmas card on my door mat, I felt sick to my stomach to know I’d made you feel unwelcome and made you feel unwanted when the truth is...” Joe gulped air into his lungs and held her gaze. “The truth is I want you so badly it hurts. And I want you to stay so badly it hurts even more.”

Carrie’s eyes widened. She seemed lost for words.

“I tried to phone you to talk to you earlier, to explain all this before it was too late, but you didn’t answer.”

Carrie blinked and pulled her phone from her pocket. “I turned the ringer off when I visited your nurse colleague this afternoon to drop off the photograph album I made for her. She invited me in for tea and I didn’t want to be distracted.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me Carrie, not after how I’ve behaved. I just wanted you to know that...”

He was dancing around what he had to say, fearing taking the risk and being shot down. But Joe knew he had no other

choice but to go on or else he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

"I know I've probably blown things with you, Carrie. You don't deserve to hear me out after I avoided you for so many days. But the thing is..." He briefly closed his eyes and summoned every ounce of courage he could find. "When you move up to Yorkshire to stay with your parents, I was hoping I could come and visit you."

"Oh." Carrie's eyes widened again. "I see."

"I've got two weeks off work at the start of January. If you'll let me, I'd like to drive up and stay so we can spend time together. I'll book a hotel, obviously, somewhere near where your parents live. We could spend a wintry Yorkshire holiday together. I could come and visit you at your parents and take you out so you can show me around the dales or the moors or wherever it is you'll be living from now on."

A smile curved at her lips and Joe's heart raced. Was this actually working?

"And as for Christmas Day dinner tomorrow," he continued, eager to plough on. "Please say you'll be there? It won't be the same without you and my mother will literally clobber me if I turn up without you and have to explain that the reason you're not there is because I'm a clueless idiot."

Carrie's smile widened and she laughed. The sound was like music in Joe's ears.

"All right, I'll come along to Christmas Day dinner, if you're sure you want me there," Carrie said.

"I do! I absolutely do!"

"But as for you driving up to Yorkshire to visit me next month, I don't think that will work."

Joe's heart dropped to his feet. "You don't?"

Carrie shook her head, her smile now gone along with her laughter, leaving behind a blank expression that turned his blood cold. "No, I'm sorry, Joe."

His eyes searched her face, searching for some sign that this could still be salvaged, that he could convince her to give

him another chance. His mind briefly probed the question of why she would agree to come to Christmas Day dinner with him but turn down point blank the idea of allowing him to visit her once she moved away, but he couldn't square the circle any more than he could penetrate the baffling expression on Carrie's face.

"It doesn't have to be two whole weeks," Joe said. "I could come up for just a few days instead."

But her gaze remained fixed. "No, like I said, that just won't work."

He'd put himself on the line but it was obvious to him now that it was too late. He'd blown it. Carrie might be willing to share some Christmas dinner with him and his family, but beyond that, the idea of spending any more time with him was obviously a non-starter, and...

"The reason it won't work," Carrie suddenly continued, a smile now lifting her expression, "is because I won't be in Yorkshire next month."

Joe frowned. "I thought you were moving up to stay with your parents?"

"Not anymore."

"Oh, right. So where are you going?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

Joe stared for a long beat, wondering if he'd heard her right. "What?"

"I said, I'm not going anywhere." Her smile now stretched from ear to ear. "Well, technically, I *am* going somewhere. I'm moving further down Foxglove Street to live with my new housemate who I just saw ten minutes ago. But I'm staying here in Hamblehurst."

Her words crashed through his brain like a tornado. "You're not leaving?"

"I'm not leaving."

"You're staying here?"

Carrie laughed. “Yes, I’m staying here, thanks to some wonderful serendipity and your very sweet neighbours and—”

Before she could say another word, Joe grabbed her in his arms and lifted her off her feet and swung her around. “You’re staying!”

“I’m staying!” she laughed.

Joe let out a whoop and spun them both around again. When he placed her back on the ground, he pulled her closer into his arms and kissed her.

In that moment, everything in the world seemed absolutely perfect. As the fairy lights twinkled around them and night fell on Foxglove Street and Carrie snuggled into his arms and kissed him with a sweet passion that left him hungry for more, Joe knew it was the best Christmas Eve he’d ever known.

When at last they parted, Joe looked deep into Carrie’s eyes. “I’m sorry about the last few days, Carrie. I truly am.”

“I suppose you’ll just have to think of some way to make it up to me,” she replied with a smile.

“Can I start by inviting you inside for a Christmas Eve drink?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She held up the shopping bag looped over her arm. “I have festive deli nibbles I might just be willing to share.”

“Then it sounds like we’re all set.”

Joe returned her smile and led her inside past the twinkle lights that danced around the front door, thinking about the magic of Christmas and the wonder of second chances.

CARRIE WOKE on Christmas morning to the sight of snow drifting down outside the window and the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen. She stretched and sat up in bed, feeling warm and cosy and filled with excitement about the day ahead.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Joe said as he returned to the bedroom with mugs of coffee on a tray along with plates of hot buttered toast. He sat the tray down on the bedside table and brushed a kiss across Carrie’s lips that brought back delicious memories of how they’d spent the night before.

“Morning,” she said, accepting the coffee mug he held out. “I could get used to this kind of service.”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

Joe slipped back beneath the bed covers and kissed her again before taking his own mug from the tray. Carrie looked around his bedroom, taking in the blue walls and hardwood bed frame and simple but elegant white wardrobe and chest of drawers. Last night when Joe had led her in here, his hand clasped in hers, she hadn’t had time to take in the masculine décor. Her mind had been occupied with other things.

She blushed to think of the amazing night they’d shared and the way Joe made her feel when she was in his arms and in his bed.

“This is a nice bedroom, Joe,” she said, sipping some coffee.

“It’s even nicer with you in it.”

“Wow, that’s cheesy.”

Joe laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. I ought to think up some better lines.”

“You don’t need any lines.”

Carrie looked into his eyes, remembering so many sweet moments from the night before. They’d shared wine and food and talked until past midnight, welcoming Christmas Day as the clock struck midnight with a kiss that told Carrie that something very special was happening here, something she hadn’t expected, but something she wanted all the more because of it.

The night they’d just spent together left her with warm tingling sensations from her head down to her toes. Waking up on Christmas morning in Joe’s arms was the best gift she could have hoped for.

“I have a present for you,” Joe said, reaching down the side of the bed and coming back up with a wrapped gift in his hand.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did. Open it.”

Carrie set her coffee mug aside and tore off the wrapping paper. Inside she found a beautiful glossy silver photograph frame. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw a photograph of herself inside the frame, with Coco and Praline curled up on her lap and Joe’s Christmas tree twinkling in the background.

“When did you take this photo?” Carrie asked, amazed and puzzled in equal measure.

“Last night, after you brought the cats over to my flat so they wouldn’t be alone on Christmas Eve. When I went to pour us more wine in the kitchen, I looked over and you looked so cute and comfortable and lovely sitting on the sofa with the two cats curled up beside you. I snapped the photo with my phone camera and printed it out later when you were in the bathroom.” Joe nodded to the framed photo. “It’s just

printed on plain paper, but I'll replace it with a proper photographic print as soon as I can."

"This is a lovely photograph, Joe. I'm so touched by this."

Carrie looked again at how he'd captured the soft lights of the Christmas tree and the cosy scene of herself with the two cats on the sofa. When she'd asked last night if it would be okay to bring the cats over to his flat so they wouldn't be by themselves, he'd agreed readily, his eyes twinkling in obvious amusement at her thoughtfulness towards the animals. That he'd caught this candid moment of her with the two sweet cats brought emotion to her throat.

Coco and Praline were the reason she'd come here to Foxglove Street in the first place, and without them requiring someone to look after them in Leah's absence, Carrie never would have met Joe. She'd cherish the photo he'd given her and its lovely reminder of the two cute cats that had brought them together.

As if on cue, the two felines scurried into Joe's bedroom and hopped up on to the bed before proceeding to wind themselves around Carrie and then settle down beside Joe amongst the bed clothes.

"I'll have cat hair everywhere now thanks to these two," Joe laughed, pointlessly attempting to sweep a few stray hairs off the duvet.

"They love you," Carrie said, amused at the two cats huddled up beside Joe. "Perhaps you ought to get cats of your own."

"Only if you'd be willing to help me look after them."

"It's a deal."

Carrie smiled and looked again at the framed photo Joe had given her. "Thank you again for this, Joe."

"I bought the frame for you when I did all my Christmas shopping and you helped me wrap it all up. I picked the frame out thinking it would be the perfect match for that fantastic black-and-white photo you took of the street in the snow."

Carrie nodded as she thought of the photo he meant, the one she'd shown him on the afternoon of the Christmas Lights extravaganza. "You're right, it would be perfect for that."

"I'll buy you another frame, in that case." Joe ran his fingers over her cheek and through her hair. "We ought to get up and get ready. We're due at my parents' house at noon for Christmas drinks before dinner, and I have to collect Mr Irving and his dogs on the way there."

Carrie checked the time. "We've got ages yet." She pulled him close and kissed him. "I haven't given you your Christmas present yet."

His eyes danced as he quirked an eyebrow. "What did you get me?"

"Come closer and find out."

Joe's lips met hers and Carrie melted into the kiss as he wrapped his arms around her. As he pulled her closer, she felt the cats spring to their feet and off the bed before dashing out of the bedroom, meowing in protest at the interruption to their nap.

Carrie laughed and Joe did, too. As they disappeared beneath the bed covers, Carrie thought this was the perfect start to Christmas Day—and to a Christmas she might never forget.

EPILOGUE

FOXGLOVE STREET LOOKED like a picture-perfect winter wonderland when Carrie and Joe left the flat later that morning. The snow was still falling and lying in drifts along the pavement and road and gardens. Children were building snowmen and throwing snowballs and Carrie heard the warm melody of church bells ringing in the distance.

“It’s so beautiful!” Carrie said as they stepped outside. “A proper white Christmas!”

“It’s perfect,” Joe said. “*You’ve* made it perfect.”

“Now you’re just being sappy.”

He laughed and gave an easy shrug. “Guilty as charged. What is it Scrooge says to the ghosts at the end of *A Christmas Carol*? ‘You’ve taught me the true meaning of Christmas’. That’s what you’ve done for me, Carrie.”

“Definitely sappy.”

“I mean it. I thought I’d always be alone. And then you came along and changed everything.”

His gaze was soft, his expression vulnerable, and Carrie thought she could look into his eyes for a lifetime and it would never be enough.

They were at the start of something wonderful, she knew that already. That it had started at Christmas made it even more magical.

When Carrie had called her parents earlier to wish them a merry Christmas and had shared the news about the surprising

new housemate she'd found and what that meant for the new romantic relationship in her life, her mother had used the word 'magical' to describe what had happened. Carrie couldn't disagree. Her Christmas wishes had come true just when she'd thought all hope was lost.

Her mother would've kept her on the phone far longer, asking for more details, but with a Christmas dinner invitation to get to, Carrie had promised to chat later instead. With her accommodation emergency now resolved, Carrie told her parents she'd delay her trip to Yorkshire until after they returned from their winter sun holiday, and that she'd bring Joe with her. It might only be early days in their new relationship, but she couldn't wait to introduce him to her parents.

Their relationship might still be new, but Joe's smile when she'd suggested this change of plans had told her it was already the right thing to do.

"We ought to hurry up or we'll be late," Carrie now said, steering him towards his parked car. "Not only am I having dinner with your family, but it's Christmas Day dinner to boot, and I want to make a good impression."

"You already have. My family think you're terrific."

"Well, naturally."

Joe laughed at her silly joke and wry expression as they stowed bags of Christmas gifts into the boot of his car. Carrie was opening the passenger side door when she saw Olive Nimmo walking along Foxglove Street.

"Good morning, Olive," she called out. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas to you too!" she replied. "Where are you both off to on this fine festive morning?"

"We're heading over to collect a friend of Joe's and then we're all going to Joe's parents' house for Christmas dinner," Carrie said.

Olive gave a knowing smile. "That sounds wonderful. I hope you have a lovely time. I take it that means the two of

you were able to have a proper catch-up after I saw you yesterday?”

“We did,” Carrie said, returning her grin.

“Well, I’m thrilled to hear it. I must say you both look very happy this morning.”

Carrie blushed at the older lady’s wicked smile, which only made Olive cackle.

“What are your plans for Christmas Day, Mrs Nimmo?” Joe asked.

“It’s a non-stop day for me,” Olive replied, looking pleased. “I had Christmas breakfast this morning with my neighbour Angela and her daughter, Lindsey, which was a lovely treat. They are spending the rest of the day with Angela’s boyfriend and his daughter, and I just waved them off a moment ago. Now I’m on my way to visit my friend Walter and swap Christmas presents and then the two of us are going to have dinner with his grandson Darren and his girlfriend, Jess.”

“I hope you have a lovely day,” Carrie said.

“Thank you, dear.”

“Merry Christmas, Mrs Nimmo,” Joe said and got in behind the wheel of his car to start the engine and defrost the snow-covered vehicle.

“Olive, thanks again for steering me towards Ellie yesterday,” Carrie said. “I’m so grateful.”

“You’re quite welcome, dear.”

“Now that I’m able to stay here on Foxglove Street...” She turned to look at Joe sitting behind the wheel of the car. “Well, who knows what might happen now that wouldn’t have happened otherwise.”

Olive gave her a warm smile. “I wish you both much happiness together. And love, too, if that’s the way things turn out.”

Carrie knew in her heart that she was already tumbling towards love. It felt wonderful, and as bright and magical as the Christmas Day snowflakes falling all around her.

She hugged Olive warmly, thankful for the older lady's kindness. Olive hugged her in return and gave her a tender pat on the back.

When the two women separated, Carrie's gaze was drawn to another woman hurrying down Foxglove Street with an anxious look on her face as she peered at the mobile phone in her hand. The woman looked a little older than Carrie, perhaps somewhere in her late thirties, and appeared to be in a great rush, her unbuttoned jacket flapping against her legs and her scarf flying out behind her.

Olive saw the hurrying woman at the same moment as Carrie did, and her smile turned into a concerned frown.

"Meg?" Olive called out. "Are you okay?"

The woman, Meg, glanced up from her phone but only slowed a little as she hurried past.

"I'm fine, thanks," Meg replied, waving her phone in the air and maintaining her pace. "But there's a Christmas turkey disaster brewing if I don't get a move on. I'll talk to you later, Olive."

The woman continued along the street and out of sight, still tapping at her phone as she disappeared.

"Oh dear, I hope everything's okay," Olive said as her smile returned. "Although it wouldn't be Christmas without someone somewhere landing in the middle of a turkey disaster. Speaking of which, I'd better get myself along the road to Walter's or we won't be ready by the time Darren comes to collect us and then I'll be the one causing the turkey disaster by making everyone late."

With a laugh, Olive hurried off the driveway and back out towards the street. "Merry Christmas, Carrie!" she called out behind her. "I'll see you soon."

"Merry Christmas, Olive."

Carrie watched the older lady rush off.

“What’s going on?” Joe asked, getting out of the car to scrap away the melting snow from the windscreen.

“Nothing, just a friend of Olive’s rushing past on her way to avert a Christmas turkey disaster. She seemed like she was in a bit of a flap.”

“Which is what my mother will be doing if we don’t get there in time for the ritual basting of the turkey as it cooks in the oven.”

Carrie smiled. “Your family has a turkey basting ritual?”

“We do. It involves burnt fingers and quite a lot of sherry consumption. Shall we get ourselves over there and take part?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Joe kissed her and opened the passenger door of the car so she could get inside. As they backed out onto the street, she caught sight of Coco and Praline at the flat window, watching them leave. She’d promised to bring them plenty of turkey leftovers when they returned from dinner, and Carrie couldn’t help but think the little cats had understood every word.

Carrie glanced at Joe as he navigated the slick road. Snowflakes fluttered and danced in the air as they drove off and the festive lights that decorated everyone’s front gardens twinkled and glowed from one end of Foxglove Street to the other. She let out a soft sigh of contentment as Christmas carols played on the car radio and Joe reached over and squeezed her hand.

She’d hoped for nothing more than a roof over her head this Christmas when she’d first arrived in Hamblehurst, and a chance to figure out where she might live next. She’d never expected to remain here on this lovely street in this pretty town, and she’d never expected to fall head over heels into a sweet Christmas romance, either.

“Everything okay?” Joe asked.

“Everything’s wonderful,” she replied with a smile as the snow fell and the carols played and Joe’s hand on hers made

her feel the magic of Christmas with every beat of her heart.

A MESSAGE FROM ALIX

Thanks for visiting Foxglove Street and I hope you enjoyed spending Christmas with Carrie and Joe and indulging in the romance and magic of the festive season.

There are plenty more wintry moments to come in the next book in the series, ***SNOWY DAYS ON FOXGLOVE STREET***, where we'll get to meet Meg, who rushed past Carrie and Olive during the Christmas Day epilogue – find out whether her turkey catastrophe is avoided and curl up for some cosy wintry vibes as a new year begins.

If you'd like to keep up to date with new book news, then join my Reader's Club at alixkelso.com. You can also find me on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

Thanks again for reading, and see you next time on Foxglove Street.

With all good wishes,

Alix Kelso

* * *

Stay in touch

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* * *

Please help by leaving a review

If you enjoyed this book, I'd be so grateful if you'd leave a review at the store where you bought it. Reviews are very helpful for readers searching for new books and for authors hoping for new readers. Thank you!

* * *

What to read next

Enjoy another visit to Foxglove Street in the next book in the series, ***SNOWY DAYS ON FOXGLOVE STREET***. Prepare for a winter visit to Foxglove Street with Meg Marshall, who has a big decision to make about her future as a new year dawns and a big freeze descends on Hamblehurst...

Want more Christmas books? I can help with that...

If you enjoy a sprinkling of magic with your Christmas romance then join Mrs Wishmore when she visits Hollyford in ***A WISH AT THE CHRISTMAS VILLAGE***. There's fun, laughter, healing hearts, and plenty of guardian angel comfort and joy in this lovely treat of a book.

And check out my two collections of Christmas stories if you enjoy something short and sweet and filled with festive cheer and wonder. For delicious stories that you can start and finish in the time it takes to enjoy a warm mince pie and a mug of hot chocolate, dive into ***A DREAM OF CHRISTMAS*** and ***THE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS***.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alix Kelso writes warm-hearted stories about romance, friendship and family. She's happiest with her nose in a book and loves being whisked off to imaginary story worlds. Alix lives in Glasgow with her husband, where she enjoys pottering in the kitchen, exploring the great outdoors, and buying far too many Christmas decorations.

Alix loves to hear from her readers, and you can find her online on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) at @AlixKelsoAuthor

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