

Sophie Claire

This Christmas in Paris

As the snow falls,
will they find love?



About the Author

Sophie Claire writes emotional stories set in England and in sunny Provence, where she spent her summers as a child. She has a French mother and a Scottish father, but was born in Africa and grew up in Manchester, England, where she still lives with her husband and two sons.

Previously, she worked in marketing and proofreading academic papers, but writing is what she always considered her 'real job' and now she's delighted to spend her days dreaming up heartwarming contemporary romance stories set in beautiful places.

You can find out more at www.sophieclaire.co.uk.

Also by Sophie Claire

The Christmas Holiday

A Forget-Me-Not Summer

A Winter's Dream

Summer at the French Olive Grove

An Escape to Provence

Sophie Claire

This Christmas in Paris



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To Julie Corallo

Praise for Sophie Claire

‘Enduring and endearing. A truly romantic read! Full of Sophie’s trademark warmth and charm’

Heidi Swain

‘A gorgeous read . . . lush and romantic’

Phillipa Ashley

‘Fun and festive’

Trisha Ashley

‘An absolute delight, full of Provençal sunshine’

Julie Caplin

‘A joyful summery escape’

Caroline Roberts

‘Sumptuous’

Woman & Home

‘If you have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all.’

Your mum

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Epilogue

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1

Carys

Carys was hurrying to get to the bakery when the car came screeching round the corner.

She'd just dropped into her friend Natasha's flower shop to buy a pretty pot of marguerite daisies and hugged it to her as she stepped out into the road. But the loud roar of an engine made her freeze. She glimpsed the car coming towards her and dropped the pot.

'Miss Bell?'

Her brain froze with terror, and she saw the accident all over again. Headlights hurtling at her, swerving and snaking out of control. The blood draining, and her fingers gripping the steering wheel. Metal smashed into metal, throwing her head back. A hospital room, faces peering down, strip lights making her squint—

'Miss Bell?'

A hand tugged at her arm, and she blinked. The pictures in her head shrank away, and she stared into the face of a former pupil.

It took her a few moments to remember her name. Jessie Mallard. She'd been tiny when Carys had taught her. She must be around twelve now. Her little brother, Stephen, was in Carys's class.

'Are you all right, Miss Bell?' Jessie's mum asked.

Carys swallowed. Jessie and her mum had stopped, and she realised other passers-by were watching curiously too. Heat rose in her cheeks and she tugged her scarf a little tighter. The bold red satin felt cool against the back of her neck.

Natasha rushed out of the flower shop and arrived, panting, at her side. 'Carys, what happened?' she asked breathlessly.

'I— D-didn't you see?' she stammered. 'That car was going too fast.'

‘It was,’ Jessie’s mum agreed. ‘But it’s gone now.’ She patted Carys’s arm.

Her daughter crouched to rescue the pot of flowers. Soil had spilled all over the road. Damn. Carys had bought it for her best friend Liberty, thinking the summery daisies would look perfect by the front door of Damsfly Cottage.

‘Come into the shop,’ Natasha said, steering her away. ‘I’ll make you a cup of tea. You’re in shock.’

Carys felt sick at the thought. She shook her head. ‘I’m fine,’ she said – but her legs gave way, and Natasha caught her, propping her up until the strength slowly returned.

‘You’re not fine,’ Natasha said firmly. ‘Come with me. You can sit in the back room while you catch your breath.’

The crowd in the street seemed to be growing with every minute that passed and she could feel all eyes on her. ‘Okay,’ Carys murmured. ‘A glass of water would be good.’

Twenty minutes later, she’d stopped shaking.

‘The shop’s quiet now,’ said Natasha, returning to the back room after serving a customer. She wiped her hands on her apron. ‘Shall I get Liberty?’ she asked, with a nod towards the Button Hole fabric shop where Carys’s friend worked.

‘She’s at home,’ Carys said. ‘She has the day off because she ran a couple of evening workshops this week.’

Natasha sat down. ‘How are you feeling?’

Carys wrapped her hands around the mug of tea. ‘Mortified.’ She groaned. ‘I don’t know what happened. I saw that car and suddenly I was there again.’

‘The accident?’ Natasha’s blue eyes were soft with understanding.

Carys nodded and took a sip of tea, wincing at how sweet Natasha had made it, then put the mug down. Her fingers instinctively reached for the scar on the back of her neck and she made sure it was well hidden beneath her scarf. Then she pointed at the street. ‘He was speeding, though, wasn’t he? He was driving recklessly – and in the middle of the village, too.’

Her friend tilted her head, as if choosing her words with care. ‘He was going a bit fast.’

‘Didn’t you hear the tyres squealing? Didn’t you see how out of control he was? He almost skidded round that corner.’

There was a short silence before Natasha said, ‘It was difficult to tell from inside the shop.’

Her friend was being tactful, Carys realised. In fact, thinking back, no one else in the street had looked frightened. But they’d all been staring at her with concern. Because she’d reacted with terror. Perhaps the car hadn’t been speeding at all. Perhaps she’d simply panicked.

‘Oh, no.’ Her head dropped into her hands. ‘When am I going to stop getting them?’

‘Flashbacks?’

‘The doctors said they’d fade with time but it’s been over a year now.’ She thought of Jessie’s anxious expression. ‘And it’ll be all round the village, how I had a panic attack in the high street.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Natasha said, with a wave of her hand. ‘Everyone cares about you, Carys. If they talk, it’s only because they’re concerned.’

She knew her friend was right. Everyone did care. But she didn’t welcome their concern. She just wanted her life to go back to how it had been before the accident, when everything had been normal.

Natasha asked, ‘Shall I call Liberty and ask her to pick you up?’

‘No!’ Carys said quickly. ‘I’m fine, honestly. I’ve got the car.’

‘Well, if you’re sure.’

‘Thanks for the tea, Nat.’ She picked up her bedraggled flower pot and tried to pat down the soil, poking the daisies back in.

‘Here,’ said Natasha, handing her another pot. ‘Take this one instead.’

‘But you won’t be able to sell it now it’s been damaged.’

‘I will,’ Natasha said. ‘It just needs a bit of TLC and it’ll be good as new. Like you. Make sure you take it easy this afternoon, okay?’

As Carys pulled up outside the cottage, she remembered when she’d come

out of hospital, how excitedly she'd drunk it all in. The tiny cottage in a clearing in the woods. The loop of smoke weaving up from the chimney. Charlie, Liberty's black Labrador, barking at the door, impatient to greet them when they went inside. The birdsong, the peaty woodland smell, the crackling of a log fire in the lounge – it had all been exactly as Carys remembered.

Until Alex, Liberty's new boyfriend, had stepped out of the kitchen and greeted her in the traditional French way with a kiss on each cheek.

Brushing aside the memory, she picked up the pot of daisies and went in.

'Is everything okay?' said Liberty, rushing into the hall before Carys had even closed the front door. 'Nat called. She said—'

'Yeah. Just some idiot speeding. It took me by surprise, that's all. Here,' she said, handing over the flowers. 'I thought these might look good on the doorstep.'

'Aw, they're gorgeous. Thanks, Car.' Liberty ran her fingers over the bright petals. But when she looked up frown lines creased her brow. 'Nat said you had a flashback.'

'Let's not dwell on that. What are we doing this evening? A night out on the town?'

'Is that what you want?' Liberty's face told her it wasn't what she'd planned.

'Why not? It's Saturday, after all.'

Liberty tucked her red hair behind one ear. 'Um – the thing is, Alex was going to cook dinner for us. For you too,' she added quickly, 'if you like?'

Carys hid her disappointment. And immediately felt guilty. Of course Liberty and Alex wanted to spend romantic evenings together. 'It's okay,' she said, mustering a smile. 'But thank you. I'll – er – pop in and see Mum. I haven't been over for a while.'

'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely. In fact, I'll stay over tonight. Then you two can have some privacy.' She brushed a smudge of dust off a nearby picture frame. The photograph was of her and Liberty in the snow a couple of years ago. Her brown skin and Liberty's red hair glowed in the winter sun, and their smiles

were broad.

‘Oh, Car, you don’t need to—’

‘I want to,’ she assured her friend, and pulled her into a hug. Liberty smelt of freshly cut grass.

‘Are you sure you’re okay, Car? It must be so frightening to have those flashbacks.’

It was, but she wasn’t going to admit it. To do so would be like giving in to the fear, and she wouldn’t let that happen. ‘It’s nothing, Lib. Forget about it.’

She’d survived the worst, but ‘survive’ was the crucial word. Now she wanted to move forward. She was determined to put the accident behind her.

But that felt impossible on days like today when the past came crashing back and everyone was looking at her with sympathy or – worse – pity.

‘Carys!’ her mum, Jamila, cried, as she opened the door, arms wide to pull her into a hug. ‘My beautiful girl. It’s good to see you. How are you? Not overdoing it, I hope?’

Carys had to press her lips together to suppress her irritation. It was only because her mum cared, she reminded herself. ‘I’m fine, Mum.’

Jamila didn’t seem convinced, and brushed the fringe out of her eyes as she studied her more closely. ‘How’s everything with Liberty and Alex?’

‘It’s fine. Why?’

Her mum arched an eyebrow as if she didn’t believe her, then beckoned her into the kitchen where something delicious was baking in the oven and a bottle of wine was open. Jamila poured her a glass and they sat down at the wooden table. ‘You asked to sleep over, that’s all. I thought you might have argued or something.’

‘Oh – no. She and Alex are having a romantic dinner and I wanted to give them some space. Is it okay? I’m not disturbing you, am I?’ It hadn’t been long since her youngest brother had left home and Carys knew her mum was enjoying her new-found freedom. She had some exciting house renovations planned to start soon.

‘Of course not. You know the spare room is free.’ Her mum studied her

closely. 'It can't be easy for you, now Alex has moved in.'

'Alex is lovely,' she said quickly, 'and Lib's been great too. They've told me a hundred times I'm welcome to stay at Damsely Cottage . . .'. She stared at an old stain on the floor. A tiny black circle where one of her brothers had dropped a match. Carys remembered how she'd had to stamp out the flame, and afterwards she'd scolded him. She'd been mothering her three brothers since they were born. Perhaps that was why teaching had seemed such an obvious career choice.

'But?' Jamila prompted.

She looked up. 'How do you know there's a "but"?''

'I'm your mum, Carys Bell.'

Reluctantly she admitted, 'I feel like a spare part and I think . . .' she took a deep breath ' . . . I think I should move out.'

Surprise flashed through her mum's deep brown eyes, but she hid it quickly. 'Well, you can always come here, but the builders are starting work next week. There's going to be a lot of dust and chaos for a while.'

Carys shook her head. She was thirty and had lived independently for the last ten years. Moving home would feel like a huge step backwards. 'Thanks, Mum, but I need my independence.'

'So you'll look for a place in the village?'

'I don't know. Willowbrook is tiny. There aren't many places for rent.'

'In town, then?'

Carys tipped her head half-heartedly. 'Maybe.'

Jamila reached across the table to touch her hand. 'Are you unhappy, love?'

Carys's head jerked up. Was it that obvious? And was she unhappy? 'No,' she said finally. 'Not unhappy . . .'

She couldn't pinpoint what the feeling was exactly. 'It's like the world moved on without me.'

'Well, it did, I suppose. You were in a coma for six months. That's a long while.'

So much had happened in that time, not just Liberty meeting Alex, but she didn't know how to describe how she felt. And it wasn't just about Alex

moving into Damsel­fly Cottage. She sipped her wine thoughtfully.

Jamila sighed. ‘It can’t be easy for you. So much changed while you were in hospital.’

It wasn’t a surprise that after years as a social worker her mum was good at reading people. And Carys knew she could be honest with her because her mum would never judge, but how could she explain her emotions when she didn’t understand them herself? ‘I suppose I’m still getting used to it.’

‘And getting used to Alex?’

Carys stiffened uncomfortably. ‘I know it sounds surly, but home doesn’t feel like home any more now Liberty’s with Alex.’

Her mum patted her hand.

‘I’m happy for Lib,’ Carys went on, ‘more than happy . . .’

‘But?’

Truthfully, she was also a little . . . resentful. She hated herself for it, and it made her feel selfish, but it was how she felt. Pushed out. A gooseberry. ‘But I had no time to get used to this change. I woke up in hospital and Alex was there, holding her hand.’ And Liberty hadn’t needed to tell her how deep her feelings ran for the Frenchman. It had been plain as day. Which was why Carys would never say or do anything to spoil their relationship. She wanted her best friend to be happy. She was thrilled that she’d found a man she loved and who was clearly devoted to her. Whatever Carys was feeling was her own problem, and she’d work through it.

‘Damsel­fly Cottage is too small for the three of us.’

More than anything she missed the cosy nights in she and Liberty used to enjoy, watching a movie or just chatting, sharing confidences and dreams for the future. She missed their closeness.

But now Liberty and Alex needed closeness too, and Carys understood that. Tonight she’d sleep at her mum’s, but it wasn’t a long-term solution.

Jamila studied her thoughtfully. ‘It’s difficult, love. But it was bound to happen. Sooner or later one of you two was going to meet someone.’

‘I know.’

‘So what are you going to do?’ Jamila topped up their glasses. ‘How are you going to find your happy?’

Carys felt her brow pucker in a deep frown. ‘I don’t know yet, Mum. That’s what I need to work out.’

‘Miss? Miss?’

‘Just a minute, Stephen.’

Carys continued down the list of names, making sure every pupil present was logged in the register.

‘Miss?’ Stephen perched on the edge of his seat, almost red in the face – he seemed desperate to share his weekend news.

Carys was used to it. Monday mornings were always buzzing in her classroom of five-year-olds. As soon as she’d finished, she smiled and said, ‘Right, Stephen. What’s your exciting news?’

He practically sprang from his chair like a jack-in-the-box. ‘My mum said she saw you on Saturday in the village.’

Instantly her smile vanished. She opened her mouth to respond, but the words rushed excitedly from his mouth. ‘She said you were scared because of a speeding car and you dropped flowers in the road and my sister had to pick them up and then you almost fainted.’

Someone gasped. Another child giggled.

‘Were you all right, Miss? Mummy was very worried.’

Her heart turned over. Carys cleared her throat. ‘Yes, Stephen. I’m fine, thank you.’

A room full of faces watched her expectantly. Their concern was touching, but a prickle of unease made the hairs on the back of her neck lift. ‘There’s no need to worry. The car just gave me a fright—’

‘Is it because of your car crash?’ Stephen interrupted.

‘Kind of. But it’s—’

‘But you’re better now, aren’t you, Miss?’ one of the girls asked.

Carys swallowed. ‘Yes, Lucy. I’m absolutely fine.’ She clapped her hands, keen to get off the subject. ‘Right, now let’s start today’s work. Open your exercise books, please.’

As the rustle of bags and books filled the room she was relieved to get back to teaching. But as she crossed the room, she heard Stephen whisper

loudly to the boy beside him, ‘Mummy said the car wasn’t even going very fast . . .’

Later the same day Carys stood at the front of the main hall. Twenty-seven five-year-olds dressed in shorts and T-shirts grinned at her, waiting for her next instruction.

‘Imagine you’re an elephant,’ she said. ‘How does it feel to be really big and tall? Huge! How does it feel to have a trunk for a nose?’ She waved her arm like an elephant’s trunk and began to stamp her feet heavily.

The children copied her, adding their own elephant noises and happily stamping around the hall. But as the noise level rose, Carys kept thinking about her conversation with her mum at the weekend, and all the uncomfortable emotions that had gradually been building in her over the last few months since she’d come home from hospital.

Are you unhappy? How could she be unhappy when she was so lucky to have survived? When doctors said it was a miracle that she’d made a full recovery? When she was doing the job she’d always loved, and surrounded by people she’d known all her life? She couldn’t be unhappy. Yet she couldn’t put her finger on how she felt.

Carys stopped again, and the children followed suit. Once they were all quiet, she whispered, ‘Now imagine you’re a teeny tiny ant in a big jungle. How does it feel to be smaller than a leaf?’

The children gasped and giggled, then crouched down, fully immersing themselves in the imagination exercise.

Then Carys spread her arms. ‘And, last of all, a bird. How does it feel to be way up high in the sky, looking down on the earth?’ She nodded at the window and the blue sky, punctuated with plump clouds. ‘How does it feel to fly? To feel the wind lift you? And where would you fly away to?’

The noise level rose as the children swooped and soared, but Carys was distracted, her gaze drawn to the blue sky, and she felt a pull, enthralled by the idea of being lifted into the clouds. The vastness, the freedom. What was out there, beyond this village school where she’d worked for almost ten years?

Need swelled inside her as she imagined stretching her wings, feeling the wind on her face, and seeing the world from a different perspective.

And finally she realised what the feeling was that she hadn't been able to describe to her mum.

She was restless.

She was gazing out of her classroom window when her colleague, Suzie, popped her head in at five o'clock. 'Still here?'

Carys patted the pile of handwriting books she'd been marking. 'Nearly finished.'

Suzie crossed the empty room. 'You've been working late a lot recently. You're not avoiding going home, are you?'

'No,' Carys said quickly, then blushed. 'Well, maybe. I just feel I ought to give Liberty and Alex a bit of space, you know?'

Suzie perched on the corner of her desk. She picked up a pencil and twirled it with her fingers, like a majorette. 'Is everything all right?'

Carys sighed. She was constantly reassuring people that she was fine. 'I wish everyone would stop asking me that! I just had one flashback, that's all. It's not—'

'Woah!' Suzie put up her hands, smiling.

Carys bit her lip. If only she could turn back time. Or escape to a place where no one knew about her accident. Where she wouldn't be treated differently. 'Sorry, Suzie. I know you mean well, but Saturday was a one-off. That car just—'

'I wasn't talking about that.'

'Oh.'

'I meant here – at work. Are you enjoying being back? Only there are times when you don't seem as . . .' she seemed to choose her words carefully ' . . . enthusiastic as you used to be.'

Ah. Carys leaned back in her chair. Was it that obvious?

'Don't get me wrong,' Suzie added quickly, 'you're still a wonderful teacher and everyone's thrilled to have you back, but, well, I get the feeling your heart isn't in it like it used to be.'

Silence filled the empty classroom. Carys heard the clatter of a metal bucket further along the corridor as the cleaner mopped the floor.

Suzie went on, 'You rushed to come back to work, but perhaps events are catching up with you now.'

Maybe her friend was right. 'Suzie, do you ever feel like teaching is too . . . small?'

'What do you mean?'

'Like there must be more?'

'You're not enjoying it?'

'I enjoy it.' She sat back in her chair and bit her lip. 'I just don't love it any more.'

'Ah.'

'To be honest, it's not just my job. Everything feels small now.'

'You mean Willowbrook?'

'Partly. But also my life.' She looked around the classroom with its miniature chairs and desks. It *was* small, always had been, and she knew it was her who'd changed.

She felt like Alice in Wonderland when she'd eaten the cake that made her grow until her head hit the ceiling. Willowbrook had always been home, but now – her fingers touched the scar on the back of her neck – she was suffocating in sympathy, pity and concern. 'I need a change,' she told her friend, with a dawning sense of realisation.

Suzie's eyes widened. 'What kind of change?'

Carys didn't want to be defined by the accident any more. She wanted to make a fresh start, to live her life in the fullest possible way, making the most of each precious second.

But to do that she knew she had to leave Willowbrook.

'An escape.' She grinned, lighting up at the thought. 'An adventure.'

2

Carys

‘What?’ Liberty’s eyes became round circles of chestnut brown as she stepped out into the back garden.

The air smelt fresh in the June sunshine and the distant drilling of a woodpecker carried through the trees.

‘But you can’t leave,’ Liberty continued. ‘Why would you want to? This is your home.’

Guilt hit Carys head-on. She’d known it would. ‘It just feels . . .’ she bit her lip, hunting for the words to explain, but not wanting to hurt her friend’s feelings ‘. . . like the right time. I want to have new experiences, spread my wings.’

Avoiding Liberty’s gaze, she smoothed out the folded quilt she’d hooked over one arm. The pattern of brown and blue triangles in a line looked like a long arrow against the cream background. Liberty made the most beautiful quilts. Modern, vibrant and colourful.

‘But we did that! We went to America. New York, LA, the Grand Canyon – wasn’t that enough?’

They’d spent a month doing the road trip they’d always dreamed of but never thought they’d be able to do because of Liberty’s fear of flying. Liberty had made huge changes to her life while Carys had been in hospital. She’d become braver and bolder, and flying was just one of the fears she’d conquered. Carys was filled with awe for all her friend had achieved. But now she needed a change too. A drastic one.

‘It was great,’ Carys agreed, ‘but I’ve caught the travel bug. I want to see more of the world, have more new experiences.’

She was sure this was the best thing for everyone. If she left, Liberty and Alex’s relationship would have the chance to blossom. Her heart pinched

with a tiny nip of envy that she made herself ignore. She stepped around a cluster of sky-blue hardy geraniums.

‘Here?’ She pointed to the spot in front of the oak tree where Liberty liked to photograph her quilts before posting them in her online shop. Carys’s job was to hold up the quilt – although Alex sometimes helped with that too.

Liberty gestured for her to move to the left. ‘Where will you go?’

She shrugged. Anywhere. ‘I’ve applied for a few house-sitting jobs in Scotland, the Isle of Wight and some other places.’

She unfolded the quilt and Liberty’s phone clicked as she took several shots. Magpies clacked high up in the trees, and a couple of squirrels chased each other across the garden fence. Charlie barked and bounded after them in a frenzy.

‘House-sitting?’

Carys peeped around the side of the quilt. ‘You know. Where the owners are away and—’

‘I know what it is,’ Liberty interrupted. ‘But why that of all things? Why not teaching? You’ll be alone, Car, and you hate being alone.’ She stepped forward to take some close-ups and zoomed in on the triangles, the stitching, the binding.

Above them, a blackbird launched into song.

Why house-sitting? It was a good question. ‘I want a change from teaching, and I thought that would be a good place to start. I don’t need qualifications, there are no upfront costs, and it would give me space to think. Decide what I want to do next.’ Liberty finished snapping pictures and Carys was relieved to give her arms a rest. She hugged the quilt to her chest.

‘This isn’t because of Alex, is it?’ Liberty asked.

Carys tensed. ‘No, of course not. You two have made me feel so welcome.’ And yet it had been her home first. She should have been the one welcoming Alex. But it wasn’t his fault that Fate had had other plans for her. She gazed around at the woodland, annoyed with herself for getting tearful. She blinked hard.

‘But?’ Liberty prompted.

That was the trouble with having a best friend who knew you inside out:

she heard the unspoken words before you did, knew when you were holding back.

Carys wished she could hide behind the quilt again. But it would be pointless. Liberty knew her better than anyone. ‘I know this will sound ungrateful, but since the accident everyone’s been so . . . careful around me.’

Charlie trotted back to them.

‘Careful?’

‘Always checking I’m okay, asking how I’m feeling. Mum, everyone at work, and in the village . . .’ She bent to pet the dog, who nuzzled against her leg. Even he had been super-protective of her since the accident.

‘Only because they care.’

‘I know,’ she said quickly. ‘But . . . I’m fed up being treated with kid gloves. I wish I could disappear. Become anonymous.’

‘You?’ Liberty giggled. ‘Honey, I hate to break this to you, but you have too much energy to disappear.’

Carys thumped her arm playfully, then became serious. ‘I keep thinking that if I went somewhere no one knows me, or about the accident, I could start again. You know, a fresh start. Maybe.’

She bit her lip, waiting for her friend’s reaction.

This was about her life, her plans, her future. But she also wanted her friend’s blessing.

‘I get it,’ Liberty said finally. Her voice was tinged with sadness.

The blackbird trilled, then, with a flourish, hit a high note and stopped. She could hear other birds singing too, but they weren’t as exuberant as the blackbird.

‘I thought you’d understand. Lib, I know it’s a shock, but I need some time away.’

Liberty plucked a loose thread from her sleeve. ‘Ignore me. It’s just . . .’ She swallowed, as if the words were stuck in her throat and didn’t want to come out. She looked down and rolled the thread between her thumb and forefinger until it made a tiny ball. ‘I already lost you once, Car. I’m scared of losing you again.’

Carys released a breath she hadn’t realised she was holding. ‘Not going to

happen,' she said firmly. 'Wherever I go I'll be on the phone to you regular as clockwork.'

They'd always told each other everything. Personality-wise, they were chalk and cheese – Liberty was quiet and preferred to blend in with the background while Carys liked to think of herself as bubbly – but their friendship was rock solid. They were like sisters. Family.

Which was why leaving would be so hard.

But just as every child had to grow up and leave home, Carys knew she had to do this. She had to leave Willowbrook.

'It won't be the same, though, Car. We've always been there for each other.'

Carys felt a rush of love for her friend. 'Hey, you're brave and badass now. You don't need me any more.' *And you have Alex*, she thought.

Liberty blinked, her eyes shimmering with tears, which made Carys well up too. She nodded at the quilt. 'Have you got enough pictures now?'

Liberty glanced at it, as if she'd forgotten about it. 'Just a few more by the shed. It'll bring out the brown tones really well.'

Carys followed her over. 'Here?'

'Yes, but let the top corner drape forward to show the backing fabric. That's it.' As Liberty took more photographs, she asked, 'Why don't you look for something in a city? It might be more . . . you.'

Carys tilted her head and considered this. 'I could, I suppose. Nothing like that has come up so far, but you never know.'

Liberty put her phone down. 'How long have you been looking?' It was clear from her tone that she felt betrayed.

Carys shuffled her feet. She had to tell the truth. 'Two weeks.' She'd just wanted to explore her options, see what was out there. This was a big decision, not one to be rushed into, but the more she'd trawled through the adverts, the more excited she'd felt. 'There's one more thing,' she added.

'What?'

'I handed in my notice at school. Angela said I can leave at the end of term.' The head teacher had been very calm, almost as if she'd been expecting it.

Liberty's mouth fell open. 'But that's only three weeks away!'

Carys nodded sheepishly. 'It means I'll be free to start immediately if a job comes up.'

Charlie was sniffing around the grass and Liberty absently reached down to stroke him. 'You know,' she said quietly, 'I always thought this would happen.'

'What would?' Carys had never considered house-sitting before. She'd always loved working with children. Her job had been hugely rewarding – until now. Sometimes she wondered if the accident had left more damage than the doctors and their scans could detect. She wished she could go back to her old self, content and passionate about her job.

But since she couldn't, she had to move forward.

Liberty said, 'That you'd leave Willowbrook.'

'I'm not leaving. Just having a break.' She folded the quilt in half, then in half again, and ran her fingers over the triangles of warm brown and cream fabric. 'What's this design called, by the way?'

'You like it?'

'I love it.'

'It's a classic. Flying Geese.'

They paused a moment longer over the quilt. Then Carys asked, 'Why did you think I'd leave?' She'd only had the idea a couple of weeks ago. What had her best friend spotted that she hadn't?

Liberty smiled. 'Willowbrook is too small for someone like you, Car. You're brave, you dream big. You like adventure and excitement and . . . ' She shot Carys a cautious look.

'What?' Carys smiled, remembering their best times. The camping trip when they'd been caught in a storm and finished up in a pub, drenched but laughing. The surprise party Liberty had organised for Carys's twenty-first birthday when the whole village had turned up. The concert that had ended with Carys on stage duetting with the lead singer of their favourite band. 'Spit it out, Lib.'

'Drama,' she said, then added quickly, 'but I don't mean that in a bad way.'

Carys chuckled. She was lucky to have a friend who understood her so well. Drama was exactly what she was craving right now. And she wouldn't get it as long as she stayed here, where everyone would always remember the accident. The residents of Willowbrook were like her extended family – but, much as she loved the place where she'd lived all her life, she had to get away.

She had to find her own place in the world.

The next day Carys was scrolling through the new job adverts when one caught her eye.

Responsible person wanted to take care of Parisian café for four months from 1 September to 31 December . . .

Carys's heart leaped. Christmas in Paris! She and Liberty had spent a long weekend there a couple of years ago and they'd had a magical time visiting the sights, Christmas shopping and enjoying delicious meals. Carys had loved practising her French, and the thought of living in the city for four months made her heart spark with joy. She read on:

Owners seek experienced person to manage the café and keep this successful business thriving. Must be good at managing staff and dealing with customers. Experience in the food industry is essential. Accommodation will be provided.

She clicked on the link for their website, expecting to see a traditional French café with a burgundy canopy and small round metal tables lining the pavement. There were a few tables outside, but no canopy, and the building was a cheerful pastel pink that stood out against the grey and cream stone buildings around. The upstairs shutters were painted green, the slate roof had a blue tinge, and the street was cobbled. It was quaint yet sophisticated, quirky yet elegant, and the modern signage read 'The Red Cat Café'. Carys's eyes widened. Oh, the place was wonderful! So inviting, with big sofas in the

enormous windows, golden lighting inside and— Were they bookshelves? She explored further and found pictures of a cake counter filled with mouth-watering *pâtisseries*. The menu also included snacks, such as *croque-monsieur* and *soupe à l'oignon*. Even if she didn't get an interview, Carys had to visit the place.

She began to type an email.

A reply came back the same day.

Dear Carys,

Thank you for your application. We've received three hundred emails enquiring about the job in less than four hours and we're frankly quite overwhelmed.

Her heart sank, and she braced herself for a polite rejection as she read on:

We need to find a manager very quickly. We're pleased to say your email was among the first thirty to arrive, so if you're free for an online interview tomorrow at twelve noon please let us know.

Her heart galloped with excitement. She had an interview!

3

Carys

If she said so herself, Carys thought the interview had gone really well. The owners of the café, Ingrid and Mark, had been impressed that she could speak French, and she'd been fascinated to hear how they'd invested their life savings in the café three years ago and worked hard to build up the now flourishing business. The only sticking point had been when they'd asked about her experience in hospitality, but Carys had got round that with a little quick thinking and imagination, and they'd seemed reassured, won over by her enthusiasm.

So it was a shock when the rejection arrived the same evening.

Crikey, Ingrid didn't waste time. Her message read:

I'll be honest with you, Carys. We thought your application was really strong, but we have another candidate with more restaurant experience. We've offered him the job and he's accepted. I hope you're not too disappointed.

Her spirits sank and she stared out of the window at the lush green woodland. She was gutted. She'd wanted the job so much.

'It might have been for the best. I may have embroidered the truth a teeny bit,' Carys confessed to Liberty, over dinner that evening.

'A teeny bit?'

She smiled mischievously. 'I might have made my part-time bar job at the Dog and Partridge sound more impressive than it was.'

'Car, you're naughty.'

'I just really wanted the job.'

‘Well, it doesn’t matter now. Imagine if they *had* given you the job. How guilty would you have felt knowing you didn’t have all the experience you’d said you did?’

Carys nodded. It was water under the bridge now.

Her disappointment must have shown because Liberty went on, ‘I’m sorry you didn’t get the job, Car, especially when you’re so good at French, but if running a café is what you want to do, maybe you should get some experience.’

‘Maybe.’ Truth was, she didn’t know what she wanted to do. But she had all summer to work it out.

Alex brought over the risotto he’d prepared and placed it in the middle of the table. It smelt delicious and her mouth watered at the sight of the pink prawns that studded the rice. ‘Living in the city would have been very different after growing up here,’ he said. ‘It’s so noisy and busy compared to Willowbrook, and people are not as friendly as they are here.’

Carys grinned. ‘*You* used to enjoy city life. Liberty told me how quiet you found Willowbrook when you first came here.’

He and Liberty shared a smile. ‘Yes, I did,’ he said honestly. ‘But now I’m used to it, I’m not sure I could go back to city life. On the Métro no one makes eye contact, shopkeepers are brusque, and no one stops to chat like they do here. You might have been lonely there.’

Carys kept quiet. She would have welcomed the change, and she ached for the chance to see the big city lights.

‘Lonely?’ Liberty laughed. ‘If anyone can make friends quickly it’s Car. She’ll never be lonely anywhere.’

Carys slowed down as she passed the primary school. It was nearly September and soon everyone would be going back, starting the new academic year.

Everyone except her.

Another teacher would be greeting her class and hearing all about how the children had spent the summer. The niggling in her stomach started up again. She’d been feeling it more and more as the weeks had passed and she hadn’t

found a new job. Leaving her teaching post suddenly seemed so irreversible. Had she done the right thing? Should she have taken more time to think about it? Waited for the perfect post to come up before she took this leap?

The muffled sound of her phone made her reach into her handbag. She frowned, not recognising the number.

‘Carys? This is Ingrid from the Red Cat Café. Can you talk?’

Her eyebrows lifted. ‘Yes, of course.’

‘We’re leaving for Australia next week but the person we appointed hasn’t turned up. We wondered if you’d still be interested in the job.’

‘Yes.’ Her heart was pounding. She laughed. ‘Definitely yes!’

‘Fantastic.’ She heard the relief in the other woman’s voice. Then, ‘How soon can you get here?’

The taxi pulled up outside Damselby Cottage and Carys carried out her suitcase. Liberty went with her.

‘Are you sure this is what you want?’

‘Hundred per cent,’ Carys lied. Right at this moment she felt about one per cent sure. But she was determined to conquer her last-minute nerves.

‘If you change your mind you know you can come home any time, don’t you? There’ll always be room for you here.’

Carys smiled. ‘Of course I know. Now stop making me cry and wish me luck.’

‘Good luck. You’re going to have a fab time. And they’ll love you, honey. Paris won’t know what’s hit it.’

Carys giggled, feeling sad but excited in equal measure. She would have a wonderful time. She was going to make a new start in the City of Light where no one would know her – and no one would have a clue about the accident. She was lucky it hadn’t left any obvious marks – only the thin scar on the back of her neck, like a red pencil, that reached up into her hair. ‘And remember,’ she told Liberty, ‘Paris is only a few hours away. You can come and stay for weekends.’

Tears were trickling down Liberty’s face, and Carys had to fight to keep it together. She held her friend by the shoulders and promised, ‘I’ll call you –

often, okay?’

Liberty nodded.

‘And it will be good for you and Alex to have some time together.’

‘Oh, Car, that’s not—’

She held up her hand. ‘That’s not why I’m doing it, no. I’m just trying to look on the bright side.’ Her voice cracked. ‘I’m going to miss you too, Lib.’

They hugged, then scrubbed at their cheeks, laughing at themselves as they tried to stop the tears, but it was hopeless. Carys glimpsed Alex in the hallway, tactfully keeping his distance to give them privacy, and loved him even more for it.

‘Right,’ she said, and picked up her case. It was heavier than she’d have liked, but how did you pack for a trip to Paris? You certainly couldn’t pack light. ‘I’d better go. *Au revoir* and *à bientôt!*’ She got into the taxi.

‘Don’t forget to call me!’ Liberty yelled, as Carys wound down the window to wave one last time.

‘*Bien sûr!*’ She blew one final kiss, then sat back as the taxi headed towards the station.

She stepped off the train, amazed, as she had been on her last trip to the city, how little time it took to get to Paris. Passengers spilled out from the carriages and formed a human stream flowing fast towards the station exit. Carys let herself be caught up in the current, and excitement filled her as she stepped out into the street, dragging her big suitcase. It wasn’t too far so she decided to walk, eager to take in her surroundings and get to know her new home.

She had no trouble finding the Red Cat Café. The pink and green building was like a beacon on the street corner, a welcoming flash of colour on this grey day that heralded the start of September.

She stopped at the pedestrian crossing. The traffic was crazy. Engines roared and accelerated, a klaxon made her jump, bikes, cars and mopeds flashed past, weaving and swerving, brakes screaming. Carys waited for the lights to change and the green man to signal it was safe to cross, but even then she checked both ways and darted across as fast as she could.

The small round tables outside the café were empty, washed clean and lacquered with rain, but the café's lights glowed like fireflies on the overcast day, beckoning to her. Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and went in. The smell of sweet waffles, garlic and fresh coffee filled the air. The sofas and armchairs were packed with customers. People leaned forward, heads together, chatting and laughing, while others relaxed in their seats reading or typing on laptops balanced on their knees. A fizzy feeling spread through her. She'd been here only moments but she loved the place already.

Carys made her way to the counter, where a young woman with hair of an even brighter red than Liberty's was examining her nails. As Carys approached, the young waitress spotted her enormous suitcase and looked her up and down appraisingly. 'Carys?' she said.

'*Oui*,' Carys said cheerily, though she suddenly felt self-conscious about her tangerine dress and leopard-print boots. She'd gone for a bold, confident-boosting look but, glancing around, Parisians seemed to favour a more conservative style of dress.

There was no smile, no warm greeting, nothing. Instead, the girl said in French, 'I'll tell Ingrid you're here.'

Soon she returned with her boss. 'Carys, welcome,' said the thirty-something blonde woman, with a wide smile. 'Come with me. You can leave your suitcase in the office.' Ingrid had a Scandinavian look about her, but Carys couldn't place her accent and her English was impeccable.

'That's great.' Carys cast a longing glance at the cake counter before following her to the back of the building.

She tried to take in everything as they hurried through. There was a raised area in the corner, with bookshelves and a chandelier, and lots of nooks and crannies, giving the tables privacy and lending the place a sense of secrecy and discovery. It was much bigger than it appeared from outside. 'Wow,' she said, gazing around her. 'This place is magical.'

'Yes, it has character,' Ingrid said. 'We've tried hard to make it stand out from your average French café.'

In the office her partner, Mark, was printing documents and hurriedly packing a small rucksack.

‘Mark,’ Ingrid said, ‘Carys is here.’

‘Ah, great! Take a seat.’ He gestured to a vintage leather sofa strewn with cushions and one ginger cat curled up asleep.

‘The red cat!’ Carys cried delightedly, and sat down beside it. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Raoul.’

The cat opened one disdainful eye, then went back to sleep.

‘Is he yours?’

‘We inherited him with the café,’ said Ingrid. ‘The place was named after his grandfather.’

‘And he knows it.’ Mark had a strong Australian accent. ‘Acts like he owns the place.’

Carys laughed. ‘Cats are like that, aren’t they?’ Haughty. Superior. Capable of withering indifference.

Ingrid picked up a notebook and pen, looking as if she meant business. ‘As I said on the phone, Mark’s father is ill so we’re going to Australia to help out with the running of his ranch.’

Mark’s expression was grave. ‘Unfortunately, we had a call this morning and he’s taken a turn for the worse, so we have to leave immediately. I’m afraid we’re not going to have time to do the handover we’d planned. But we can quickly talk you through the main points now.’

Carys gulped. No handover? ‘That’s fine.’

Ingrid smiled reassuringly. ‘I’ve made some notes for you too.’

Carys followed her gaze: on the desk was a list of typed instructions with headings such as: *Monthly accounts, Staff wages, Suppliers . . .*

‘We’ll be away four months until the end of the year. It’s not long, and the business is very strong,’ said Mark. ‘We have a chef who bakes our cakes and makes hot snacks, and two waiting staff, but when it’s busy it’s all hands on deck.’

‘Some of our staff are – what’s the word?’ The couple exchanged a glance. ‘Temperamental.’

Mark nodded. ‘Our chef, Emile, for example, can be quite protective of his kitchen. But they all have their quirks.’

Carys smiled. ‘That won’t be a problem. I’m used to peacekeeping and persuading stubborn characters to do what’s required of them.’ Although she was more used to cajoling five-year-olds into sitting quietly for story time and not pulling each other’s hair.

Ingrid moved on quickly, and Carys understood that time was of the essence. ‘I’m from the Netherlands, Mark is Australian, and we pride ourselves on the fact that the café has an international and inclusive atmosphere, so everyone feels welcome here.’

‘I’ll make sure they do – feel welcome, I mean.’ She loved their vision of it as a gathering place, somewhere anyone could come and not feel lonely.

‘Right.’ Mark got up. ‘All the information about ordering and accounts is written in the instructions, and the staff will show you how things are done.’ He seemed impatient to go. ‘You worked in a pub, right?’

Carys cringed inside. She’d forgotten she’d embroidered the truth about her work experience.

‘What did you do there?’

She’d worked behind the bar, but that wasn’t what she’d written in her CV. The air stuck in her lungs. She should come clean. She opened her mouth to speak, but what could she say? That she’d exaggerated and didn’t have management experience? Her gaze fell on their passports and Mark’s rucksack. They needed to leave and be with his father. She couldn’t let them down now. And how hard could it be to manage a café? She was a fast learner. Plus, something about the energy of the place had grabbed her the moment she’d stepped through the door. She *knew* this was the adventure she’d been looking for. This café, this city – there was so much going on, and she was guaranteed anonymity here. Excitement, too.

She glanced around the room at the colourful painted walls and the eclectic furniture. She pictured the warm fug of the café, she glanced at the sleeping ginger cat next to her, and felt it all slipping away. Her heart spiked with panic. She couldn’t lose the opportunity now. She wanted the job so much, and she was sure she could do it – and do it well.

‘I – ah – I was managing the place in all but name.’ It was only a tiny exaggeration, she told herself. Okay, a tiny lie. ‘The manager, Gary, has

known me since I was a girl and he trusted me to run the pub when he was away.’ She made a mental note to call him in case they asked for a reference. Gary wouldn’t mind. She could imagine his deep, throaty chuckle when she admitted she’d embellished the truth a little.

‘I thought you were acting manager.’ Ingrid looked confused.

Carys’s fingers reached for the scarf around her neck. Improvise, she told herself. ‘Em – I was assistant manager. But on the days he wasn’t in I was in charge. Acting manager.’ She drew her shoulders back a little and smiled confidently. And that bit was true. She’d taken in deliveries, sorted out last-minute staff issues, and dealt with customer complaints. Not that there were many of those: everyone knew everyone else in Willowbrook and the atmosphere at the Dog and Partridge was very laid back.

‘Well, that’s great, then.’ Ingrid and Mark were visibly reassured.

He clapped his hands. ‘Right, then. We’d better go. Oh – here are the keys for your studio. It’s small but you’ll have everything you need. Any questions before we go?’

Carys weighed the keys in her hand. She had a million questions, but none seemed important enough to delay them any longer. She shook her head. ‘Have a great trip and I hope your dad gets well soon.’

There was a beat’s pause before Ingrid said, ‘I’m really sorry this is so chaotic. It’s not the handover I’d planned at all. I – I can’t overemphasise how much the café means to us. Mark and I have put everything we have into making it a success. If his dad wasn’t so ill there’s no way we’d both have abandoned it like this.’

Carys heard the emotion in her voice, her last-minute jitters and regret, and her heart tugged. ‘You’re not abandoning it,’ she assured her. ‘You prepared for this, and your staff will show me the ropes.’

‘They will,’ she said. ‘But running a place like this is no small task. Parisian customers can be demanding, hard to please. A city café is not the same as a small village pub.’

Carys felt a twinge of guilt. But she brushed it aside, determined she wouldn’t let down her new boss. ‘Ingrid, customers are customers no matter where you are in the world. They’re all people, and I’ll do everything in my

power to make sure they're happy.'

'Yes.' She heard the smile of relief in Ingrid's voice. 'I'm sure you will. What came across most strongly in your interview were your *joie de vivre* and your energy. We loved that about you.'

Carys smiled. 'Thanks. And don't worry, Ingrid. Your café will be in safe hands. I'll look after it as if it were my own, I promise.'

They left, and Carys found herself alone in the office. She looked around, and a ripple of fear flashed through her. She had no idea where to start. But she drew her shoulders back and took a deep breath. 'You're in charge now,' she whispered to herself, 'so just fake it till you make it.' It was the motto she'd recited a hundred times before and it had never let her down. The thought made her smile. She went back into the noise and warmth of the café, and strode across to the counter.

The red-haired waitress was putting cakes into a takeout box for a customer. Carys waited until the customer had left, then held out her hand. 'I'm Carys,' she said. 'What's your name?'

The girl gave her hand a scathing look, but didn't shake it. 'Aurélie,' she muttered.

The rejection stung. What was her problem? And why did Ingrid and Mark employ such an unpleasant person? Customer service was everything in a place like this. She remembered Ingrid's words: *Some of our staff are temperamental.*

Carys stiffened with resolve. She wasn't going to let a sulky waitress intimidate her. 'Aurélie,' she repeated cheerfully. 'And the rest of the staff's names?'

Aurélie waved a hand. 'Léo is around somewhere, and there's the chef, Emile.' Looking as disinterested as a teenager in school, she leaned back against the counter and examined her nails. Carys glanced around and spotted customers waiting to order, as well as tables cluttered with dirty cups and plates. She thought of the children she used to teach. Five-year-olds were not too difficult to handle, but there were often one or two with a cheeky attitude. She drew back her shoulders, remembering the advice she'd been given as a trainee teacher: *Walk into that classroom as if you're stepping onto a stage.*

Own the room. Show them you're in charge – with your confidence.

'Right then, Aurélie,' she said brightly. 'Let's get to work, shall we? You serve those customers and then you can help me clear tables.'

A flicker of surprise flashed across Aurélie's face. 'You're telling me what to do?'

Carys had to bite back her own surprise. What did the girl think she was being paid for? She smiled encouragingly. 'We don't want unhappy customers, do we?'

The waitress all but sighed as she straightened, pulled out a tiny notebook and trudged over to one of the tables.

Carys watched her, then picked up a tray and a cloth, and set to work clearing used crockery. Nothing would dampen her mood.

'You must be Carys.' The young man smiled, and his eyes creased. They were the deepest shade of brown, like molten chocolate, and she felt a fizzing in her stomach. 'Our new boss?'

She put on her most charming smile. 'That's me.'

'I'm Léo. Hello.' He grinned, and was it her imagination or was there a twinkle in his eye? He'd just emerged from the kitchen and had headed over to introduce himself. 'Ingrid said you were young and beautiful,' he said, with a wink.

Carys laughed. 'Are you sucking up to me already?'

'Of course. Flattery will get me everywhere.'

She shook her head, but felt a tiny edge because he was gorgeous. Taller than her, and with the assurance that was so French.

'So what do you think of Paris? And your studio?' he asked. 'Is it nice?'

'I haven't seen it yet. I literally stepped off the train an hour ago. My suitcase is in the back.'

He seemed shocked. 'This is no good. You must be tired – you must have things to do too. Why don't you go and settle in, and come back tomorrow? We can manage for today.'

Carys glanced around the busy café, her gaze homing in on Aurélie, who was idly chatting to a male customer. The waitress saw her watching and

straightened, blowing her lips out as she reluctantly left the customer. ‘That’s very kind,’ Carys said, ‘but there’s only half a day left until closing time, and I can settle in then.’

‘The studio isn’t far. At least you don’t have to commute each day.’

‘Do you commute?’

‘Yes. I live in the *dix-neuvième*. Near the Conservatoire.’

Carys had no idea where he meant, although she knew that Paris was divided into numbered districts called *arrondissements* and guessed that was probably what he was referring to.

‘I take the Métro,’ he went on, ‘or sometimes I cycle in the summer.’

‘That must be lovely.’

‘It’s not.’ He laughed. ‘French drivers are mad. They drive too fast, break all the rules, and think nothing of bumping another car if they don’t fit into a parking space.’

Carys felt a chill. She pulled her scarf a bit tighter.

He peered at her. ‘Are you all right? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘What? Oh – no. Sounds like I’ll be safer on the Métro. Or just walking.’

He nodded, still puzzled. Then he saw a customer signalling to him. ‘I’d better go and serve Gérard.’

Carys followed his gaze to a man in the corner by the bookcase. ‘You know the customers’ names?’ She was impressed.

‘No. I made it up. He has a sweet tooth and always has a book of poetry with him. He seemed like a Gérard. I give all the regulars nicknames.’ He grinned.

Carys warmed to him even more. ‘I love it. Will you teach me all the other nicknames?’

‘Of course,’ he said, over his shoulder, and hurried away.

Well, well, well. It seemed that Aurélie and Léo were complete opposites. What one lacked in helpfulness, the other made up for in charm.

Carys took a moment to familiarise herself with the layout of the place, the menus, the till, and a sleek but intimidatingly large coffee machine. Through the kitchen hatch she could see the chef working, but there wasn’t time to speak properly just now: she had customers to serve.

‘*Bonjour, Madame,*’ Carys said warmly, to the young mother by the window. She asked, in her best French, what she’d like to order.

‘One plate of brunch pancakes please,’ the lady replied, and pointed to her children, who, Carys guessed, were around four and six. ‘These two will share.’ A baby girl sat beside them in a high-chair, happily smearing herself with yogurt.

‘Of course,’ said Carys, and turned to the children, a boy and his little sister. ‘You like pancakes, then?’

The two grinned shyly.

‘They don’t have big appetites,’ their mother explained. ‘They think they do, but their eyes are bigger than their stomachs.’

Carys chuckled and pretended to make big eyes. The children laughed. ‘So what are your names? No, let me guess. Is it Big Eyes One and Big Eyes Two?’

They looked at each other, then fell about belly-laughing.

‘No?’ Carys said. ‘Is that not right?’

‘No!’ said the eldest. ‘I am Fabien and this is Laure.’

‘And our little sister is called Lili,’ Laure said proudly.

Carys nodded. ‘Yes, Big Eyes, Big Eyes and Big Eyes. That’s what I thought.’ She collected their menus, and left them laughing, while she went to prepare their drinks and pass the order to the chef. She felt a swell of satisfaction. She was going to love this job.

As soon as she had a chance, Carys pushed open the swing doors and went into the kitchen to find the chef, Emile.

It turned out he was there – literally right in front of her as she walked in, because the kitchen was tiny. There was a worktop on one side with a shiny metal hatch that gave onto the café, and behind Emile was a wide stove, wall-mounted shelves filled with jars and tins, and an enormous fridge. At the far end of the room Carys could see a sink and a dishwasher, which Léo was filling with crockery and cutlery.

Carys smiled at Emile, who was plating three dishes of ratatouille and sausage with the care of a Michelin chef. ‘Hello, I’m Carys,’ she said, in her

best French.

He barely glanced up and her heart sank. Not another rude, uncooperative employee?

‘He can’t multi-task,’ Léo explained, as he closed the dishwasher and flicked a switch to set it running. He slapped Emile on the back. ‘*Pas vrai, mon vieux?*’

Emile grunted.

‘Ah. Well, in that case, can I do anything to help?’ She’d like to get a feel for how things worked in the kitchen, and what better way than by rolling up her sleeves and getting stuck in?

Léo laughed, though she wasn’t sure why. Emile paused from his work to shoot her a deep scowl. ‘*Non,*’ he said simply and firmly.

‘*Non?*’ She felt a shot of despair. Were all the staff here going to be difficult?

‘He means *non merci,*’ Léo said, then, in a lower voice, explained, ‘He doesn’t let anyone help with the food because he’s a *perfectionniste.*’

‘Ah.’ Carys smiled, as understanding dawned.

Léo went on, ‘If the food is not to the standard he demands he won’t let it leave the kitchen, and nothing anyone else does is ever good enough for Emile.’

‘In that case I’ll leave him to it.’ She backed out of the kitchen, feeling wrong-footed yet again.

Carys was standing behind the counter folding napkins when the lady walked in. Her hat arrived first, red with a wide brim, exuberant jewels and flowers, and beneath it a tiny woman with enormous sunglasses and a riot of colourful clothes. Carys tried not to stare but the emerald trouser suit with a seventies-style collar and lots of chunky necklaces and bangles in primary colours were eye-catching, eccentric yet elegant. The customer sat down at one of the window seats, and placed her wide-brimmed hat on the chair beside her. Her lipstick was as red as a British pillarbox, and her white hair was fashionably short, yet her heavily wrinkled skin suggested she was well past her eightieth birthday. Carys smiled to herself. This was what she loved about Paris. The

sheer variety of people, of life.

The lady looked at Carys and waved her hand imperiously.

Carys hurried over. 'Good morning—'

'You're new here?' the lady cut in.

'Em – yes. I'm Carys.' She smiled. 'What can I get for you today?'

The lady took off her sunglasses and waved them in the vague direction of the counter. 'Ingrid knows me. She'll tell you. I have the same every day, young lady.'

Ah. Right. Carys tried not to smile. 'Well, if you tell me what it is, I'll make sure to remember.'

Deep frown lines appeared at the bridge of the woman's nose. 'Where's Ingrid?'

'She and Mark had to go away for a while. I'm managing the shop for them.'

'What?' She looked so shocked Carys almost reached out to steady her.

'They didn't tell you?' Carys had had the impression that the other regulars knew.

'No. But I haven't been in for a couple of weeks because I was in New York.' The lady adjusted her jacket and sat up a little taller. 'Ah, well. This is life, isn't it? Things change constantly. Although we'd prefer them not to.'

Carys smiled. 'You sound very wise, Madame.'

'Madame Jalibert,' she corrected. 'Right. Well, here's my order. Pay close attention, young lady, because I don't like to repeat myself. I'd much rather spend the precious time I have left on this earth discussing important things . . .' her eyes twinkled ' . . . like fashion.'

Late in the afternoon, the chef, Emile, came into the café. His expression was serious, but he flashed Carys a quick smile, then extended his hand to her. 'Carys, *bonjour*. Sorry I was occupied earlier. Did you want to talk?'

'Let's go into the back room.' She got them both drinks and brought in the last two slices of yogurt cake.

Emile was comfortably seated on the sofa with the cat curled up beside him.

‘Come on, Raoul,’ Carys said, reaching to pick up the animal. ‘You need to move now.’

But the cat snarled. She jumped back, shocked. She loved animals, and they normally loved her.

Emile chuckled. ‘He’s not a friendly cat. Here, have this chair instead.’ He spun the desk chair round for her.

Carys sat down, and the cat watched her through slitted eyes. Not friendly? He looked positively evil.

Emile pulled a face. He held up the cake he’d bitten into and inspected it. ‘This is too dry. Overcooked.’

She tasted a piece. ‘What are you talking about? It’s delicious.’

He shook his head.

She saw what Léo meant about him being a perfectionist. ‘So how long have you worked here?’

‘Three years. Since Mark and Ingrid opened. Before this I trained as a *pâtissier*.’ He reeled off his credentials, and it seemed he had worked in some of Paris’s finest bakeries. ‘I love working here. I love working alone. That way no one gets under my feet, no one spoils my hard work, and any mistakes,’ he gestured to the uneaten cake on his plate as if it were a disgusting failure, ‘are my own.’

Carys had the feeling he didn’t often make mistakes. At least, not what others would call mistakes. She glanced at the cake counter, relishing the excitement of a new challenge. ‘Tell me, how do you decide which cakes to make? Did Ingrid and Mark devise the menu with you?’

Instantly his dark brows pulled together in a deep frown. ‘Why? You don’t like the menu?’

‘I didn’t say that! It all looks delicious. I’m just curious to know how things work, that’s all.’

He relaxed back in his chair. ‘I am in charge of the menu. But the suppliers, this is your job.’

He talked her through the ordering system, then finished his drink and got up to go.

‘You’re not going to eat your cake?’ Carys asked.

He flicked his hand in a dismissive gesture. ‘It’s for the bin. I can’t believe no one complained. Tomorrow I’ll make sure I taste all the cakes before they go out.’ He was clearly disgusted with himself.

Carys watched Emile leave, cleared their table, then went into the café and helped Léo to clear the rest. It was almost five o’clock and he’d flipped the sign on the door to ‘*Fermé*’.

‘Don’t most French cafés stay open all evening?’ she asked, as she wiped down the empty cake counter.

Léo was totting up the bill for the table outside. ‘Most do, but not us. Ingrid wanted the Red Cat Café to be different. Most cafés don’t stock all the *pâtisseries* we have, and we’re more like a bistro because we serve hot food – but only breakfast and lunch, not dinner. We are unique,’ he finished, then went out with the bill in hand.

His good humour was infectious and Carys couldn’t help but smile too.

A short while later Carys locked up and began wheeling her suitcase up the street towards her new home.

‘It’s not far,’ Léo had said, about the studio apartment, and he was right. Just across the road and up the hill. But as she neared the apartment block, a little bistro next door caught her eye. It was set back from the main road by a small gated green square with a tiny park inside. The bistro had tables outside and it would be the perfect spot for dinner. There were a few solitary diners, which reassured Carys she wouldn’t be the only one eating alone, and she was ravenous. There hadn’t been time to snatch even a bite at the café because it had been so busy.

She ordered a burger and a glass of red wine, then sat back and watched city life unfold in front of her. A woman walked past with a tiny dog in her handbag, and a couple of teenage boys headed towards the nearby square, each with a basketball tucked under one arm.

Carys remembered when she’d come to Paris with Liberty two and a half years ago. They’d been sightseeing and Christmas shopping over a long weekend, and it had been her birthday present to Liberty. They’d visited the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, and taken a boat trip along the river. The city,

strung with Christmas lights, had sparkled like a chandelier in the cold winter's air. She and Liberty had had the best time. Carys fiddled with the stem of her glass. They'd caught the train because of Liberty's fear of flying, and Carys had helped her apply for a passport because she hadn't renewed hers after their disastrous trip abroad when they were twenty-one and Liberty had had a panic attack on the plane.

But now Carys was alone, having dinner for one in Paris on this warm September evening.

Her food arrived, beautifully presented and delicious. And once she'd eaten, she felt better. She sat back in her chair enjoying the city life bustling around her. People were walking home from work, or stepping out for the evening with friends, cyclists whizzed past, and in the distance cars streamed along the busy main road. Chatter and laughter rang through the air, the smell of cooking filled her nostrils, and everywhere she looked she saw smiling faces.

She was alone because it was her first night, but her new life was unfolding before her. She was excited about running the café, and looking forward to meeting new people. Carys lifted her glass in a silent toast and smiled to herself. Now she was here, she was going to put the accident behind her once and for all, and get on with the serious business of living.

Carys let herself in through the big wooden doors of her apartment block and followed Ingrid's instructions, tapping in yet another security code to open the little door on the right. The staircase was dark, and there was no lift so she began to climb the stone steps, lugging her case behind her. She had just passed the fifth floor when she stopped to let someone past – a tall blond guy running down the stairs. He smiled and thanked her, then vanished. She loved how cosmopolitan Paris was, how big, noisy and anonymous. Everyone raced past, heads down, intent on where they were going.

By the time she reached the top, she had to pause again, breathless. Then she pushed open the last door and stepped into a dark corridor.

Ingrid hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said the studio was small, but it was perfect. The shower room was brand new, and the kitchenette seemed

unused too – the microwave still had a sticker taping the door shut, which Carys peeled away. The double bed was made up with crisp white bedding, and fairy lights were draped around the headboard. She flicked them on and the tiny cream roses glowed. The window looked out over the rooftops. Carys opened it and leaned out to peer at the view. She was so high up it was dizzying, and she could just make out the pink walls of the café down the street. Whoever lived in the studio next door had put a tiny metal table and chairs in the space outside their window, so the roof must be safe to step onto. She climbed out. It was dusk, and in the buildings all around dozens of lights were coming on, glowing gold and illuminating other people's apartments. Carys's gaze skimmed from one window to another, taking in tiny screenshots of strangers' lives. A woman drying her hair, a boy playing a computer game, an elderly couple having dinner.

The view of the city was incredible from up there, and the sinking sun cast an apricot glow over the slate-blue roofs. She could see roof terraces and balconies dripping with greenery and flowers, and the sound of traffic rose from the street below, a jazzy saxophone melody drifting on the evening air.

Carys breathed it all in and her heart soared. The sky and the clouds seemed almost within reach, and she spread her arms wide, like wings, savouring her freedom. It was as if chains had fallen away from her. No one knew her here, no one knew about the accident. Nothing could hold her back any more. And the knowledge brought with it a lightness in her chest, a humming in her blood.

She watched the sun dip in the sky and her heart swelled with excitement and joy. The next few months were going to be the best of her life. She was certain of it.

4

Mat

Mat opened the door of his apartment as quietly as possible and listened. The hum of Parisian traffic was constant in the background, but the staircase was empty and there was no sound in the building. Gripping his shoulder bag, he slipped the key into the lock so his door would close without a click, then trod very softly down the stairs. He was careful to stay on the carpet and avoid the bare stone edges that tapped and echoed, and he moved as fast as he could, his hand sweeping over the cold black metal of the balustrade, worn smooth after two hundred years of use. As he reached the fourth floor, he smiled to himself and quickened his pace.

Then he heard the familiar squeak.

‘Mathieu?’ she said, asking his name as if it were a question.

Closing his eyes, he paused. She stopped him like this every morning, but today he was late for work and couldn’t afford any delay. His boss had been losing patience with his lateness recently, and his boss wasn’t a patient man. Mat turned and smiled. ‘*Bonjour Madame Parot.*’

She beamed. ‘Ah, Mathieu, I’m so glad it’s you. Come. I need your help. It’s just a small task.’

It was always ‘just a small task’. He glanced anxiously at his watch. ‘It won’t take long? I’m late for work, Madame Parot.’

‘*Non, non, non.*’ She beckoned him with crooked fingers. ‘Please, come. I won’t keep you, I promise.’

Biting back a sigh, he climbed the stairs heavily, trying not to think about the snide comments his boss would make. *Third time this week, Devine. I expect you’ll still be here this evening to make up for it. Who do you think you are – someone special?* His words would be echoed by quiet sniggers around the office, and Mat would curse himself yet again for not having got

up when his alarm sounded.

‘Should I get my toolbox?’ he asked, as the old lady closed the door behind him. The flat smelt of baking and eau de Cologne. She slid the chain back into place aching slowly, and he wondered, as he did every day, how someone so riddled with stiff and painful joints managed to move so quickly to her front door when she heard him leave his apartment. He’d tried everything – leaving later, earlier, padding barefoot to his front door – but she always knew he was going out. She must have supersonic hearing and ninja-like speed.

‘It’s just a small thing, nothing difficult, not for a tall young man like you.’ She smiled, and her gold tooth twinkled almost as much as her eyes. ‘Come.’

He tried to ignore the feeling of alarm as she shuffled away towards the bedroom, and followed her. ‘Is your heating working okay?’ He’d fixed that the week before. If you could call it fixing when all he’d done was move the dial back after she’d accidentally knocked it.

‘Yes, thanks to you. I’m such a clumsy old thing.’

‘And the window?’ It had been jammed and she struggled to reach because she was so small. Barely five feet tall. The window had been a little stiff, but he’d closed it without any problem.

‘I haven’t opened it again. I can’t keep asking you for help so I leave it shut now. It’s better that way. You know how I feel the cold.’

He felt a pang of guilt. ‘Oh, Madame Parot, don’t worry about asking for help. If you open the window, I’ll happily close it for you on my way home. It’s just in the mornings I have to rush because my boss—’

‘There it is,’ she cut in.

They reached the bedroom and she pointed to the top shelf of the open wardrobe. He stared at it, trying to work out what the problem was. Had something broken? The door come off its hinge? He couldn’t spot anything amiss.

‘My cardigan,’ she prompted. ‘I need that one – the mint green – but I can’t reach. Oh, I thought about getting the stepladders, but you know how unsteady I am these days, and then I heard you walking past and I thought,

My Mathieu won't mind. It's only a small thing, and I appreciate it, I really do.'

My Mathieu? Flattered, he hid a smile, and his shoulders sagged with relief that it wasn't anything more complicated. 'No problem,' he said, standing on tiptoe to reach the cardigan, then handing it to her. 'There you are, Madame Parot.' He should be out of here in a jiffy, and if he ran for the Métro perhaps he'd just make it to the office in time.

'Thank you so much.' She beamed, patting the cardigan as if it were a small dog. 'Now. Please let me do something for you in return. I made quiche yesterday. You can take a piece for your lunch.' She shuffled off towards the kitchen.

'It's all right, I'll buy a sandwich,' he called after her, although half-heartedly. She made the best Quiche Lorraine. Crisp pastry, quality lardons, not too much Gruyère.

But she waved a hand through the air. 'Pff! I won't hear of it. You must let me repay you. Come. I'll just wrap it in foil.'

He got to work at ten thirty-five. Fortunately Christian wasn't in his office, and Mat's shoulders dropped with relief.

Pietro, who was coming out of the men's toilet, slapped him on the back. 'Here he is!' he announced at top volume. 'Make way, make way. Devine has arrived.'

Jean-Baptiste cursed quietly. 'Every. Single. Day.'

'When are you going to get an alarm clock?' Julianne called. It was a tired joke. They'd even clubbed together to buy him one for his birthday last year.

'It's my neighbour,' he said, as he crossed the room. 'She needed help "urgently" again.'

Alice said nothing but arched an eyebrow as he approached their desk. She sniffed and went back to typing.

Pietro grinned. His Italian accent was exaggerated by his hand gestures as he said, 'Yeah, yeah, we've heard it all before. When are you going to learn to say no?'

Jean-Baptiste rubbed a hand through his beard. 'Ask yourself, Devine. Is

an old neighbour really worth losing your job for?’

Those words, *une vieille voisine*, set Mat’s teeth on edge. ‘She’s ninety-three.’ He draped his jacket over the back of his chair and said pointedly, ‘Only someone with a heart of stone wouldn’t stop to help.’

Jean-Baptiste shook his head. ‘She’s got you wrapped around her little finger.’

The printer began to churn and Alice stood up. ‘You just need to get up half an hour earlier,’ she said tartly. ‘It’s that simple.’

Well, yes. Mat didn’t have an answer to that. Each day he switched off his alarm with a groan, then battled the dark feelings to make himself get up. The prospect of going to work and facing his boss made his skin clammy, yet now he was here it wasn’t so bad, was it?

He sank into his chair and transferred the mouse to his left. Who had moved it? He noticed his computer was switched on. Had he forgotten to switch it off last night? A story had come in late about a suicide on the Périphérique and he’d stayed behind to finish it, but he was convinced he’d shut everything down before leaving.

Alice returned from the printer, shuffling pages. ‘I switched it on for you,’ she said, under her breath, ‘in case Christian noticed.’

‘Right. Thanks.’ Colour rose in his cheeks. Alice’s kindness confused him. She looked at him with daggers in her eyes when he was late, yet she’d surreptitiously helped him.

‘Turns out I didn’t need to, though. He’s not in yet himself.’

‘Where is he?’ he asked, clicking open the article he’d begun to write yesterday.

‘Dentist. Won’t be in until lunchtime.’

Mat sagged with relief. With any luck he’d have finished his first piece by the time his boss got back.

‘What the hell is this?’ Christian waved the sheet of paper in one hand and slapped it with the other. It made a cracking sound and Mat tried not to flinch. It was mid-afternoon and their boss’s visit to the dentist had done nothing for his mood. He was red in the face, his eyes straining in their

sockets, and spittle flew from his mouth with every word. ‘It’s drivel! Utter pointless rubbish. How am I supposed to work with it? What would my readers say if I published it? Eh?’

The four journalists stiffened. It was a rhetorical question. Surely he didn’t expect an answer. Whose piece was it? Mat tried to see. It probably didn’t matter. The fact that they’d all been called in meant they were all in trouble. Christ, it was like being back at school. Spidery purple threads glowed in Christian’s cheeks, and a vein sprang up in his forehead, like a repulsive warning light signalling his rage. Unable to look at his boss any longer, Mat’s gaze slid to his colleagues. Alice’s eye met his. When Christian went into one of his rages there was nothing they could do except soak it up, then sympathise afterwards.

‘Pietro,’ the boss said.

Pietro flinched. ‘Yes, boss.’

Now the individual attacks would begin. ‘How long did this take to write? Be honest.’

‘Er – I can’t remember. I’ve had so much—’

‘You’ve had so much? Try standing in my shoes.’ He crumpled the sheet into a ball and tossed it at him. ‘Start again. And this time do your research, get some quotes, something – anything – to back up what you’re saying. We’re not writing opinion pieces here. Right, next. Jean-Baptiste.’

Pietro shrank back as Jean-Baptiste stepped forward into the firing line. Mat zoned out and tried to remember the weaknesses in his own piece. He didn’t have to wait long before the boss jogged his memory for him. ‘Mat. This –’ he tapped a printout ‘– this is possibly the worst writing you’ve ever given me.’

Mat fought the urge to snap back, and his lips formed a thin line.

‘What do you think we are? A bloody poetry class? This piece is full of description and purple prose. We’re a local paper. We need facts. Objective facts, statements, observations. Not verses of Baudelaire.’ Christian slammed his hands down on the desk. ‘All of you can tear up what you’ve written and start again.’

A toxic, choking silence thickened the air.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ Christian yelled. ‘Go. Get something decent back to me within the hour or you can kiss your jobs goodbye.’

‘Jeez,’ muttered Mat, as they returned to their desks. It sounded like an empty threat, but Mat remembered a time when his boss had fired someone in a fit of temper.

‘Do you ever wonder what his blood pressure is doing when he’s going red in the face like that?’ Alice asked, as they sat down.

Their desks were next to each other with Jean-Baptiste facing them. Pietro was across the room near Julianne, who spent the day on the phone pitching advertising space.

‘He might drop dead in front of us one day,’ Mat said, genuinely worried at the prospect.

Alice giggled, her grey eyes dancing.

‘It’s not healthy,’ Mat said. ‘Not for him, and not for us.’ His pulse was still hammering. He smoothed out his crumpled article on the desk in front of him. ‘I didn’t think my piece was too bad.’

‘Me neither.’ Alice glanced over her shoulder at Christian’s office. ‘Not sure I can face another hour writing about sewage works. It wasn’t much fun the first time round.’

An hour later Mat finished reading his article, then pressed send. ‘There. Let’s hope he’s happy with it this time.’

Alice did the same and sat back in her chair. ‘So now we wait. What a joy.’

Mat glanced at Christian’s office, where he was ranting on the phone. ‘Like waiting for the axe to fall,’ he muttered.

She drew her long hair forward and inspected the ends. ‘I hate working here.’

‘Really, Alice?’ he said drily. ‘You don’t enjoy getting a daily dressing-down in return for your hard work?’

‘We have to get out of here,’ she said quietly. Her eyes were startlingly earnest as they met Mat’s.

He felt an unexpected ripple of protectiveness towards his friend. But

there was nothing he could do to help. ‘Yeah,’ he agreed, his voice low. ‘But it’s easier said than done. Have you been looking?’

‘For months. Nothing comes up. And when it does, I don’t even get to interview stage.’

‘Same.’ It was faintly comforting that Alice was in the same boat. She was a good journalist. Consistent. She didn’t have the ups and downs he did, the days where inspiration wouldn’t come and the cursor blinked on the blank screen, like a pulsing heart.

‘Do you think this newspaper will still exist in three years?’ she asked.

‘Not a chance. It’s a sinking ship. They all are. Even the broadsheets can’t compete with the internet.’ He grabbed his water bottle and took a swig.

‘Have you thought about a career change?’

‘All the time. But to what?’

She smoothed out a crease in her long brown and pink skirt. ‘I’d rather die than go home,’ she said.

‘Bit melodramatic?’

‘It’s true.’ She’d told Mat before that her family ran a pancake restaurant in Brittany, and they’d been furious when she moved to Paris. Her brother hadn’t spoken to her for a year and, although they’d superficially patched things up, he still resented her for saddling him with the responsibility of running the family business. ‘My brother would be all “I told you so”, and my parents . . .’ she sighed ‘. . . they’d instantly retire to make sure I couldn’t change my mind.’

Mat sympathised. ‘Families suck.’

She raised a brow. ‘You’re all right. I wish I had a rich father like you.’

The envy in her voice hurt like a spur. He wished he hadn’t told her who his dad was, but, since they’d started working next to each other a few months ago, little details about their lives constantly crept into the conversation and there wasn’t much he could do to prevent it. ‘You wouldn’t if you met him.’

A sudden roar of laughter made them both turn. Christian was on the phone. It refocused Mat’s mind. ‘Maybe we should start taking on extra work in our spare time. Do other things, get some more experience.’

‘Doing what?’ Alice sighed. ‘We work long hours as it is. I’m shattered when I get home.’

He thought of the restaurant reviews he’d been writing anonymously online for the past few months. He enjoyed that, but it didn’t pay and eating out was expensive. But there must be something. There must be an alternative to working in this place.

By the time Mat had hung around for Christian to end another interminable phone call and finally approve the article it was eight o’clock. He grabbed his jacket and headed for the Métro. He didn’t have a reservation, but there were a few eateries in the *septième* district he’d had his eye on and, you never knew, they might squeeze in a solitary diner.

The first bistro he tried was full, so he booked to eat there in a few weeks’ time, then left. The second, a small Spanish restaurant that had opened six months ago, kept him waiting at the door while the staff scratched their heads and moved tables around, then ushered him in. He ordered wine, and sat back to read the menu. He’d sometimes thought about asking Alice or one of his other colleagues out for his dining excursions, but something had held him back. He wasn’t sure what. He hadn’t told anyone about the reviews he wrote. It had begun as a few posts on a restaurant review site. Then he’d set up his own account on social media. He took the pseudonym Madame Incognito and her avatar was a cartoon depiction of a woman in a trilby hat with dark glasses and a scarf pulled up to her nose. Writing reviews felt like light relief after work, writing words that no one criticised or found fault with, celebrating the good food he was passionate about. And Madame Incognito was popular. She seemed to connect with people in a way he’d never been able to in real life. Her posts provoked enthusiastic discussion and she had a group of loyal followers, fellow foodies who were eager to hear her recommendations.

But, popular as they were, Mat kept quiet about his reviews. He was worried that if he told Alice or anyone else about them, they’d examine them and criticise. He had enough of that at work. So he continued to dine alone.

He ordered a generous selection of tapas, at which the waiter raised a

brow. ‘For you, Monsieur? This is a lot.’

‘I can always take it home,’ he said. He had a healthy appetite. As a boy he’d loved helping Grandmère in the kitchen. He remembered perching on a stool to roll pastry, and munching an apricot when he was supposed to be stoning them.

When the waiter had gone, he surreptitiously watched the staff as they danced around each other behind the tiny bar, the chef yelling at them in Spanish for not being quick enough to serve the plates of food he’d sent out minutes ago. A heated conversation ensued when the waiter replied in a forceful stream of Spanish that Mat couldn’t follow – until the chef waved his hand, disgusted, and turned away. Someone had been singing in the back of the kitchen and they got a sharp reprimand too.

Mat sipped his wine (a Rioja with a slightly rough edge but interesting flavours), and fell upon the bowl of olives delivered to his table. Then he looked around the place. A couple sat near the window holding hands, and beside them another pair frowning at their phones, ignoring each other. At the table nearest to Mat a group of four were talking loudly; probably a couple out with her parents. They were discussing politics, and the young man was visibly flinching at every sweeping generalisation his mother-in-law made. Her husband wasn’t helping the situation by flirting with the waitress each time she passed their table.

‘Your food, sir.’ The waiter appeared with his tapas.

Mat tucked in. Tortilla that melted in the mouth, patatas bravas (yes, an obvious choice, but surely a necessary one in a Spanish restaurant) that were crispy, a little undersalted but with a delicious sauce that made up for it. Also, octopus, sardines, ham croquettes, and a selection of other meat dishes.

The wine improved with food, and as he ate he looked out of the window, noticing the chestnut trees turning brown and orange, a reminder that summer would soon slip into autumn. He loved Paris in the autumn. The buzz when everyone returned to the city after the summer holidays, *La Rentrée* when the children went back to school and all the shop windows were filled with colourful displays of newly sharpened pencils, books and satchels. It reminded him of his own childhood in Provence – although the memories

were tinged with sadness. A sharp arrow of loss hit him as he thought of his mother and grandmother. It had been twenty years, but he still missed them every day. Yet they lived on in him: the passion for food he'd shared with Grandmère, the love of music he'd inherited from Maman.

By the end of the meal he felt pleasantly full, memories of his childhood fading with each sip of wine.



Review: El Toro

An unexpectedly charming discovery.

I may have arrived late and without a reservation, but room was made for a solitary diner and this was greatly appreciated. In fact, it soon became apparent that last-minute chaos is the house speciality. The staff are highly strung and there's a slightly chaotic farmyard atmosphere that is actually endearing and probably authentic – a cynic would say that's the 'look' they strive for.

There's no doubt that the head chef (also the owner) rules the roost and doesn't hold back in letting his feelings be known when his staff don't hop to it. The place itself is busy and dark (atmospherically so), so most diners didn't seem aware of the drama involved in getting their food ready and, anyway, tapas is meant to be enjoyed warm, not hot, so it seemed like a lot of fuss about nada.

The chorizo in red wine was sublime, the garlic octopus and paprika chicken were nothing to write home about, and the real stars of the show were the sardines.

*The verdict: *** (3 stars)*

A tiny place with a heart as big as a bull's. Perfect for every day or an impromptu visit.

5

Carys

The next morning Carys arrived at the café bright and early. As she let herself in, the delicious smell of baking hit her with force. She closed her eyes and inhaled. In the kitchen Emile was busy mixing batter, and trays of cakes were cooling on the side.

‘Ooh, apple tarts!’ said Carys. ‘I hope there’s some left over this afternoon. I can’t wait to try one.’ They were caramelised and sticky.

He snorted. ‘That won’t happen. They always sell out fast. You’d better take one now if you want to taste it.’

She didn’t need telling twice, and scooped one onto a plate. ‘It’s very important that I know the products I’m selling.’ She grinned.

‘*Non, non, non!*’ Emile grabbed the plate from her.

Carys blinked as he marched over to the fridge. He slid a spoonful of cream onto her plate, then dusted the tart with a little icing sugar. ‘*Voilà,*’ he said, handing it back to her. ‘Now you can enjoy it.’

She chuckled. ‘Thanks.’

He wagged a finger at her. ‘And this is how you must serve it for our customers, understand?’

Carys winked. ‘I will. But, first, I need to taste it. Want to join me? I’ll make coffee.’

He shook his head. ‘I have too much to do just now.’

She carried the apple tart into the office and couldn’t resist snapping a picture of it while she waited for the computer to load. She’d noticed the café had social-media accounts, but they hadn’t been updated recently. Why not post pictures of Emile’s beautiful food each day? It seemed wrong not to shout about their delicious offerings, especially when the chef went to so much trouble to prepare and present them. She posted it, then tucked in. The

tart was more delicious than anything she'd ever tasted. The pastry was crisp and buttery, the apples melted in her mouth, and the whole thing was irresistibly sweet yet tangy. There was no doubt about it: Emile was one very skilled baker.

At eight thirty Léo arrived and they opened the doors. A steady stream of customers kept them dashing back and forth. Carys carried espressos, *cafés noirs*, *cafés américains*, and glasses of fruit juice. She slid croissants and *pains au chocolat* onto plates and served pancakes, and bread and jam or chocolate spread for the little ones. And with each customer she tried to take the time to smile and be friendly.

'Let me know if you need anything else,' she told the businessmen in suits. They nodded and resumed their conversation.

'Isn't it a beautiful day?' she remarked, to the blonde woman breakfasting alone outside. The woman raised an eyebrow as if blue sky and sunshine were nothing out of the ordinary, so Carys scuttled back inside to serve the next customer.

'Working hard?' she asked the student bent over her laptop in the corner of the café.

The girl paused from typing Japanese characters. 'I'm writing an essay on French fashion.' She grinned. 'It doesn't feel like work at all.'

'You should speak to Madame Jalibert,' Carys advised. 'She'll tell you everything you need to know.'

At ten o'clock Carys checked her watch. 'Where's Aurélie?' she asked Léo.

He shrugged.

'The rota says she was supposed to start at nine.' Carys dried the coffee cups and stacked them.

'Has she called?'

Carys checked the work phone in case she'd missed a message, but no. 'I've heard nothing.'

A flash of orange fur caught her attention and she spotted Raoul emerging from the office. Carys watched as he crossed the café and hoped no one would try to stroke him, remembering how he'd snarled at her. The cat

stopped by Gérard and looked up. Gérard petted him absently, and Raoul closed his eyes, twisting his neck in bliss. Carys stared. Perhaps the cat knew Gérard well and was only wary of her because she was a stranger – yes, that must be it.

When Gérard went back to his reading, Raoul continued onwards with an air of satisfaction. He passed the counter, lifting his head to glance in her direction, and Carys could have sworn he shot her a daggered look. Was that even possible for a cat?

As the animal slunk out through the open door, Aurélie came in. She scowled at Carys, but didn't say anything, not even *bonjour*, and tugged a thin scarf from her neck as she went through to the back. She hung it up in the corridor with her denim jacket. Carys followed her. 'Is everything all right, Aurélie? You're very late.'

'I know.' Aurélie's hair gleamed rich copper in the morning light.

Carys let a moment pass for her to speak. When Aurélie said nothing, Carys felt her hackles rise. 'So what happened?'

The girl sighed, as if Carys was testing her patience, not the other way round. 'I'm just late, okay? It's not the end of the world.'

Carys felt hot colour rise in her cheeks. 'Actually, the café's been really busy. I need to know you'll be on time every morning. Understand?'

Aurélie threw her a look of contempt.

It made Carys bristle even more. 'You'll have to work through your lunchbreak to catch up,' she said, and walked away.

She slipped into the back room to give herself time to cool off. Her heart drummed against her chest. It wasn't so much the girl's lack of punctuality as her attitude. But Carys couldn't do anything about that. What she could control, however, was how she dealt with it, and she was determined to keep her cool.

When she went back into the café half an hour later, it was no less busy. In fact, this was peak time for the brunch and lunch crowd, which kept Emile busy in the kitchen. He became irritable if his carefully prepared plates of hot food were not served immediately. Carys pitched in to help, but once or twice she noticed Aurélie scrolling on her phone.

‘Table six is waiting to order,’ Carys prompted, as she went past the girl.

Aurélie looked at the waiting customers, then back at Carys, who prayed she wouldn’t make a scene. Was it too much to ask that she do her job? Finally, Aurélie rolled her eyes, and trudged over. Carys felt a rush of relief.

‘Everything all right?’ Léo appeared, carrying a tray loaded with dirty plates.

‘Yes, thanks.’ Carys smiled, determined not to let Aurélie get to her. Whatever the girl’s problem was, Carys would deal with it.

By the end of the day, Carys’s feet were aching. But the café was calmer now, and empty tables were beginning to outnumber those that were occupied. Carys hurried over with the bill for a couple of older gentlemen. ‘Was everything all right?’ she asked, as she cleared their cups and plates.

‘Yes, fine.’

‘The banana bread is delicious, isn’t it?’ she said, awarding herself Brownie points for remembering what they’d ordered.

The men briefly glanced at her. ‘Yes,’ one said, then resumed the conversation. Feeling a little stung, she quickly finished clearing and hurried away.

As she passed the counter, Aurélie tutted. ‘This isn’t America, you know.’

Carys stopped, plates in hand. ‘What?’

Aurélie nodded in the men’s direction. ‘You’ll frighten people away, being over-friendly. They’re not here to make conversation with you or listen to you say, “Have a nice day.” The French are reserved and serious. We order, we eat, then we leave. You don’t need to make conversation with every customer. You’re trying too hard.’

Carys watched as she sauntered off. Was she right? Were people irritated by her approaches? Had she come here with unrealistic expectations because in Willowbrook everyone had time to stop and chat? Self-doubt crept in. Maybe she should hang back a bit, show a little reserve, just until she’d got to know everything a bit better.

But then the door opened and the tiny lady in the big sunglasses came in, waved, and Carys lit up. ‘Madame Jalibert!’ she greeted. ‘Let me hang up

your coat. Ooh, it's gorgeous. I love it.'

Madame Jalibert beamed. 'Thank you, my dear, but I won't let it out of my sight because a dear friend gave it to me after we'd worked together in Milan. It's a Christian Lacroix . . .'

While Carys listened to the story she caught Aurélie watching disapprovingly and grinned at her. She was wrong. Carys wasn't being over-friendly. The customers who wanted to chat loved to do so. Who wouldn't? Hellos and How-are-yous were as important as air and water, no matter where you were in the world. Carys loved nothing more than getting to know others. That was simply her nature. And she wouldn't let Aurélie or anyone else stop her being herself.

Carys walked home from work in a pensive mood. Her first few days had gone well, and she was feeling much more confident about the prospect of caretaking the café.

But evenings were another story.

Once she'd had something to eat, she went for a walk and that way she was learning her way round the local area. But as she passed the busy cafés and bars and saw groups of young people huddled around tables she yearned to make friends. Because life couldn't just be about work, could it?

She had hoped she would get to know her neighbours in the studio apartments next to hers. She'd spotted the tall guy a couple of times and a couple of beautiful girls about her age with waist-length hair; she'd heard voices in the corridor and music drifting in through her window. But how would she reach out? Passing on the stairs, everyone was in a rush. Yet if she did nothing and met no one, the rest of the year would stretch ahead of her, empty and lonely.

Carys pushed the key into her door. There was only one thing for it, she decided. Tonight she'd knock on a couple of doors and introduce herself. With any luck, she might make a new friend.

An hour later, she stood in the dark corridor and took a deep breath. What if they laughed at her? What if they thought she was totally bonkers? She could imagine Liberty's reaction when she told her about this. *You're the*

bravest, boldest person I know, Car. What were you afraid of?

It turned out that being brave at home, in the place you'd grown up, was not at all the same as being brave when you were alone in a foreign city.

Carys lifted her hand and rapped on the door of the flat next to hers. She had no idea who lived there: they hadn't used the chairs outside their window while she'd been in, but she'd heard their music playing sometimes in the morning when she was getting ready for work.

There was no answer. She waited a moment longer, then tried the door opposite. She was fairly sure that was where the tall guy lived. He had a warm smile and she was confident he'd be friendly.

No answer.

Beginning to have second thoughts about this plan, she tried another door. The name plate suggested the occupant was Senegalese, and a woman in her early twenties answered. Carys had nodded to her in the corridor once or twice, and she had long hair and stunning dark eyes that narrowed with suspicion when she saw Carys. 'Oui?' she said.

'Em – hi,' Carys said, in French. 'I've moved into number nine and just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Carys.'

The girl waited. Impatience flickered in her expression, and Carys's smile faltered. She was reminded of Aurélie at work and wondered what it was about French girls that they could make you feel so small. 'Em – I wondered if you'd like to come over for a coffee or a beer or something.' She waved in the vague direction of her studio, although she was having second thoughts now she'd caught a glimpse of the other girl's room. It was sumptuously furnished and impeccably tidy. Carys's place was messy in comparison.

'I'm busy just now.' The words were clipped and curt with no trace of apology to soften them.

Carys froze. Faced with such a blunt rejection, she didn't know what to say. An awkward pause followed.

The girl went on, 'I have to write my dissertation.' She glanced at her watch and Carys understood she had a deadline. Or simply wanted Carys to leave.

'Ah – right. Okay.' She backed away, half expecting the girl to say,

‘Another time,’ or ‘tomorrow’.

But, no. The door closed, and Carys found herself alone in the dark hallway.

She scurried back to her room and, once inside, pressed her back against the door. ‘That went well,’ she told herself wryly. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so mortified.

Next morning, Aurélie was on time. Well, only ten minutes late, which Carys decided to ignore. ‘Pick your battles’ was wise advice she’d learned long ago and it had served her well in the classroom. Léo wasn’t due in until eleven, but Carys and Aurélie managed the customers, and the young waitress only needed the odd nudge from her boss.

When Carys returned from the kitchen, things had calmed down a little, and she was thrilled to recognise the family of three young children when they came in. She fetched a high-chair for the baby and greeted them warmly. ‘How are you all today?’ she asked.

‘We’re going to eat pancakes!’ the children chorused.

‘With blueberries? Fabulous. I can’t wait to see your blue tongues.’

The little girl giggled and the boy stuck his tongue out at her.

‘Fabien!’ his mother scolded. Then she turned to Carys. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t know why they’re so excited today.’

‘No need to apologise. Excited is good. Would you two like to do some colouring while you wait for your food? I bought some crayons and paper for my special customers.’ It seemed the schoolteacher in her wasn’t ready to retire just yet.

‘Yes!’ Even the baby clapped her hands happily.

Carys handed out sheets of paper and asked them each what they were going to draw. They promised pictures of colourful food and of the café and, as she left them, she saw their mum sink back in her chair with relief.

‘You like children,’ Aurélie said, as she watched Carys prepare their drinks.

‘I do.’ She set the coffee machine running and reached into the fridge for cartons of apple juice. ‘Those three are very cute.’

‘I heard you were a teacher.’

‘Yes. I worked in a primary school.’

‘You didn’t work in a café before?’

Carys’s skin prickled uncomfortably as she remembered her interview with Mark and Ingrid and how she’d bent the truth. ‘I worked in a pub. It’s like a café. We served food and drinks.’

‘When?’

‘A few years ago.’

‘You were the manager?’

‘Not exactly . . .’ Aurélie fixed her with piercing grey eyes and Carys had to look away. Insecurities rose in her, humming and vibrating, like a swarm of bees. She’d embroidered the truth about her experience and she had no formal qualifications to equip her for this job. Perhaps if she had, she’d know how to deal with difficult, uncooperative staff.

‘Where was this pub?’ Aurélie asked.

‘In Willowbrook. The village where I grew up.’

‘A village? It wasn’t in a city?’ Aurélie looked appalled.

‘No.’ She wasn’t sure why her voice sounded so thin. The cup of coffee trembled as she placed it on the tray next to the children’s drinks.

‘It can’t have been busy, then. Not like a city bar or café.’

Carys shrugged. ‘I don’t think that makes much difference. As long as we have enough staff and we all work hard we’ll manage fine,’ she said pointedly.

As she picked up the tray and strode purposefully towards her customers she could feel the waitress’s eyes on her.

At the end of the day, Carys locked the doors and she, Léo and Aurélie set about clearing up. Emile had left earlier, and the kitchen was sparkling, which she was grateful for. But the café needed sweeping and mopping, and the counter area had to be emptied and wiped down.

‘There’s lots of cake left today,’ Carys said, as she picked up plates of chocolate éclairs and madeleines. ‘What do you normally do with the leftovers?’

Léo shrugged. ‘We take them home. But I’m meeting my boyfriend for dinner tonight, so I don’t want any.’

‘Your boyfriend?’ Disappointment hit her, but she did her best to hide it, and counted the cakes. Even if she took one or two, there’d still be several left. And she’d already had an éclair with her lunch.

‘I’ll take them,’ Aurélie said.

‘Oh, good,’ said Carys. ‘I don’t want to throw them away. How many would you like?’

‘All of them.’

Carys raised a brow, surprised. ‘All?’

Aurélie met her gaze as if she’d issued a silent challenge.

Carys backed off. ‘Okay. I’ll box them up for you. Can you wipe down the counter? Thanks, Aurélie.’ She’d only been curious to know more, but the girl didn’t have to explain herself.

A short while later she watched Aurélie leave with the box of cakes and wondered what she would do with them. Was she up to no good?

But Carys refused to give in to suspicion. She strongly believed that, unless you were convinced otherwise, you should always assume the best about people.

No matter how prickly they were to work with.

The café was closed on Sunday and Monday, and this was Carys’s first weekend in Paris. She was giddy with excitement. What to do first? Where to visit?

She decided she wanted to get to know the city better, and the weather was beautiful, the autumn sun bathing the rooftops in rich golden light, though the morning air had a distinct chill. She slipped on her trainers, bought a baguette sandwich from the *boulangerie* down the road, and set off on the Métro in the direction of the river. She loosely followed a walking trail in her guidebook but with lots of detours to investigate anything that caught her eye – interesting buildings, window displays, street stalls selling food or gifts. She wandered past some high-end *pâtisseries* and was drawn in by their eye-catching displays. Baskets of red-and-green-striped croissants, éclairs piled

high with fancy meringue or chocolate decorations and shards of gold leaf that caught the light like expensive jewellery. She'd never seen such beautiful food, and it was so extravagant it reminded her of the catwalk and the outlandish costumes by the big fashion designers. She succumbed to temptation, bought herself an enormous sugar-cruled *palmier* and nibbled it as she wandered down towards the river.

Although the failed attempt to befriend her neighbour still played on her mind, she loved how everyone simply got on with their lives in this city, not paying her any attention, and she drank in the chatter of French, the smell of hot food, and someone busking with an accordion. Her phone pinged. She had messages from her mum and Liberty, both checking how she was. She rolled her eyes. How many times would she have to repeat that she was fine? Better than fine.

By midday she was ready to sit down for lunch. She went to the Jardin du Luxembourg. It was busy, but so spacious that didn't matter. She weaved her way along avenues of trees planted in lines like sentries, and a less formal area with enormous pines that cast slim shadows across lawns. She soaked up the sounds of children playing and adults laughing, and, as she approached the grand building at the heart of the park, a pond came into view. There were green metal chairs all around it and she picked one to stop for lunch. Her mouth watered as she unwrapped her sandwich. The French were so good with food that even a plain baguette filled with chicken and avocado was delicious, she thought, as she enjoyed her first bite.

A family with young children went by, the little ones on scooters, the parents following hand in hand. A couple of pigeons pecked at the gravel near her feet and eyed her hopefully until they were distracted by a pile of crumbs. She tilted her face up and felt the sun's heat trickle over her. This, she thought, was perfect. This was why she'd come to Paris. In that moment she felt so incredibly alive, the world so full of possibilities and choices.

When she opened her eyes again, still smiling, she noticed someone watching her on the other side of the pond. A young man wearing thin glasses and a blue jacket. He grinned, then looked down at the notebook in his lap. Carys felt a buzz of energy. He'd caught her enjoying a private moment. She

watched him for a little longer. He wasn't exceptionally good-looking, but there was something about his smile and the way he'd looked at her, as if he'd seen her joy – and shared it with her. Plus, was there anything sexier than a man with a book?

On impulse, she got up and walked over to where he was sitting. He was scribbling in his notebook and looked up as she approached. His eyes were a startling shade of blue and they creased as he smiled.

'Hi,' she said, pulling up a chair. She left a reasonable space between them, but not enough that anyone else could fill it. 'You're working?' she asked in French, and indicated the notebook in his hand.

'You're British?' he said in English, clearly surprised.

She laughed and snapped her fingers. 'Damn. I thought I sounded fluent.'

He smiled. 'Sorry. You have a little accent. Just a tiny one.' He pinched his thumb and finger together, and the lines around his eyes deepened with good humour.

'I saw you looking at me,' she said.

His cheeks turned an endearing shade of strawberry before he confessed, 'You looked so happy. So . . . in the moment.'

She snorted. 'You mean I looked crazy?'

'No.' He laughed, then said, more seriously, 'Not at all. You were like a dazzling star. It was impossible *not* to look at you.'

The warmth in his voice made her feel as if she was tumbling. It was exhilarating. Her head spun.

'Have you had some good news?' he asked.

'Oh – no. I just . . . I was so excited to be here. In Paris.' She stretched out her arms, taking in everything around them. 'Living life to the full. I haven't been here long, you see.'

His eyes twinkled as he said, 'Parisians often look miserable. And serious. I don't know if you'll like it here.'

'Oh, I will.' Their eyes met and locked. 'I'm sure I will.'

The distant sound of a car alarm made them turn towards the road. Carys took a deep breath, and tried to calm the clattering in her chest. There was something about this man. She wanted to know everything about him.

She was about to ask his name when a ringing noise made him dig into his pocket for his phone. He groaned when he saw the caller's ID. 'Sorry,' he told her, before answering in French. '*Madame Parot, bonjour.*'

Carys hid a smile and rubbed her toes together, trying not to listen. But his tone became urgent as he said, in French, 'There are sparks? Have you unplugged it? Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can . . . No . . . Don't worry. It's no trouble.'

He jumped to his feet, flustered. 'I'm sorry, I've got to go. It's an emergency – my elderly neighbour. She hasn't got anyone else. I'm so sorry.'

Her heart turned over at his kindness. 'It's fine,' she said hurriedly. 'Go!'

He dashed off, glancing over his shoulder to throw her another apologetic smile, which made her laugh.

It was only after he'd gone that she realised she had no name or number for him, and disappointment washed through her.

6

Mat

Mat crept across his flat as fast as he could on the tips of his toes. He was late. Again. When would he learn? When would his sleeping self respond to his alarm like a normal human being and actually wake up long enough to remember that he needed his job and couldn't afford any more warnings?

But it was Monday morning, and they were the worst. His heart felt blue, bleak and heavy. His stomach made a tight knot as he pictured himself trudging into the office, churning out yet more words, receiving yet more criticism for his efforts. *You're a waste of space, Devine. When will you give me the piece I asked for? Always too short, always too poetic. You're paid to write news articles, not literature.* His boss's words circled like vultures in his head.

Mat sighed and gazed out of the window at the busy street below. The homeless guy he passed each day was asleep in the doorway of an empty shop. The rush-hour traffic was almost at a standstill. A moped whizzed past, and pedestrians hopped between cars to cross the road. Mat hated his boss, hated his job.

Think of something positive, he told himself, trying to claw his way out of those murky, suffocating thoughts. His mind flashed back to the girl he'd met in the park yesterday and his heart lifted. When he'd first spotted her, she'd looked so happy, so rooted in the moment, enjoying the sun on her face, as if it was the most blissful thing. He'd felt a lurch. Her joyousness had been infectious. If only he hadn't had to leave so suddenly. Why hadn't he taken a few seconds to give her his number, at least? Now, in a city of two million people, he had no way of finding her again.

Still, the memory of her smile was enough to nudge him out of the flat and on his way.

He grabbed his jacket in one hand, rucksack in the other, closed the front door and made his way quickly down the stairs. Madame Parot might have good hearing but she wasn't speedy, and he didn't believe for a moment that she staked out her front door, waiting for him to pass. His shoes tapped on the maroon carpet, light as raindrops, and he'd almost reached the bend in the stairs when her door creaked open. 'Mathieu?' called the small voice. Thin. Frail.

He thought of his boss. What was to stop him running downstairs and pretending he hadn't heard? Chances were it was something trivial again, like yesterday, which hadn't been an emergency at all, simply an old iron that had broken. He could see Madame Parot tonight, as usual, and help her then.

His hand gripped the cool metal banister. But what if it wasn't trivial this time? What if she actually needed him?

He sighed and turned back. '*Bonjour, Madame Parot.*'

'Do you have a little minute?' He heard the smile in her voice. *Une petite minute*, as if time could shrink or expand depending on how generous he was feeling.

'Actually, I'm late—'

She cut him off. 'It'll only take a moment.'

'Madame P—'

'Don't call me that. It makes me feel old. Call me Rosette. I've had a letter from the insurance company,' she said, ushering him into her apartment, 'and I don't understand what they're asking me to do.'

He stopped. A letter? When had a letter ever been urgent? Snail mail was, by its very nature, slow. 'I'll stop by tonight. We can look at it then.'

She tutted and wagged her finger. 'It says, "Reply immediately." That's the only line I understood.'

'I'm sure it can wait a few hours—'

But he was aware of what a weak argument it was when he was already standing on the threshold of her apartment.

She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him in, whispering, 'I have *pains aux raisins* still warm from the *boulangerie*. If you're really in a hurry you can take one with you, but first look at this letter for me. Please?' She blinked up

at him and her pleading blue eyes were his undoing.

He smiled in spite of himself. ‘Ten minutes, okay?’

It hadn’t been urgent. He should have known. Mat put the letter down. ‘So you just call that number there and they’ll help you.’

‘Thank you, Mathieu. I don’t know how I’d manage without you.’

He picked up his jacket and edged towards the door but Madame Parot was standing in his way. ‘It’s nothing. Really.’ His toes fidgeted. He had to leave now.

She handed him a paper bag with the *pain aux raisins* she’d promised, but asked, ‘Do you have to go so soon?’

‘I told you, I have work. I’m already late.’ The bag rustled in his hand. Why didn’t she understand?

‘Oh, that’s a shame because there’s a *pissaladière* in the oven. I wanted to give you a piece but it won’t be ready for another ten minutes.’

‘Is that what I can smell?’ He loved *pissaladière*, a traditional tart from the South of France. He could almost taste the sweet onions and anchovy as he breathed in. ‘You make a lot of Provençal dishes. Are you from the South?’ he asked.

‘Yes. I grew up there. But I don’t have the Provençal accent,’ she added. ‘My mother was very strict about the company we kept.’

‘Shame. I like the accent.’ It reminded him of his childhood. He remembered the musical lilt of Grandmère’s words, especially when she’d been with her friends in the village, and how his mum used to tease her for it. Theirs had been a loving, affectionate teasing, not the abrasive mockery Mat later encountered when he went to live with his dad. He hesitated, curious to know more, and tempted by the delicious smell of food. But he had to get to work. ‘Madame Parot—’

‘Rosette,’ she corrected.

He couldn’t bring himself to say it. She’d always be Madame Parot in his eyes. ‘Sorry, but I really have to go now. I’ll be in so much trouble if I’m late again. My boss—’

‘Your boss is a dragon. You should take him a piece of tart. That will shut

him up.'

He laughed at the thought. 'I'm afraid it would take more than that.'

She waved a hand through the air, then paused and her eyes brightened as if she'd just had an idea. 'Why don't you call in this evening on your way home? We could have the *pissaladière* over an aperitif, you and me.'

'That sounds great. Thanks.' He felt a rush of warmth at the prospect. Apologetically, he reached for the door. 'Got to go now. Bye, Madame Parot.'

'Rosette!' she called after him. He heard her tut and mutter, 'Makes me sound a hundred years old . . .'

Christian was talking to Jean-Baptiste when Mat arrived, breathless, in the office. His boss made a great show of looking at his watch, then said, 'We have flexible hours, Devine, not elastic hours.'

'I'm sorry. I'll make it up tonight. It's my neighbour, you see. She's elderly, and—'

His boss interrupted. 'I'm not interested in hearing excuses. I want to see results, that's all. Results. Otherwise this paper is for the guillotine. So write something good, something people want to read, for a change.' He riffled through the papers in his hand, pulled one out and slapped a brief on Mat's desk. 'I need this by four, along with the others. Which leaves you five hours.' He walked away, muttering loudly, 'Would have been seven if you'd been more punctual.'

Mat shrugged off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to get started. The secret to success in journalism was getting words down as fast as possible. Since Christian liked nothing more than striking through them, editing wasn't even a requirement. Just spew words onto the page, Mat told himself. Write something. Anything. And submit it on time. Sometimes it helped that the deadlines were so short. When they were up against it, Christian often let things pass simply because he had to print something. But it wasn't for Mat to question quality. His job was to produce the goods. And, if they weren't good enough, to rewrite. Today he had five articles to draft: on rail repairs affecting the Gare du Nord, the misuse of electric scooters (people were

abandoning them in increasingly awkward-to-reach spots such as tree branches or dangling from bridges), a new art exhibition, homelessness around the *seizième arrondissement*, and a campaign by local shopkeepers protesting about pigeon droppings.

Pigeon droppings? Seriously? Christian was taking the mickey. Mat glanced across the office at his boss, who was holding an animated conversation on the phone, gesticulating and getting increasingly red in the face. Not the time to question it, then.

He set to work on the rail repairs, drawing up all the quotes he'd managed to get the previous day (not many). This article was going to be neither interesting nor informative, so he was tempted to weave in as many puns as possible about the company going 'off the rails' and 'having a ticket to ride' – but something told him Christian wouldn't see the funny side today.

By four o'clock he had something to show for all five articles. The one about pigeon droppings could have done with a better picture, but it would have to do. He submitted them all, then made coffee while he waited for Christian's sign-off. No one went home until he'd given you the nod.

Alice joined him in the kitchen. 'What did your neighbour want this time?' she asked, as she made the foul-smelling herbal drink her homeopath had recommended for her delicate stomach.

He sighed. 'Oh, she was panicking about a letter from the insurance company. Honestly, the way they word these things they're almost unintelligible.'

'But you helped her.'

'Not really. I just read it and calmed her down.' He lifted his cup and inhaled the aroma.

'You're so kind to her.' She stirred her drink and what looked like wood shavings bobbed around in the water, tingeing it a rusty colour.

'Look at you, with your blue eyes and your English mannerisms. I used to think it was an act, but it isn't, is it?'

'English mannerisms?'

'You know.' She waved her hands. 'The way you move so politely, so

self-effacingly . . .’

‘Alice, what are you talking about?’

‘Always opening doors and letting others go first, never talking over anyone but being such a good listener and seeming like you care. You do that on purpose, right?’

‘What?’ he spluttered. ‘*Why* would I do it on purpose? It’s just – I don’t know – good manners.’

‘Why would you do it? Let me see now – to get the girls? Because it’s irresistible?’ She rolled her eyes. But instantly her cheeks turned pink – as if it had slipped out and she regretted it.

He laughed incredulously. She laughed too, a little nervously.

He stared at her. *To get the girls? Irresistible?* Had she really believed it was a deliberate act?

‘It’s not deliberate, believe me.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Actually, I haven’t had many relationships. I’m no good at all that stuff. I went to an all boys’ school.’ His cheeks burned. But it was true. All his life he’d been a misfit. As a child he’d shuttled between his parents in France and England, bilingual but never completely belonging in either place. At boarding school, he’d been the ‘new boy’, the nerd with his nose in a book. At university he never found a solid group of friends or had a serious girlfriend. The girls had seemed to prefer more confident boys and in Paris even more so.

‘Really?’ It was her turn to be incredulous now. ‘Do single-sex schools even exist any more?’

‘In England they do. I suppose it didn’t get my confidence with the opposite sex off to the best start.’ And since he’d moved here he hadn’t had many relationships. Not lasting ones, anyway. His job often involved antisocial hours, which didn’t help.

She threw him a stony look that implied he was testing her patience. ‘Mat, you’ve had ten years plus to catch up since then. I’m sure women have been coming on to you in that time.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ His own temper was beginning to fray now. She blinked. Her grey eyes were grave, and he felt he had to explain. ‘I always say the wrong thing or don’t know what to say at all. I’m a goof.’

In the silence that followed he heard a phone ring in the next room, and Jean-Baptiste's deep voice as he answered. The printer whirred into life, and a car alarm went off in the street outside.

Alice sighed. 'You're not a goof, Mat.' She picked up her cup and left, muttering, 'You're so not a goof . . .'

An hour later he got the feedback he'd been waiting for.

'Mat.' Christian's quick nod indicated he should come to his office. His boss waved a printout of his article. 'This is too flowery. What do you think you are? A poet?'

There it was. He should be used to his boss's brutal feedback by now, but it never failed to hit him, like a strong left hook. Mat's jaw tightened but he bit back the retort he wanted to make.

His boss went on, 'I need you to sharpen this up. Cut all the waffle – we're not setting the scene for a play, we're reporting, Devine. We don't need the descriptions of what the shops sell or what the shopkeepers look like.' He shook his head with exasperation and waved a hand. 'Go! You have ten minutes.'

Mat went back to his desk. Pietro and Alice gave him sympathetic nods as they put their jackets on and slipped out of the door. Jean-Baptiste was reworking his article too, and he had the tougher job of adding words. Mat sat down and rolled up his sleeves. Come on, then. Cut the waffle.

His feet were heavy on the stairs as he climbed the five floors to his apartment. He never took the lift, not even after a long day like today. It was a tiny glass cube, big enough to carry one person, two if they knew each other intimately. He'd once seen the flimsy contraption break down and poor Monsieur David from the third floor had been stuck in there for two hours, wedged between the second and third floors while they'd waited for a repair engineer. Fortunately, the old guy had a special walking stick that converted into a stool so he'd been able to sit down at least. But being trapped inside that tiny box, unable to eat, drink or pee and in view of everyone, did not appeal, so Mat took the stairs.

As he passed Madame Parot's, he heard the tinny jingle of a television

game show. He'd get changed quickly, then nip round for the apéritif. He was looking forward to it, though he'd never admit that to Alice or anyone else—

His apartment door came into view and he stopped mid-step. It was ajar.

Mat frowned. He'd definitely closed it that morning. He remembered the metal click it had made. Someone was in his apartment.

Senses alert, he approached with silent steps. Burglaries were a constant threat in this city, and the perpetrators were often armed. In their desperation not to be caught, they were capable of surprisingly disproportionate violence, too. He knew because he'd reported many such cases. They carried knives, guns, crowbars. He felt an injection of cold fear as he peered through the gap in the door. His heartbeat was a bass drum in his ears.

'Have you seen my indigestion tablets, sweetpea?' said a deep voice. 'I'm farting like a trooper. It'll be that champers we drank on the plane. It always does that to me.'

Mat felt a wash of relief as he recognised the voice – then the holdall, which had been abandoned in the entrance hall. But as the tension leaked away, it was immediately replaced with anger.

He stepped inside and slammed the door. As he shucked off his rucksack, his dad appeared from the bathroom. His face was rounder than the last time Mat had seen him, his belly too, and he spread his arms wide. 'Mat! There you are. We thought we'd surprise you.'

Mat ground his teeth as his dad slapped him on the back. Then his dad's latest girlfriend, Poppy, tried to kiss him by making sucking noises vaguely near his cheeks.

'It's an impromptu visit,' Charles Devine continued.

'You don't say.' Mat heeled off his shoes.

His dad seemed not to hear. 'I finished filming early so we thought we'd treat ourselves and have a week in the sun before my next job. We fly to Mauritius tomorrow.' He grinned, pleased with himself.

Mat was seething. 'That's nice for you.'

'Should be better than nice. We're staying at Roddie's place. You know Roddie Williams, the singer?'

All Charles Devine's friends were celebrities.

‘He’s lending us his villa. A coconut’s throw from the sea and fully staffed. People to cook for you, make your bed, wipe your arse.’

‘I know what “fully staffed” means,’ Mat snapped.

His dad raised a brow and looked at him. ‘Oh dear. Bad day at the office? Or is it the time of the month?’

Mat bristled. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Poppy had tactfully slunk away to the bathroom. ‘Dad, you can’t just turn up like this. Why didn’t you warn me you were coming?’ Even better, he might have asked to stay instead of presuming.

His wide shoulders lifted and fell as he chuckled. ‘Why? You hiding a woman in here? Got “plans” for the evening? Don’t mind us. We won’t interfere.’

‘It would have been polite for you to check before arriving and just letting yourselves into my flat.’

‘All right, all right, keep your hair on, son. I told you, it was last minute.’

‘Nothing is *that* last minute. You could have texted me before you left. Or even as you got on the plane. At least given me some warning.’

‘Why?’ His dad’s baffled expression, the amusement in his eye made Mat’s blood boil even more. ‘What’s the problem?’

Mat’s fists balled. Couldn’t he see? ‘This is my flat,’ he spelled out. ‘I live here.’

‘Yes. I know.’ His dad’s belly shook as he chuckled.

Mat’s teeth clenched. ‘Maybe you should give back your keys because you don’t have any respect for the fact that this is my home.’ He cringed as he held out his hand. But they’d been through this before – his dad couldn’t keep turning up like this.

Charles laughed again. Then stopped. ‘Hold on a minute. You’re not serious, are you?’

Mat’s resolve began to crumble and he let his arm drop. He couldn’t do it. Family was family, after all, even if his dad was the least paternal man in the world.

‘You’re saying I can’t stay here?’ Charles asked incredulously. His face reddened.

‘You can definitely stay here, you’re welcome to stay here – but you need to *warn* me that you’re coming.’ Or, even better, ask, he bit back.

His dad scoffed. ‘The cheek! Have you forgotten that I paid for the upkeep on this place all those years until you were old enough to take it on yourself?’

Mat pressed his lips together. Of course he hadn’t, and the maintenance on these old apartments was considerable. They were riddled with ancient wiring and pipework given to spontaneous leaks.

‘Cost a bloody fortune,’ Charles grumbled.

‘I know,’ Mat said heavily, ‘and I’m grateful. But, Dad, I’m thirty. I have a life here. You can’t keep using the place like it’s your own. Mum left it to me. Just show a little consideration, will you? Some respect.’

A long pause followed. The tap was running in the bathroom. Finally, his dad blew out his cheeks. ‘Fine. I’ll call you next time.’

He rolled his eyes and began to walk off towards the kitchen. ‘Come on, let’s not argue. Why don’t we have a beer, then go out for dinner? Eh? My treat.’

Dinner with his dad and Poppy was agonising and awkward. Mat was still angry, and feeling guilty too because Madame Parot had sounded so disappointed when he’d called to cancel their evening. Poppy was as distracted by her phone as always, and his dad was excited about a new filming job that would involve travelling all over Asia.

‘First stop Hong Kong,’ he said proudly, ‘then Singapore and Japan. And that’s just for starters.’

Mat nodded politely. It did sound like a great opportunity, but his dad’s smugness was unbearable. It was always like this. He could feel his blood pressure rising with every minute he spent in his company.

‘I’ll be on the road for four months. It’s going to be fan-bloody-tastic.’ His dad took a hefty swig of wine and smacked his lips.

Mat’s gaze slid to Poppy, and he wondered what she thought about this. What would his dad get up to alone? Wherever he went, he had people fawning over him, and he wasn’t the kind of man to push them away. But she must know this. She was Charles’s fourth partner, and infidelity had been the

grounds for all his divorces.

‘Dad’s going to be away a long time,’ Mat said carefully, addressing her.

‘Yes, I’m going with him,’ she said. ‘The hotels are all paid for anyway, so it’s a no-brainer.’

His dad patted her knee and told Matt, ‘We love the Far East.’

She adjusted her fringe. ‘I have lots of shopping trips lined up. You can get clothes made to measure for a steal over there.’

Mat drank his beer, silently ruminating on this. There were advantages to this trip, at least. His dad would probably be too busy to get in touch. But Mat could imagine the reviews for the new programme already. The press loved Charles Devine, controversial TV personality. They’d rave about it. Mat could already imagine switching on the television to see his father’s smiling face, his cynical witty descriptions of – what exactly?

‘What’s the programme about – cars?’

‘That’s where it gets interesting.’ His dad reached for another olive and ate it greedily. He didn’t wait to finish it before continuing, ‘It’s a new direction for me. A bit of cultural history.’ His cheek bulged.

‘What kind of history?’

His father spat the olive stone into his hand. Mat slid the ashtray towards him. ‘I don’t know, to be honest. They’ll research and write it all for me, and I just turn up and present it.’ His dad grinned gleefully. He might as well have slapped his thigh.

Mat looked away. His dad would say he’d worked hard for this. That for years he’d been slogging away to reach this peak in his career when work came easily and he was in demand. Yet Mat knew his success had been more about good fortune than hard work.

‘Won’t people think it’s strange that a car critic is suddenly lecturing about history in the Far East?’

His dad looked quite offended. ‘Don’t talk nonsense! Of course not. Besides, I won’t be lecturing. I’ll be talking to them in my usual distinctively endearing manner,’ he put on his television voice, ‘imparting fascinating information and knowledge.’

Bloody hell, thought Mat. He sounded like one of his own reviews.

Except, rather than describing a new top-of-the-range Ferrari, he was talking about himself. Could he not hear how pompous and self-congratulatory he sounded? Or was this what happened to everyone when they'd enjoyed decades of success and having their egos stroked? 'Distinctively endearing?'

His dad grinned, unperturbed. 'Their words, not mine.'

'Anyway . . .' Poppy cut in. The two men turned in surprise, and Mat had to admit that for a moment he'd forgotten she was there. His relationship with his dad was always like this. Volatile. All-consuming. Charles Devine seemed to swallow everything – and everyone – else in the room, so only he remained. '. . . what's happening with you, Mat?'

'Not much.'

'Not much?' His dad laughed. 'There must be something. Tell us about your work.'

He cringed. 'Not much to tell. Boss tells us what to write, we write it, repeat.'

'You're not going to look for something else? Move on from that rag?' His dad pursed his lips.

'There's nothing out there.' He bit back his frustration. How he wished that one of these days he might have something positive to share for a change. If only he could tell him he'd had a scoop or a promotion, a new job with one of the broadsheets or a glossy magazine. Something to prove that hard work paid off and brought success. He thought of the restaurant reviews he'd started writing. He hadn't told his dad about them. Perhaps he should. His following was growing steadily. But there was no bigger blabber than his dad, and Mat's cover would be blown in hours. So he kept quiet.

Charles pushed another fat olive into his mouth and said, 'I don't know how you can do it.'

Mat tried not to look at him. Why did he always talk with his mouth full? 'Do what, Dad? You're a journalist, too.'

'But there's a difference. Free papers are like the sweatshops of the fashion industry. They have you churning out high-volume low-quality work day after day. At least I get to choose what I write about and it's a subject that interests me. You're writing about – I don't know – cigarette ends in the

street.'

Mat thought of the article on pigeon droppings and flushed with anger. Just because his dad had had an easy ride in life he assumed those who weren't so privileged were gullible fools. 'We have to start somewhere. Even you must have had to do work you didn't enjoy at the start of your career.'

'Me?' His laughter came from deep within his belly. 'Not on your nelly. Anyway, it's not the start of your career, is it? How long have you been there now? Eight years?'

'Five,' he ground out, remembering how pleased he'd been finally to get paid work after eighteen months of freelancing and unpaid internships. His dad made him feel as if he'd achieved nothing.

'There you go, then. It's time to move on.'

Poppy reached forward and patted his hand. 'Are you happy, Mat?' she asked kindly. 'That's the main thing.'

'Yes,' he said, surprised by the question, 'course I am.' But it was a lie.

His dad emptied the last of the wine into his glass. 'Well at least you're not writing those ridiculous songs any more, eh? Do you remember, Pops?' He laughed, as if he'd told a hilarious joke, but Poppy looked blank. 'Ah. Different woman. Sorry.' Charles had the good grace to blush.

Mat tried not to remember how his dad had mocked him when he'd walked in on his fourteen-year-old son strumming a guitar and singing in his room: *Think you're the new Eric Clapton, do you? These lyrics are cornier than a boyband's*. His childhood was peppered with stinging memories like that, each one papered over with his dad's impatient declarations that Mat was *just too sensitive* and *should man up*. Yet the older he got, the more he hated his dad's attitudes and saw his teasing for what it actually was. He might not be fourteen any more, but the memories were all stored inside and at times like this they simmered to the surface, venomous and vitriolic.

When Mat got up early the next morning his dad and Poppy had already left, but there were reminders of their short visit everywhere in the apartment. The strident smell of his dad's aftershave in the bathroom, the unmade bed in the spare room, a pair of jewelled sunglasses forgotten on the coffee-table in the

lounge.

Mat set about cleaning up. He stripped the bed and aired the bathroom, trying to eliminate all reminders that his dad had been there. He thought of his conversation with Alice the previous day and his lack of self-confidence around women. And he pictured his dad: solid and well-built, with a booming deep voice. As arrogant as he was, why wasn't Mat more like him? You'd have thought his über-confidence would have rubbed off just a tiny bit on his son.

Carys

Carys got up early, determined to keep on top of all the paperwork and to be at the café well before it opened in case Emile needed a hand with prepping food. Not that he'd ever accepted her offers of help so far, but you never knew. Maybe one day he'd trust her enough to let her peel potatoes or something. She smiled at the thought as she unlocked the front door of the café, then slipped inside.

Today the smell of caramel greeted her and she wondered what delicious bakes he'd made. '*Bonjour!*' he said, emerging from the kitchen with a tray of cakes. 'Pear and caramel sponge,' he announced, as he slid them into the counter display.

Carys tried not to salivate at the glistening gold slices. 'Oh, my, they look amazing!' She had got into the habit of skipping breakfast so she could sample his baking each morning and her stomach growled excitedly. 'I have to post a picture online. They'll be so popular.'

'You're still doing that?'

'Absolutely. Yesterday's carrot cake got the most likes ever.'

'Probably because the idea of carrots in cake is totally bizarre. Only the British would think of such a crazy thing.'

She smiled. 'It is crazy, but that's not why people liked the picture, Emile. It's because your cooking is delicious and beautiful. Since I started posting pictures of your food each day we've doubled our number of followers.'

The chef's cheeks glowed with pride.

In the office she put down her bag and hung up her jacket. At this time in the morning the air was really chilly and she couldn't wait to have a hot coffee in her hands. First, however, she topped up the cat's food bowl. As she did so, Raoul sauntered in. 'Raoul! *Bonjour,*' she said. She was determined to

be friendly and earn his trust.

The cat stopped. Carys clicked her tongue. ‘Come on,’ she coaxed. ‘You must be hungry after your night-time escapades.’ She held out her hand to him, hoping he’d let her stroke him, but he lifted his nose and eyed her haughtily.

Carys sighed. ‘Fine. Suit yourself. I’ll go and see Emile.’ She backed away from the bowl and tried not to be offended when the cat rushed over and gobbled his food hungrily.

By ten thirty the café was full and everyone was run off their feet. Everyone except Aurélie, that was. As Carys served a take-out customer, Léo was hurrying into the kitchen with a full tray and Aurélie stood behind her, examining a strand of her long red hair. Carys bristled. The girl had phoned in sick yesterday. She might as well have been absent today also for all the help she was.

‘Aurélie, table two is waiting to order,’ Carys told her.

The girl looked up as if this was news to her, then picked up a notepad and sloped off.

A little later, Carys returned from outside with a full tray of empty plates and cups. This time the waitress was chatting to a customer. ‘Aurélie,’ Carys said, as she passed, ‘clear table six, please.’

All morning she had to keep prompting her to do her job, and Carys’s mounting frustration intensified as she rushed from one table to another, growing more and more hot and flustered. In a pause between serving customers, she fanned her face with a menu card.

‘Why do you always wear a scarf?’ Aurélie asked. She was leaning against the counter watching her.

Instinctively, Carys reached for the zebra print scarf around her neck. ‘Because I like it.’

‘You look hot.’

‘I am hot,’ she snapped. If Aurélie would only pull her weight, Carys wouldn’t have to rush around so much.

‘Why don’t you take your scarf off?’ Aurélie asked.

‘I’m fine.’ She adjusted it at the back and wished her hair would grow

faster. It would need to be shoulder-length before it covered her scar completely.

‘You never take it off?’ Aurélie’s eyes became narrow slivers of flint.

‘I’m fine,’ she repeated. Her skin prickled uncomfortably as Aurélie continued to scrutinise her. With a rush of irritation she jerked her thumb at the far corner of the café. ‘Table ten is waiting for their bill.’

A beat’s silence passed. Then Aurélie picked up the bill.

Carys watched as she moved off, and wondered how the girl always managed to unsettle her so much. Carys had come to Paris to make a fresh start. She’d longed to get away from being fussed over and to be treated the same as everyone else. But Aurélie was making her life difficult in a new way. She’d left one set of problems only to run headlong into another.

Determined not to let her emotions get the better of her, Carys pulled her shoulders back and got on with her job. She threaded her way round the café, collecting dirty cups and plates, checking her customers didn’t need anything. Aurélie was just one person in a city of two million. Think of all those other people Carys had yet to meet. Her mind spun back to the man in the park.

She kept thinking about him. His complicit smile when she’d opened her eyes and seen him watching her. And how concerned he’d been for his elderly neighbour, dashing off to help. Who was he? What did he do?

‘You have to watch that one,’ Madame Jalibert said.

Carys was startled from her thoughts. Today Madame Jalibert was wearing a peacock blue and green dress with balloon sleeves, and she adjusted the enormous red-rimmed glasses that matched her lipstick.

‘Who?’ Carys asked.

Madame Jalibert gestured at Aurélie. ‘She’s lazy.’

Carys’s shoulders dropped. Things must be bad if even the customers had noticed Aurélie was slacking.

‘But you never lose your temper with her,’ Madame Jalibert went on. ‘This is good. She wants to provoke you.’

‘You think so?’

The woman nodded, and her earrings jangled. ‘Anyone can see it. That girl is brimming with anger.’

‘Do you know why?’

‘No idea. I’m just telling you what I observe every day. But you keep doing what you’re doing, being patient and firm. She’ll learn eventually.’

‘How do you know so much, Madame Jalibert?’

Her face broke into a wide scarlet smile. ‘You’d know a lot too if you’d been around as long as I have. Plus, I worked in fashion and I’ve dealt with my share of moody young women.’ She fingered her beaded necklace and winked. ‘I may even have been one myself, once upon a time.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ Carys said, and went back to work, chuckling at the thought.

‘Are you okay?’ Léo asked, when they were clearing up that evening.

Carys rubbed her temple. ‘I’m fine.’ Since the accident she sometimes suffered from headaches, usually when she was tired or stressed.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Just tired.’ She glanced at Aurélie, who was hurrying to go home. The door slammed behind her.

Léo followed her gaze. ‘Why don’t we go for a quick drink, you and me? My boyfriend is working late, so I’ll be all alone otherwise.’

‘A drink would be perfect,’ she said gratefully.

They picked a bar down the hill and around the corner, and sat outside enjoying the evening sunshine. It was much cooler now they’d escaped the confines of the café, and a cold beer was just what Carys needed.

‘So, how are you settling in?’ Léo asked.

‘To Paris? Or the café?’

He shrugged in that deliciously French way. ‘Both.’

‘Paris is wonderful. It’s everything I hoped it would be. Big, exciting and busy. And I love the café, but . . .’ She trailed off as she tried to find a way to say this tactfully.

‘But?’ he prompted

She put down her drink. ‘Léo, how long have you worked there?’

He made a mental calculation and seemed surprised with the result. ‘Three years.’

‘You must like it.’

‘I love it. It’s the perfect way to fund my PhD.’

She spluttered into her drink. ‘PhD?’

He beamed. ‘Why are you shocked? You thought I was just a waiter?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being a waiter.’

‘There isn’t. You’re right,’ he acknowledged.

‘What’s your PhD in?’

‘Music. Contemporary jazz.’

‘How long do you have left until it’s finished?’

‘Officially eighteen months. More likely two years.’ His self-deprecating smile made her smile too. He was fun. She liked working and hanging out with him. Which reminded her of why she was there. ‘Léo, I need to ask you about Aurélie,’ she said.

‘Ah.’

‘I’m finding her a challenge.’ The girl was regularly late or off sick, and when she did turn up for work she seemed to be doing everything to make Carys’s life difficult. Carys wasn’t sure how to fix the problem. Being firm only seemed to make the girl more defiant.

‘Yes. She can be a bit moody.’

A bit? Yet Carys had noticed she could be fine with the customers. It was hard not to take it personally. ‘Was she difficult with Ingrid – always late or calling in sick?’

‘I’m not sure. Our shifts overlap but I’m not usually there when she starts hers.’

‘So you don’t have a problem with her?’

‘If she’s having an off-day I ignore her. To be honest, we don’t have much time to speak. When we’re working we’re both busy.’

‘One of you is busy,’ she corrected. ‘Doesn’t it annoy you that she doesn’t pull her weight?’

‘No.’ He grinned. ‘The less she does, the more it makes me look good, and I get bigger tips.’

Carys laughed. Well, that was one way of looking at it. Still, things were going to have to change if Aurélie was to stay. ‘Do you know why?’

‘Why I get bigger tips? Because customers find me charming and irresistible, of course.’

Carys rolled her eyes. ‘Why she’s prickly.’

‘Everyone is different. Don’t take it personally. It’s not.’

Carys sighed. ‘Mark and Ingrid had warned me about her. But the thing I can’t understand is why they kept her on when she’s so unreliable.’

‘You mean why didn’t they sack her?’

She nodded.

‘In France you can’t sack someone so easily.’

‘No?’ She felt a prickle of dread.

‘No. Employment laws make it very difficult.’

Damn. She was stuck with her, whether she liked it or not. In that case they were going to have to find a way to work together. She pondered this as a group of rowdy young men exited the bar and headed off, singing.

Léo touched her arm. ‘Don’t look so worried,’ he said. ‘You’re doing fine. Remember, you don’t need to be friends with her or Emile – or even me.’ He slanted her a crooked smile. ‘Although I would like us to be friends.’

His kindness was unexpected, and she felt a surge of warmth. ‘So would I . . .’ She fiddled with the stem of her glass, recalling her attempt to meet her neighbours and what a failure that had been.

The realisation that she was lonely hit her like a sledgehammer. Growing up in a small village, she’d known everyone. Loneliness was new to her. But since the accident she’d been fending off a growing sense of isolation. Even her closest friends and family couldn’t really understand what she’d been through.

She met Léo’s gaze. ‘I’d really like that. I never thought it would be so hard to meet people in a big city.’ The threat of tears caught her off guard and she blinked hard.

‘Oh, Carys, *chérie*, I didn’t realise you were lonely. You’re always so bubbly and happy.’

‘It’s just taking longer than I thought to settle in, that’s all. I’ll be okay.’

‘Maybe you should join some classes or clubs?’ he suggested. ‘And what about your neighbours – have you met them?’

‘I tried. It wasn’t a huge success.’ She told him about the girl in the studio opposite hers.

‘What a bitch,’ he said. ‘Well, any time you want to go for drinks or anything else, just ask.’

A little later, they waved goodbye and Carys set off, noticing how the evenings were growing darker. Earlier, the streets had been filled with office workers, heads down, hurrying home. Now, people were more relaxed, wearing jeans and smelling of perfume as they headed out for the evening.

Truth be told, she was worried about how to handle Aurélie. She was at a disadvantage: it was difficult to tell someone off in a second language. Plus, if Léo was right about sacking people, she was stuck with her. Carys turned the corner and headed back towards the café. But that wasn’t all that troubled her. She thought Aurélie was deliberately challenging her. Calling into question her authority. The defiant attitude, those looks of silent hostility. It was as if Aurélie could sense she hadn’t done this before. Sense her weakness. She wished she could speak to Ingrid and Mark to ask their advice, but they hadn’t responded when she’d tried calling.

If she’d had more experience and the right qualifications, would she have known how to deal with a difficult employee more successfully? Then again, she was a qualified teacher. She knew exactly how to handle difficult five-year-olds, and that wasn’t learned from a textbook but from experience. Who was to say going to management school counted for anything?

She took a deep breath and drew her shoulders back. *Fake it till you make it.*

She *could* do this.

She stopped as she passed the empty café. It was deserted and dark, but the pink exterior was as inviting as it had been the first time she’d seen it, when she’d fallen in love with the place. If she *had* arrived with the qualifications for the job, would she have done anything differently? She ran her gaze over the empty tables with a new, more confident eye. Ideas began to seed and enthusiasm returned.

She continued up the hill towards her apartment block. Ingrid and Mark had chosen her to look after their café, and she was going to give it one

hundred per cent. She was not going to let a prickly young waitress erode her confidence or stifle her creativity.

The café was great, but it could be even better. Tomorrow she'd call a team meeting.

Next morning, Aurélie was on time. Léo wasn't due in until eleven, but Carys and Aurélie managed the customers, and the young waitress only needed the odd nudge from her boss.

'*Bonjour, Monsieur,*' Carys said to Gérard (she still didn't know his real name). He wore a navy beret and carried a newspaper tucked under his arm.

Smiling, he made a beeline for the table at the back by the bookshelves.

Carys brought him his espresso and croissant on a tray, and he unfolded his newspaper, smoothing it with the flat of his hand. 'How are you today?' she asked, as she put them down.

'Glad to be retired.' He sighed and gestured at the pages of print. 'Especially when I read what is going on in the world.'

'You're too young to be retired.' She winked.

He smiled and she caught a glimpse of the handsome young man he had once been. 'Ah, you flatter me, young lady. I've been retired over ten years now.'

Carys pressed the tray to her chest, curious to know more. 'What kind of work did you do?'

'Schoolteacher. I taught French literature and grammar.'

'Do you miss it?' She glanced at the book in his hand.

'The young ones are not interested in learning about Camus or Molière any more. Although when I read a beautiful piece of poetry I wish I had reason to recite it aloud.'

Carys chuckled. 'What's stopping you? There's always room for poetry in the world.'

He grimaced. 'The neighbours would think I had truly lost my marbles.'

A loud crash made her – and everyone else – look up. Aurélie was standing beside the coffee machine looking down at her feet, aghast. Excusing herself to Gérard, Carys hurried over. Pottery shards lay in a puddle

of milky coffee. Judging by the volume of liquid, it seemed the girl had knocked over a full cup.

Aurélie cursed loudly as she bent to pick up the pieces.

‘I’ll do that,’ Carys told her. ‘Go and get . . .’ she realised she didn’t know the French word for a mop ‘. . . something to wipe this.’

Aurélie didn’t reply but hurried off into the back. She returned a little later with a bucket and cloths. ‘I don’t know what happened. I must have dropped it because I’m so tired,’ she said, as they crouched to clean up the mess.

‘*You’re* so tired?’ Carys wanted to laugh. She and Emile hadn’t stopped all morning, but the same couldn’t be said for Aurélie.

The girl glanced away, but not before Carys had glimpsed the shine of tears in her eyes. It made her rethink. Anger was replaced with concern. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Just tired. Sorry. I’ll pay for the cup if you like.’

‘Forget about the cup. It’s not important. We all drop things sometimes.’

At eleven on the dot, Léo arrived. ‘Good morning,’ he greeted them cheerfully. ‘Did you miss me?’

Carys laughed. ‘We haven’t had time.’

‘Was it busy, then?’

‘Frenetic. I’ll have to leave you and Aurélie to manage by yourselves after lunch because I’ve got orders and invoices to catch up with.’

‘No problem,’ Léo said, taking off his jacket.

‘Oh, and we’re having a team meeting this afternoon. I’ve told the others already.’

Léo’s eyes widened. ‘Why?’

Carys smiled. ‘You’ll see.’

The rest of the day passed as quickly as ever, and Carys made sure the café closed punctually so they could get on with the meeting. They hadn’t even begun but Aurélie and Emile already looked desperate to leave.

Once the four of them were settled around a table, she said, ‘I want to talk to you about what you think works well at the Red Cat Café, and what you think we could change to improve it.’

Aurélie rolled her eyes and muttered, ‘Here we go. Told you she’d want to change everything.’

Carys chose to ignore this. ‘I’ll go first,’ she said. ‘We serve delicious food, we know our regular customers well and make them feel welcome. Plus the café has an international feel so people of all nationalities are at home here.’ She turned to Léo. ‘Over to you, Léo. What do you think works well?’

‘It all works well! It’s a fabulous café. Different. Inclusive. Delicious food.’

Carys laughed. ‘Thanks, Léo. How about you, Emile?’

The chef scowled at her. ‘I think I need to get back to my kitchen and check on the sauerkraut.’

‘This won’t take long, I promise. I’d love to know your thoughts – about the menu or anything else.’

‘What’s wrong with the menu?’ he shot back.

Woah. Defensive. ‘Nothing. I’d just like to know what you think of it.’

‘It’s perfect. Simple but quality.’

Carys waited. When he didn’t add any more, she glanced at the cake counter. ‘It’s definitely quality, and everyone comments on how delicious it is and how beautifully presented the savoury dishes are.’ She paused, then picked her words carefully, not only because this was testing her French.

‘But?’ Aurélie said cynically.

Carys refused to be put off. ‘There’s a big difference between our savoury dishes and the cakes.’

Emile’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Think of what you do with your sandwiches, for example. You marry unusual flavours. You experiment. You fuse ingredients from all over the world and create really unusual results.’

‘And?’

Carys felt three pairs of eyes watching her. ‘Could we make the cake display more eye-catching, perhaps? Make it . . . more exciting?’

Instantly she saw Emile’s defences shoot up, and his eyes became thin sharp knives. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The colours, the flavours,’ she said, running her gaze over the pound

cake, the madeleines and the coffee éclairs. It was a study in beige. ‘How would you like to experiment a bit more? Try new things?’

It was as if she’d lit the touch-paper. His shoulders stiffened, a deep frown sliced through his brow, and his eyes sparked furiously. ‘The cakes I make are very popular. Why would I change them when they sell so well? Do you have any idea how much time goes into perfecting a recipe?’

Carys bit her lip, wondering if perhaps she should have waited before confronting the issue. But she had a vision in her mind of how the café could be and it would be cowardly *not* to follow it. Or at least try.

‘I’ve seen the *pâtisseries* round here and they have some really beautiful displays. Look,’ she said, getting her phone out and showing him the pictures she’d taken on her walks in the city.

‘Ladurée? Hermé?’ Emile snorted. ‘These are the top *pâtisseries* in Paris! You can’t expect me to compete with them.’

‘Not compete. But maybe take inspiration from them, add more colour, more individuality to our cakes and create a really eye-catching display. Sell cakes that are unusual and unique to us. Think of our customer Madame Jalibert—’

‘The one who dresses like a peacock?’

Carys fought a smile. ‘She’s eccentric but she stands out. You can’t miss her. What if our café was like that? Bolder, more colourful, memorable. Emile, you take such care over how your recipes taste and you use bold flavours and combinations in your savoury dishes. Why not give the cakes as much of the wow factor? We’re an international café. We could experiment with unusual flavours, too.’ Out of the corner of her eye she saw Léo wince.

‘When?’ Emile’s cheeks were red with rage.

‘What?’

‘When are you going to give me time off to “experiment”? Because I already work ten-hour days. I already make cakes and the lunch menu. Perhaps you should buy from these *pâtisseries* if you prefer their cakes to mine, *hein?*’

Her scarf suddenly felt suffocatingly tight and she ran a finger round the fabric. ‘No, that’s not what I was saying at all. I just thought you might enjoy

—’

‘Well, you thought wrong!’

Her heart drummed in her ears. She said gently, ‘I’m not asking you to work extra hours. Couldn’t you just try new recipes every now and then? Perhaps other people’s recipes if you don’t have time to develop your own?’

‘Pff!’ He waved his hand, as if this was a preposterous idea.

Aurélie sniggered, and Carys looked at Léo, hoping he might defuse the situation. He didn’t, but no matter. She’d brought this on herself. She would deal with it.

‘Aurélie,’ she said wearily. ‘Have you any thoughts?’

‘I think the café is fine exactly as it is.’ The girl held her gaze with bullish defiance.

‘Oh dear. That didn’t go well, did it?’ Carys said afterwards, as they finished cleaning the café.

Aurélie and Emile were in the kitchen, while Carys and Léo had emptied the cake counter, stacked chairs on tables, and swept the floor. Carys laid a damp cloth over the broom and began to mop.

Léo didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. Instead, he patted her shoulder and gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘It will all be fine. Just . . .’ He bit his lip, as if holding back.

‘What?’ she prompted.

‘Maybe things are okay as they are. The café’s busy, it works well. People like it how it is.’

Later, as she watched him leave, she wondered if he was right. She’d promised Mark and Ingrid she’d look after their thriving café, but what if a few small changes really improved the place? They’d be thrilled, and she’d feel proud. It would prove they’d been right to entrust their business to her.

After work Carys couldn’t face the prospect of going home, so she headed off on the Métro into the city. It was still warm and a little sticky, so she was glad to get off and emerge into the fresh air. She didn’t have a particular

destination in mind, but found herself wandering towards the Jardin du Luxembourg.

She strolled through the park, glancing left and right, but her gaze kept returning to the chairs by the pond where she'd seen him. The guy with the book. She hadn't intended to look for him, her wanderings had just led her there, but he'd been on her mind all week. The memory of him hung in the fringes of her thoughts, making him spring to mind unexpectedly when she glimpsed a head of brown hair in the street, or a customer in the café reading. But he wasn't there. And searching for him was like hunting for a needle in a haystack.

She stopped, cross with herself for even hoping she might see him. Was she really so lonely?

As she walked up the hill towards her studio a raindrop landed on her arm. She looked up at the bruised purple clouds and picked up her pace. By the time she reached her apartment block it was falling heavily, and although she sprinted the last two hundred metres, she was drenched when she got inside.

She climbed the stairs to her studio, threw off her wet clothes and had a quick shower. Wrapped in her dressing-gown, she sat on her bed with a cup of hot chocolate. Her phone rang, but when she saw Liberty's name she hesitated. She couldn't face speaking to her best friend right now. Liberty would know straight away that something was wrong. She'd be understanding. Carys could hear her soothing words, and knew her sympathy would only tip her over the edge and make her cry. Liberty would tell her to come home, and it would be too tempting. Feeling guilty, she let the phone ring out and vowed to return the call when she was feeling more cheerful.

She sipped the hot chocolate and listened to the patter of rain. It reminded her of home, of Damsel's Cottage, where she and Liberty had lived together for the last ten years. She felt an ache in her chest, a longing so strong it hurt.

Closing her eyes, she imagined herself back there, in her small room that looked onto the woods. She heard the wind in the trees, smelt the smoke of a log fire, felt the warmth of being snuggled in bed with one of Liberty's colourful quilts tucked around her. Sometimes, if she woke early, she heard the chorus of birds greeting the dawn light, their trills and chirps echoing

through the woodland, like music in a cathedral. When she was the first up in the morning she'd open the back door to let Charlie out and watch him scamper around the garden, barking excitedly at every squirrel. She remembered all the meals she and Liberty had cooked together, all the evenings they'd stayed up late talking, laughing, confiding.

No one understood her like Liberty did.

A riff of soulful saxophone music drifted down the corridor and she thought of her neighbours, too busy to stop and chat. She thought of Aurélie and her scowling expression, Emile's angry reaction when she'd suggested they change the menu. Even Léo had looked disappointed in her.

Perhaps she'd made a mistake in coming here. Perhaps she was out of her depth. She'd deceived Ingrid and Mark about her experience, but perhaps she'd also deceived herself, believing that coming here would solve all her problems. Wasn't this what Alex had tried to warn her about – that the city could be a hostile place?

She'd left Willowbrook hoping to find her happy, but she'd never felt as lonely as she did tonight.

8

Mat

‘Everyone in my office,’ Christian announced.

‘Now?’ asked Alice.

‘Yes, now. You’re all here, aren’t you?’

Mat glanced around. Pietro, Jean-Baptiste, Alice, him. Yes, they were all there. They piled into Christian’s office, occupying the two chairs, and leaning against the filing cabinet and windowsill.

His stomach sank as he prepared himself for another verbal attack. Christian had never hidden from them how precarious the paper’s finances were. From one moment to the next, the owners could decide to make redundancies. But their boss seemed unusually cheerful. Especially considering he’d had a board meeting that morning. Was he leaving? Were they going to get a new boss? Mat shoved his hands into his pockets to hide his unease. He couldn’t help remembering the last round of redundancies three years ago and his sleepless nights during the weeks of uncertainty.

‘Right,’ said Christian. ‘Pietro, close the door, will you?’

On the other side of the office, Mat saw Julianne from Sales frown. Whatever was going on, she was excluded from this discussion.

Christian checked his watch. ‘I’ve got a meeting at two so I’m not going to beat around the bush. I’ve been given the green light to hire a sub-editor.’

Mat blinked. The others exchanged glances. He was hiring someone new? Where had the money come from? They were always having their budget slashed.

‘I’ve argued the case for a while now that my role is too much for one person and they’ve finally agreed that we’ll work more efficiently with one of you taking on a share of my responsibilities. The pay will reflect this.’

‘One of us?’ Pietro asked. ‘You’re not going to bring in someone new?’

Christian shook his head. ‘You can all apply, but only one of you will get it. I want to have this in place as soon as possible.’

‘But can they afford it?’ Alice said, eyes narrowed. ‘You’re always telling us how tight things are financially.’

‘That’s not been clarified yet,’ Christian mumbled. ‘It might be that we have to lose someone in the reshuffle.’

The four exchanged glances as fear rippled through the room. One of them would win, but someone else might pay the price. Still, the possibility of a promotion had been dangled in front of them like a prize, and, as they left the meeting, a new hum of rivalry filled the air.

Mat surreptitiously eyed his colleagues. There was no obvious contender that he could see: they were all in with a chance. ‘Are you going to apply?’ he asked Alice.

‘Course. Are you?’

He nodded. And by the look of Pietro and Jean-Baptiste they were excited too. They returned to their desks, but Mat couldn’t concentrate. His gaze drifted to the window beside him and, deep in thought, he stared at the florist’s opposite. Silver buckets were filled with ice-cream-coloured flowers, and in the window there was an old bicycle, enormous lilies tumbling from its basket. He felt his spirits lift for the first time in months – years, even. What if he got this promotion? Things might improve. It wasn’t so much about the money, though that would help, but – what?

Validation. Recognition. And from those he might glean a little confidence. Respect. He might get the chance to prove he could do this, that his words did matter. Alice and the others might look at him differently. He’d feel he wasn’t a misfit any longer and he belonged. His life might have new direction and purpose, something to be proud of.

The promotion settled in his mind, like a guiding star: neither dazzling nor obtrusive but simply and quietly illuminating the way.

He was scrolling on his phone when he got home and the concierge stopped him in the entrance hall. His latest restaurant review had been popular and Madame Incognito had acquired a large number of new followers. He was

surprised, but he forgot about it when the concierge saw him. She was sweeping the cobbled courtyard at the centre of the apartment block.

‘Ah, Monsieur Devine,’ she said, beckoning him over.

He slipped his phone into his back pocket.

She gestured to the small pile of soil and twigs she’d swept. ‘Those gardeners never clean up after themselves. The plants might look good, but I always spend half a day clearing up.’

He followed her gaze to the flowerbeds and pots. It amazed him that plants could grow in such a small space with six floors of apartments towering over them and the sky so far away. Yet the collection of trees and bushes seemed to thrive, and really brightened up the courtyard.

She propped the broom against a wall and hurried over to her office, calling over her shoulder, ‘There’s a parcel here for Madame Parot. Could you take it up with you?’

‘Of course.’

‘It’s a nightdress,’ she said gravely, when she returned with the package.

Mat felt his cheeks heat a little as she handed it to him. He didn’t need to know the contents of his neighbour’s post, and a nightdress was too intimate to think about. Did the concierge inspect his parcels too?

When he reached the fourth floor, he knocked. ‘Madame Parot? It’s me, Mathieu. There’s a parcel for you.’

He heard the urgent beeping of a timer and tiny light footsteps sounded on the parquet. She opened the door, then immediately vanished towards the kitchen. ‘Come in, come in. The timer’s going on the oven.’

He closed the door and followed her into the kitchen. A golden loaf was cooling on a metal rack. It smelt beautiful. His stomach growled.

‘I made a *cake aux olives*,’ she said, giving it a satisfied tap. The gleam in her eye told him she was looking forward to eating it every bit as much as she’d enjoyed baking it. ‘Perfect for the apéritif.’

‘Looks good,’ he said. ‘Here’s your parcel.’

‘Leave it on the table,’ she said.

He put it down beside the tray of drinks laid out for her apéritif, spotting whisky, gin and pastis among the cluster of bottles. Pre-dinner drinks were a

fixed part of her daily routine, and he admired the dignity of this solitary ritual, even if it seemed a little lonely.

‘You’re welcome to join me,’ she added, as she lifted the cake onto a plate.

His mouth watered. The olive loaf, flecked with tomato and herbs, was still warm and he could smell the melted Gruyère. ‘Thought you’d never ask.’

Her blue eyes lit up, and he glimpsed her delighted smile as she rummaged in the cutlery drawer for a knife. His heart tugged. They’d got to know each other since she’d begun asking for his help in the mornings, but their neighbourly relationship was fast developing into friendship. He sensed she was lonely, but that wasn’t the only reason he dropped in: he genuinely enjoyed her company. And her food.

‘You carry the tray through to the lounge,’ she said, as she sliced the loaf into small narrow pieces.

Ten minutes later they were settled with drinks. The lounge smelt of furniture wax and lavender, the sideboard, chairs and table were all quality antiques, and everything was immaculately tidy. She’d brought tiny paper napkins and a bowl of ice cubes for the drinks.

‘What do you think?’ she asked, nodding at the half-eaten olive cake in his hand.

‘Delicious,’ he said emphatically. ‘It’s got so much flavour. And just the right amount of olives.’

She nodded gravely. ‘They can be overpowering. The salt.’

He thought of the delicious smells that emanated from her kitchen when he was there in the mornings. ‘Where did you learn to cook so well?’

She shrugged. ‘Here, there.’ She smiled. ‘I love food. I’m like a magpie, always watching for the next shiny recipe I can steal.’

‘Was your mother a good cook?’

She gave a little snort. ‘She never cooked a meal in her life. Always had someone to do it for her.’ She pointed a crooked finger at her chest. ‘I used to get told off for sneaking into the kitchen and Maman was always saying it wasn’t fitting to mix with the staff, but I wanted to help – and steal titbits.’

The cook used to give me the trimmings when she made pastry, and she let me lick the bowl when she made chocolate cake.’ Her eyes gleamed and he caught a glimpse of the little girl she’d once been.

Not for the first time, he suspected her family had been wealthy. Mat took a sip of his pastis. ‘This always reminds me of my *grandmère*,’ he said, licking his lips. ‘It was her favourite drink.’

Truth be told, it wasn’t his. Despite the array of bottles on her tray, there hadn’t been much he fancied. But when he closed his eyes and inhaled the aniseed perfume, he could see himself, a small boy again, begging for a sip of Grandmère’s drink, then grabbing a handful of salty biscuits and running away.

She swirled her glass thoughtfully so the ice cubes danced and chinked.

He went on, ‘I lived in Provence when I was small.’

Her thin brows lifted in surprise. ‘I thought you lived here.’ She pointed to the ceiling. ‘You said you inherited it.’

‘I did, but when I was three my parents divorced, and Maman moved back to Provence. That was where she had grown up and my grandmother lived there.’ Life in that village had been simple, and he’d been happy. He’d been loved, and his small family had been close. He’d only appreciated how close when they’d gone. His dad and his new British schoolmates had mocked him for being too sensitive. The gentle kindness Mat had learned from his mum hadn’t won him any popularity at boarding school.

‘Where?’

‘Near Aix. A tiny village in the country. Where did you live?’

‘Toulon. My father was in the navy.’ She took a sip of her whisky and the sound of a fire engine spiralled up from the street below. ‘So tell me, Mathieu. Have you a girlfriend?’

He almost choked on his drink. ‘No.’ He laughed. ‘I – ah – I’m single.’

‘I thought so. You don’t go out much, do you? Apart from work.’

‘Em . . .’

‘Why don’t you date? A nice boy like you, I’d have thought you’d be out every night with a girl on your arm.’ She added, ‘Or a man, perhaps?’

‘Woman,’ he clarified. He shifted in his seat, but she was waiting

expectantly for an answer to her question. He cleared his throat. 'I just haven't met the right woman yet. You know, *coup de foudre* and all that.' He thought of the girl at the park. Just a stranger he'd fleetingly spoken to, yet he kept thinking about her at unexpected moments, and this week he'd been finding excuses to visit the park, hoping to see her again. Disappointed when she hadn't been there.

'Ah,' she said knowingly. 'You're romantic.'

'Well, I—'

'I can see it. You'll fall in love up here.' She lifted one crooked finger and tapped her temple. 'With her mind, her words. And when you do, you'll fall hard.'

That was exactly how he'd always hoped love would be. Although he'd begun to lose faith in the idea.

'Was that how it was for you when you met your husband?' he asked, glancing at the sepia wedding photo nearby.

She followed his gaze and her mouth worked as she stared thoughtfully at the picture. Then she asked, 'Would you like to play Monopoly?'

It was so unexpected that he laughed.

'What?' she asked, evidently offended. 'It's a simple enough question.'

He noticed she hadn't answered his, though. 'I – er – I haven't played for years.'

'I'll fetch it,' she said decisively.

He held out his hand. 'Sorry, Madame Parot. I don't really have time. Monopoly goes on for hours.'

'It's Rosette. And that's all right. We'll just play for twenty minutes, or until you have to go.' She vanished before he could say any more, but as he sat back in his seat and looked out of the window he thought, Why not? The view was the same as it was from his flat upstairs. Why not spend another twenty minutes here and keep the old lady company?

They laid out the game and chose their counters. He picked the dog, and she chose the top hat.

'How old is this game?' he asked, picking up a green house, awed because it was made of wood, not plastic. The money wasn't in euros, but francs.

‘Old,’ she said. ‘It was my husband’s. We used to play every night when he came home from work.’

‘Really? That’s . . . romantic,’ he said uncertainly.

‘No, it’s not. We just enjoyed it.’ She offered him more olive cake and he ate it hungrily. ‘I didn’t love my husband when I met him,’ she said unexpectedly.

Mat realised she was continuing their conversation from earlier.

She absently straightened the Community Chest cards. ‘My family wanted me to marry him. Not an arranged marriage, exactly, but nearly.’

‘Wow. I didn’t know that happened much.’

She laughed. ‘I’m sure it doesn’t any more. Even then, it was unusual. They were very controlling, my parents. But I went along with it.’

She handed him the dice and he shook them in his cupped hands, waiting for her to go on. She didn’t. He threw seven and moved his counter along. Landed on the visiting-jail square.

‘Were you unhappy in your marriage, then?’

She considered this as she picked up the dice. ‘At first it was hard. I thought he was arrogant, and he probably thought I was a foolish girl, always with my head in the clouds.’

She threw twelve, and counted out the spaces to the Gare Montparnasse. ‘I’ll buy that one.’

When they’d finished the exchange of money and property card, she sat back with her whisky and stared at the wedding photograph. The young girl with long dark hair smiled shyly at her husband, while the man beside her looked proudly at the camera. Her bouquet was modest, and the church behind them big and austere.

‘We got used to each other, though, with time. We started off with friendship and romance grew from there.’

‘It did?’

She nodded. ‘He wasn’t the exciting Prince Charming I’d hoped to marry, but he had other qualities. He was dependable, loyal, solid. Our marriage lasted. Others did not. Or, at least, they weren’t happy marriages.’

Mat thought of his dad’s relationships. So far the longest had been five

years. ‘My dad always falls head over heels. He always thinks his latest partner is The One.’ It seemed so obvious to Mat that his relationships were doomed. That they were based on looks, youth and superficial stuff. But his dad saw a pretty face beaming at him, laughing at his jokes, and believed he’d found the Holy Grail. Every time. ‘He’s been divorced three times.’

‘Ah. But you are not your father.’

He laughed. ‘True. I’m not rich, for a start.’ He was lucky to have his own place, but he earned barely enough to cover the costs of keeping it.

She tutted. ‘Money is not the prize you think it is.’

He was curious to know more about her background. Her apartment was well-furnished, and from what she’d told him she seemed to have had a privileged upbringing. But she said nothing more.

‘What’s funny about Dad is that he still believes in the whole fairy tale. He still insists on getting married each time.’ Yet he’d been quick to divorce Mat’s mother. Their marriage had lasted only a few years. ‘Although Poppy – she’s his latest girlfriend – doesn’t want to.’

‘Perhaps that’s a good sign.’

‘Hmm. Last time he divorced, his second wife helped the third wife.’

‘Out of spite against him?’

‘Or sympathy for her, I don’t know. But the two women got together, she recommended which divorce lawyer to use, and gave her tips.’ He chortled. ‘It cost him a fortune.’

Madame Parot laughed. ‘They had a lot in common, I suppose.’

‘Yeah. Both been dumped for a younger model.’ Still, his dad seemed happy with Poppy.

Before he knew it, the clock chimed nine and Mat’s stomach was growling to be fed a proper meal. ‘I didn’t realise it was so late,’ he said, getting up. He pointed to the board game. ‘Shall I help you pack up?’

Madame Parot tutted. ‘Leave it. I’ll see to it. You haven’t finished your pastis. You didn’t like it?’

‘I prefer beer,’ he admitted sheepishly. ‘Thanks for all this, though. I’ve had a good evening.’ And he meant it – the game, her company, he’d enjoyed it all.

Carys

It was him. The guy she'd glimpsed last time she was at the park. Except last time he'd been on the other side of the pond. Today he was sitting in her spot. A laser beam of joy hit her square in the chest and she went over. 'Hello again.' She beamed.

The man's face lit up, and her heart jumped. 'Hi,' he said. His blue wool sweater really brought out the colour of his eyes.

She sat down beside him. 'Was your neighbour all right?'

He rolled his eyes. 'She was fine. Made it sound as if her iron had started a house fire but it had just stopped working. Not surprising, really, given it was about a hundred years old. She wanted me to get it repaired for her. I had to work hard to persuade her to use the new one I bought instead.'

Carys smiled. 'She's elderly?'

'Ninety-three.'

'Wow.' She noticed how the sunlight danced over the leaves on the trees, making them glow gold and orange. She heard children playing. 'So, you're British too?'

'Kind of. My mother was French, but my father's English. I've lived in both countries so I'm both and neither, if you know what I mean.'

'That's amazing. And you speak both languages fluently?'

He tipped his head modestly. 'My mum spoke to me in French, and Dad in English – so yes, I am. Although I've been living here for the last few years so French comes more easily right now. I'm Mat, by the way. Mathieu.'

'Carys.' She held out her hand to shake his, grinning at the ironic formality of it.

His grip was surprisingly firm.

'So how did you choose where to live? France or England?' Her phone

buzzed. ‘Just a moment,’ she said, and reached into her back pocket.

It was a message from her mum: *How are you feeling, beautiful girl? Everything okay?*

‘Not urgent,’ she told Mat. ‘Family – you know? Always there, even when they’re miles away.’

He smiled. ‘Ah, yes. That’s why I live here. My dad’s in the UK.’

‘You don’t want to be near him?’

‘The further apart we are the better. You’d understand if you met him.’

‘I bet he doesn’t send you three messages a day checking on you.’

‘True. But he’s opinionated, pompous, in your face.’ He brushed a small leaf off the leg of his jeans.

Her eyes widened. Her mum had been overprotective since the accident, but Carys adored her family. Her stepdad was great, and her brothers were loud but fun. Her home had been a chaotic, but warm and loving place where she and her friends were always welcome.

Noticing her expression, Mat blew out a long breath. ‘You don’t want to hear about my dad. So what brings you to Paris?’

‘I saw an exciting opportunity to work here and couldn’t pass it up. Seize the moment and all that.’

‘You’re enjoying it?’

‘I’m loving it.’

A couple of pigeons erupted from a nearby tree and flew away. A man marched past, talking loudly into his phone, his smart shoes crunching loudly on the gravel path.

‘You speak French well,’ Mat asked. ‘Did you learn at school?’

‘Yes. But my granny spoke it too. She was from Guadeloupe.’ Her maternal grandmother had died when Carys was six, but she remembered having her hair braided while Mamie had chattered away in French. Later, at school, Carys had found she had a natural affinity for languages, and she’d loved that this kept alive a small bond with her grandmother.

‘And where did you grow up? I’m guessing you’re Welsh with a name like Carys, though you don’t sound it.’

‘My dad’s Welsh, but I’m from the Cotswolds.’

‘Where?’

‘Willowbrook. You won’t have heard of it – it’s a small village in the country – but you might have seen pictures. It’s all cute cottages, thatched roofs and quaint cobbled streets.’

‘Had you lived there long?’

‘All my life.’ Her voice had a weary edge.

‘Nice place?’

‘It was fine.’ She realised she’d damned it with faint praise. ‘Actually, that’s not fair. It was lovely. Growing up, especially. Small, rural, beautiful, with a great community spirit.’

He listened attentively, as if he was trying to hear all the things she wasn’t saying. ‘I can imagine that might feel claustrophobic at times.’

‘Exactly!’ she said. ‘So I came to Paris. New beginnings and all that.’

‘You made a good decision,’ he said. ‘There’s so much history, culture, and it’s so modern, so much happening, at the same time.’

‘It feels enormous. I love that there’s always something new to see. And the food.’ She rolled her eyes dreamily.

‘The French take food very seriously.’

‘Every *pâtisserie* display is like a work of art. And I love that I can wander for a whole day without bumping into a single person I know. Mind you,’ she added quietly, ‘not knowing anyone can have its downside.’

‘Yeah. It can be lonely.’

Her heart leaped. The tone of his voice, the look in his eyes made it seem as if he understood. ‘I suppose I’ve gone from one extreme to the other. There must be a middle ground.’

‘Give it time and you’ll get to know people. Where do you work?’

‘I’m shop-sitting,’ she thought of Aurélie, ‘so I don’t want to get too involved with my staff because I’m their boss.’

He looked up at the pearly clouds sweeping past. ‘I love the anonymity, the freedom to disappear if I want to. Be anyone I want to be. In Paris anything goes . . .’

That was exactly why she’d been drawn to the city.

He went on, ‘Whatever your quirky niche interest or hobby, there are

always other people who share it too.'

'I hadn't thought of that. Quirky niche interest?'

'Like a *Star Wars* society, or people who collect miniature ballet shoes.'

She laughed. 'A society of appreciation for cheese from Liechtenstein.'

'Exactly. Or left-handed people with red hair who crochet.'

Carys smiled. 'My best friend has red hair. She mainly sews patchwork quilts, but I'm pretty sure she could turn her hand to crochet.'

'Well, she should come here. She might meet her tribe.'

'No need. Her tribe all congregate in the shop where she works, the Button Hole. Lib's happy in Willowbrook.' Her smile faded.

'What's your niche interest?' he asked.

'Who says I have one? I'm not sure any of them are niche.'

'Your not-niche interests, then.'

'Well, I love music and dancing, the theatre, the cinema. I love going for walks and exploring.' She paused, thinking of Liberty and her dog, Charlie, and felt a pang of longing for their walks in the woods and fields around Willowbrook. 'What about you?' she asked, hastily brushing aside the thought, and reminding herself of how wonderful it was to be having this conversation with a complete stranger. How freeing it was to meet new people who knew nothing about her accident.

'I love music too,' he said. His eyes met with hers and held.

The feeling of connection was so strong, it made her breath catch. Carys wondered if it was possible to feel in your gut that a person was special.

A child cried out and they turned in time to see a green balloon rising into the air. The father tried to grab the string, but it slipped out of reach and sailed away so fast all anyone could do was watch as it floated into the sky, shrinking until it was a tiny dot, then invisible.

Carys turned back to Mat, but the spell was broken, and the moment had vanished. She cleared her throat, suddenly aware that they'd only just met. She looked at her watch. 'I need to get going.'

'Me too. I'll walk with you.'

She had a bounce in her step as they headed out of the park. He was the same height as her and they walked in time with each other. 'I'm really glad I

bumped into you again. Do you come here every Sunday?’

‘Yes.’ Colour flooded his cheeks. ‘Actually, no. I came back today because I was hoping to see you again.’ His bashful confession triggered a shot of delight in her.

‘So did I,’ she said, then put on a Humphrey Bogart drawl: ‘Of all the parks in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.’

They reached the gates and stopped. Compared to the calm of the park, the street was busy, yet today even the traffic seemed quieter than usual.

‘So,’ Mat began, ‘will you – ah – be here next Sunday?’

She shot him a mischievous smile. ‘Can be. Same time?’

Carys got off the Métro at the stop before hers and walked the last mile or so. She was still buzzing with excitement and welcomed the chance to spend some energy. Her head spun, but she told herself it was simply the excitement of meeting someone who spoke English, because it meant she could relax a little and not have to search for the words she didn’t know. He’d had such kind blue eyes, and his glasses gave him an endearingly bookish look. He was boy-next-door but with a French sense of style, which made her tingle. And he’d looked at her so intensely . . .

He’d been friendly, she corrected herself. That was all. And maybe she was a little desperate for a friend. She hadn’t had much success in getting to know anyone here. It would pass. These feelings usually did. The heart-dropping blood-fizzing excitement would fade. But, in the meantime, she hoped she’d made a new friend, and that in itself was reason to smile.

Mat

Carys. Mat repeated her name in his mind like a refrain, savouring it, the flatness of the *a*, the whisper of the *s*. It was so close to the word ‘caress’ that he couldn’t separate the two in his mind, and he imagined himself breathing it as he ran his hand over her cheek.

He brought himself up short. What was he thinking? A woman like her would never be interested in a relationship with a man like him. He was shy around women, who found him nerdy with his love of words and music and food. One ex (although ex was a bit strong for a girlfriend who’d lasted only a couple of weeks) had asked him, ‘Why do you have to be so obsessive about your interests?’ He’d heard echoes of his dad saying the same thing when he’d been a teenager. But even at thirty he still had no answer. Why couldn’t he go for a meal and simply enjoy it? Why spend hours painstakingly carving out the words to review it accurately? He just couldn’t do things by halves, and Carys would undoubtedly feel the same as every other past girlfriend when – if – she got to know him better.

Yet hope rose in him, like a crescendo. The way she’d looked at him with those brown eyes, as if she was enthralled. The way she’d asked questions, as if she was hungry to hear the answers. It had been like standing in sunlight, warmth flooding his body. He pictured her joyous smile, her infectious energy. She was so uninhibited, so magnetic. And yet, when she’d spoken about her home, he’d sensed an undercurrent, an underlying sadness. It intrigued him. *She* intrigued him.

He tried to dampen down the feeling that his world had just rocked but, if he was honest with himself, he couldn’t wait to see her again.

11

Carys

It had been three days since Carys had held the team meeting and Emile was only just beginning to talk to her again. Aurélie was as sulky and unreliable as always. Yesterday she'd called in sick for the second time that week, and Carys and Léo had struggled to manage without her. She wondered why it hadn't been an issue for Ingrid and Mark. Was Aurélie playing her for a fool? Even if she'd been absent a lot before, Mark and Ingrid had been a couple, which must have made it easier for arranging cover.

Nevertheless, Carys was determined to forge ahead with her plans for the café. Léo was right, the Red Cat Café *was* successful, but she was buzzing with ideas.

She left her flat early and took a detour via one of the *pâtisseries* that always caught her eye. Five minutes later she emerged holding a beautiful box tied with gold ribbon that glistened in the morning sun as she walked to work.

'*Bonjour*, Emile,' she said brightly, when she arrived.

He was rolling pastry and grunted. She placed the box carefully on the counter near him but not (God forbid) in his way.

'What's that?' His hands worked quickly, picking up the square of pastry and flipping it round before he rolled it again.

'Just a small gift for you.'

'Why?'

'Because I thought you'd enjoy it.'

He put the rolling pin down and wiped a sleeve across his brow. Picking up a sharp knife, he sliced the ribbon. Carys tensed, remembering how angry he'd been the other night. She hoped he'd take this gift as the kind gesture she'd intended it to be.

He lifted the lid, revealing two beautiful cakes, half-dome shapes with a scarlet mirrored glaze and a flourish of berries on top. He threw her a dark look.

‘You work hard,’ she said, ‘you never have a break, and I pass that place every morning. I got one for me too. If you have five minutes, we can enjoy them together.’ She picked up the cakes and put them on plates, and held one out for him.

‘I have to finish this,’ he said, gesturing at the pastry.

She bit back a disappointed sigh and was careful to keep her tone light. ‘That’s a shame. I was hoping you’d tell me what’s in it.’

He turned back to his work, shaking his head, as if this had been a preposterous request. A deep frown dug into his brow. Carys swallowed her disappointment and took her plate with her into the office. Never mind, she told herself. She’d enjoy hers.

As she sat down at her desk, the phone rang. Carys’s heart sank. Please let it not be Aurélie calling in sick again.

But it wasn’t. ‘Hi, Carys, it’s Ingrid.’

She sat up taller. She’d been hoping to speak to her. ‘Ingrid, it’s great to hear from you.’

‘Listen, I can’t talk long. We’ve had a tough couple of weeks. Mark’s dad is getting sicker and there’s so much to do at the ranch, but I wanted to check how it’s going with the café.’

Her heart sank. She’d been hoping to have a long chat and go through everything in detail. ‘The café’s good.’

‘No problems so far?’

‘No . . .’ She hesitated, thinking of Aurélie’s absences.

‘Everything okay with the staff, the supplies?’

There were so many issues Carys wanted to discuss with her, but hearing the anxiety in Ingrid’s voice made them suddenly shrink in importance. They could wait. Clearly Ingrid needed her reassurance that all was well at the café. ‘Yes, all good.’

‘I saw you’re being active on social media. That’s great, Carys. Exactly the kind of publicity the café needs. I’m so glad it’s going well. It’s a relief

that the business is in good hands. Listen, I'd better go. Keep up the good work.'

Carys hung up and chewed her lip, wondering if she'd done the right thing in keeping quiet about her problems. Well, too late now. She'd just have to resolve them herself.

'You know, Aurélie, it would be good if you were more proactive here.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean. Instead of standing by the counter you could be checking on the customers, making sure no one needs anything, clearing tables.' She wanted to add, *Léo does it. Why can't you?* but refrained. Comparing them would only put Aurélie's back up, and Carys didn't want that. She simply wanted her to get on with her job.

'You're saying I'm lazy,' Aurélie said, casting her a look of challenge.

Carys refused to be drawn into an argument. 'I'm saying I want you to do more.'

'Oh, yeah? Or what?'

Léo's words rang in her head, *You can't sack anyone in France*. She could reduce her hours and hire someone new, though.

It was tempting, but she decided that wasn't the tack she wanted to take. Instead she asked, 'Aurélie, why do you work here?'

The girl looked wrong-footed, but quickly recovered and rolled her eyes. 'What sort of a question is that?' When she saw Carys was waiting for an answer, she sighed. 'To pay the bills, of course. To keep a roof over my head. I don't do it for fun, that's for sure.'

She spoke so bitterly that Carys bristled. 'Yeah, but why here? Why the Red Cat Café and not – I don't know – the bistro down the road? Or McDonald's?'

Aurélie examined a long, navy blue nail. 'I've been here two years.'

'So you must like the place?'

Aurélie's head snapped up. 'If you're trying to threaten me—'

Carys held a hand up. 'I genuinely want to know why you like *this* job in *this* café? And if the answer is you don't, and you'd be happy to work

elsewhere, then maybe that's something you should think about doing. But only because you *choose* to.'

Aurélie looked confused. So Carys smiled and explained, 'I want us all to be here because we love working here. The Red Cat Café is special. It has a fun, welcoming vibe, and that's what our customers love about it. It's what Léo loves, and Emile too – in his own way. We're a team. But we can only be a team if we all pull our weight and work together.'

Hoping she'd made her point, Carys picked up a cloth and went to clear table twelve, leaving an unusually silent Aurélie behind the counter.

Later that day, Carys elbowed the kitchen door open and carried the tall stack of dirty plates to the sink. Emile was frying a couple of omelettes. As she loaded the dishwasher, she told him, 'Compliments to the chef from Monsieur Brioche. He said your sauerkraut was exquisite. He's never tasted anything like it.'

The chef didn't reply, but she noticed the flash of pride in his eyes and his frown lines softened a little. She smiled to herself as she put down the plates and washed her hands.

'By the way, it was raspberry and pistachio mousse,' he said.

She switched off the tap and reached for a dishcloth. 'What?'

'The cake you gave me.' He flipped the omelettes onto the waiting plates, placed them on the hatch and pressed the bell for service, then turned to face her. 'The biscuit base was very interesting. It was nutty and saltier than I expected – but it worked.'

Carys beamed. 'You liked it?'

'Yes. But I'm not making it.'

'I'm not asking you to.'

He eyed her carefully, then began to wipe the pans. 'Why did you buy it, then? I'm worried you're expecting me to match it. I can't make *pâtisseries* worthy of Ladurée or Pierre Hermé. They're the top.'

'That's not what I'm asking at all. I simply want you to see the joy and the bravery that went into those and enjoy them. How colourful they are, how bright and bold. I'm going to bring you one each day and, if they don't

inspire you, we'll simply enjoy eating them. If they spark ideas, it'll be a bonus. I don't want Ladurée or Hermé, only Emile. The most colourful, exciting and dramatic cakes you want to dream up. The best of you.'

'You're not happy with my cakes?' he asked quietly.

'I love your cakes, Emile, but I think you're playing safe with them. And I've seen how inventive you can be with your savoury dishes. Why not with the *pâtisseries*? Didn't you say you trained as a pastry chef?'

He pursed his lips but didn't reply. Instead he asked, 'Do you know how much time it takes to experiment? To create something new?'

'I do. And you're busy, I know. How about you slim down the choice for a few weeks while you experiment? We could make the same number of cakes but only four types instead of eight. Or we could buy them in for a while. Whatever it takes to help you.'

For the first time, he said nothing and seemed to consider her idea. Seizing the flicker of hope she felt, Carys continued, 'Imagine how much fun you could have experimenting, creating something new.'

Still he said nothing.

'Think about it,' she said, and left the kitchen with a smile on her face.

Carys placed the girl's coffee and sandwich on the table beside her laptop. She came in here most mornings and always had a ready smile for Carys.

'I hope you can enjoy the sunshine later,' Carys said, glancing at the computer screen filled with Japanese characters. 'It's such a beautiful day.'

'I've nearly finished – later I'm meeting a friend for a walk by the river.'

As Carys returned to the counter she saw Aurélie raise an eyebrow and knew she thought she was being overfriendly. Maybe she was, but Carys didn't care. She was being herself and she refused to change for anyone. She thought of Mat and felt a spark of excitement. If she hadn't approached him they might never have spoken.

She paused by Madame Jalibert's table to ask if she wanted another drink. 'No, thanks, dear. Carys, do you have a minute? I need to speak to you.'

'Of course.' Carys pulled out the chair beside her. Worried thoughts crowded her head. Was the old lady ill? Unhappy with something at the café?

‘How can I help?’

But, far from giving any cause for concern, Madame Jalibert’s eyes twinkled. ‘What do you think about hosting a fashion show?’

Carys couldn’t hide her surprise. ‘Here?’

She nodded.

‘We don’t really have the space.’

‘Yes, you do,’ she said firmly. ‘We only need a little spot. That one there would be perfect if we pushed those tables out of the way.’

‘What kind of fashion show?’ Madame Jalibert often talked about the catwalks and designer houses in Milan and New York. The Red Cat Café was hardly on a par with the venues she was used to.

‘It’s to promote a friend’s new clothing business. Sustainably sourced clothes for little ones.’

‘So the models would be children?’

Her earrings jangled as she nodded.

Carys remembered organising Willowbrook Primary’s nativity play, and herding cats sprang to mind.

‘Have you done a fashion show before?’

‘Never,’ Madame Jalibert responded. ‘But that’s no reason to shy away from trying, is it?’

‘True,’ Carys said.

‘The young woman is my friend’s daughter and she’s set up this business against the odds. She’s battled cancer, survived a divorce, and has very little money. I helped her start up. But we need a venue.’

‘You can’t call on your contacts in the fashion world?’ Carys suggested. They’d be far better placed to help.

Madame Jalibert looked a little sheepish. ‘I don’t have as many as I used to. Anyway, I’ve tried. You’re my only hope.’

Carys smiled. No pressure, then. She glanced at the space, trying to picture it. ‘I don’t know, Madame Jalibert. I’ll have to think about it.’

Later that afternoon, Carys was behind the counter when Léo passed. She was vigorously drying glasses and cups but her gaze was fixed on a woman at

the table in the corner of the room. Léo stopped.

‘What did she say to upset you?’ he asked, following her gaze. ‘You look like you want to strangle her.’

‘She didn’t say anything. In fact, she pretended she didn’t know me.’

‘But she does?’

She nodded. ‘It’s the girl who lives across the landing from me.’

‘The one who was rude when you knocked on her door?’

‘The very same.’ She was insanely beautiful in the impeccable way at which French women excelled: flawless skin and just enough make-up to look effortlessly elegant. Her hair hung down her back in sleek twists that must have taken hours to do, and she and her friends (also beautiful and well-dressed) had their phones in their hands as they discussed the make-up samples they’d brought. At least, that was what Carys thought they were discussing: they spoke so fast it had been hard to follow what they were saying as she’d served them.

‘Do you really want to be friends with people who eat salad and turn away the bread basket?’ Léo asked.

Carys laughed. ‘Emile’s food is wasted on them.’

‘And look at them. They’re so busy posting online about nail varnish they’ve barely glanced at each other. You had a lucky escape not getting involved with them.’

‘You’re right. We’d have nothing in common.’ She might be lonely in Paris, but she needed to find people who shared her values and interests.

She glanced around, disturbed by how her neighbour’s appearance had unsettled her. It wasn’t as if the café was a place of solace for her: if anything, Aurélie made her stress levels rise.

Carys’s gaze fell on Gérard, who was reading, then Madame Jalibert, and an idea landed unexpectedly in her head. Gradually, it began to take shape. What if the café *were* to be a place of solace? Not just for her, but for anyone.

Friday was pay day, and at closing time Carys waited in the office while Emile, Léo and Aurélie finished clearing up the café. She had envelopes of cash ready to give them. She was also planning another team meeting, though

after the last one she hadn't explicitly said so. Instead, she invited them to sit down and offered them drinks with some of Emile's lemon and almond biscuits.

'What's this?' Aurélie asked, looking at the plate of biscuits as if they might be laced with nerve agent. 'I have to go. I haven't time to hang around.'

'It won't take long,' Carys said firmly.

The girl blew out a long breath and looked at her watch to emphasise her point.

Carys cleared her throat. 'There's something I'd like to talk to you about.' Emile, too, looked impatient to leave and Léo was the only one enjoying a small beer. Carys took a deep breath and forged on. 'Paris is a big place. It can be lonely, even when you're surrounded by people.'

Léo's expression twisted into one of concern.

'So?' said Aurélie, bored.

'So wouldn't it be good if this café could be a community hub? A place people can go and feel they're not alone, they're among friends. A welcoming place, a haven.'

They stared at her blankly.

Emile sighed. 'What are you proposing?'

'Thursday evening we'll stay open a couple of hours later and hold an open-mic session. You don't have to work, but if you do I'll pay you double.'

'An open-mic session?' Aurélie looked appalled. 'What's that?'

'Where people come together and chat and make music or . . . whatever.'

Emile had folded his arms in a defensive pose.

Only Léo seemed interested in the idea. 'Singing?' he asked.

Carys nodded. 'Or anything else people want to do. Madame Jalibert would like to put on a mini fashion show – just for twenty minutes or so. Then Gérard is going to recite some poetry.'

Aurélie groaned. 'Don't tell me he wrote it himself.'

'No. He's reading Rimbaud.'

'That's all? Poetry and fashion? It's not much of an evening.'

'The rest will be improv. We'll see what happens on the night. We'll serve

wine and nibbles. Nothing complicated.’ She didn’t need to look at Aurélie to know she was rolling her eyes. Mustering her brightest tone, she finished, ‘So, who’s in?’

She adjusted her red satin scarf and waited nervously for their response. At a push, she could manage with just one of her team.

‘I will,’ Emile said.

Carys tried to hide her surprise.

‘It’s only a couple of hours and I could do with the extra cash,’ he explained. ‘It will be my son’s birthday soon and the games console he wants is not cheap.’

‘I will too,’ said Léo.

Carys shot him a grateful smile. She went to get up. Two out of three wasn’t bad.

‘And me,’ Aurélie said.

Carys stopped. Even the men looked surprised.

Aurélie shrugged. ‘I’ve missed a couple of days’ work. I could do with the money.’

It was Tuesday morning, their first day back after the weekend, and Carys was already dead on her feet. How was it possible to be so busy when there were three of them waiting on tables and Emile in the kitchen?

She cleared all the coffee dregs and wiped down the machine, polishing the chrome so it sparkled and surreptitiously keeping an eye on the café. Léo was clearing tables, stacking plates and cups on the tray that was expertly balanced in his right hand while chatting with a nearby customer, and Aurélie —

Where was Aurélie? Carys stopped and looked around. The girl had disappeared. She checked the clock: her break should have finished half an hour ago. No wonder Carys and Léo were rushed off their feet. This was the third time today Aurélie had vanished.

She put the cloth down and hurried towards the back room to find her. On the way she poked her head into the kitchen where Emile was whisking eggs. She carried on to the back room, and there she found Aurélie – asleep, with

her feet up on the arm of the sofa. Carys cursed. The girl was taking the mickey.

‘Aurélie!’ she said sternly.

The girl didn’t move.

‘Aurélie!’ she said more loudly.

Aurélie’s eyes sprang open. She looked genuinely shocked and confused to find herself there. She sat up, blinking, and rubbed her face. ‘What’s going on?’

Carys placed her hands on her hips. ‘Your break finished ages ago. It’s been mad busy out there.’

Aurélie stared at her, clearly so dazed that Carys almost felt sorry for her. Eventually she ran a hand through her hair and mumbled, ‘Okay, okay, I’ll be there in a minute.’

In a minute? Carys had to bite her lip not to lose her temper completely. ‘It mustn’t happen again, okay?’

Aurélie shot her a sulky look. ‘Sorry we’re not all bright and bouncy like you,’ she muttered, as she straightened her top. ‘Some of us have families at home who wear us out.’

Carys’s ears pricked. ‘You have a family?’

For some reason she’d assumed Aurélie was single, maybe with a boyfriend on the scene, but not a family.

‘Why the surprise? You’re going to tell me I’m too young?’

This girl had such a chip on her shoulder. ‘I’m just interested, that’s all.’

But the silence stretched on. Disappointed, Carys went to leave. It made her sad that they’d got off to such a bad start, but she wasn’t sure what she could have done differently. She’d tried being friendly, patient, stern, sympathetic – but nothing had worked. Aurélie seemed to have taken an instant dislike to her.

‘I have two boys,’ Aurélie said.

Carys stopped and turned.

Aurélie flicked her the quickest of glances but Carys didn’t miss the defiance, the defensiveness in her eyes.

For some reason, it made her heart tug. ‘That’s nice. How old are they?’

‘Two and four.’

‘Cute ages. Hard work, though, I’d imagine.’ She was careful to keep her tone neutral.

‘Very.’

Carys glanced at the sofa and wondered how she hadn’t seen before that Aurélie’s disinterest and laziness were actually exhaustion. ‘Do you have help?’ she asked.

‘You mean a nanny?’ Aurélie’s laugh was sharp and bitter. ‘No.’

‘I meant a partner or family.’

‘No,’ Aurélie said. ‘Just the crèche.’

Emile called from the kitchen, ‘We’re getting busy in here. Can one of you come and help?’

Carys poked her head through the door to say, ‘Just a minute.’ She turned back to Aurélie. ‘It must be tough raising two young kids alone. Is there anything I can do to help?’

Aurélie spluttered a laugh. ‘I don’t need your help. You’re my boss, not my friend.’

Her brittle words were so aggressive – yet the look in her eyes contradicted them. It was loaded with pain. Carys was thrown. ‘Well, if you change your mind and want to talk to me, I’m here.’ A crackly silence filled the room, then she added, ‘I’d love to see a photo of them.’

Aurélie looked surprised.

The clatter of cutlery made Carys glance over her shoulder. She was needed out there, but this felt important.

‘Here,’ said the girl, holding out her phone.

On the screen two smiling faces were butted up, cheek to cheek. She peered at them, taking in their pale red hair. ‘Oh, they’re adorable,’ she said softly.

‘Yes.’ Aurélie’s grey eyes were warm. ‘Exhausting too.’

Carys heard the weariness in her voice and desperately wanted to ask why she was alone, what had happened to their father. Why didn’t she have any family to help? Instead she said, ‘Little ones are. It gets easier, I’m told.’

Aurélie didn’t look convinced.

‘What are their names?’

‘Adam and Maxence.’

‘Do they get on well together?’

‘Most of the time, yes. They’re good boys.’ Her hard expression softened with love as she gazed at the picture.

‘Is the crèche near here?’

‘I can’t afford anything round here. It’s near our home,’ she said vaguely.

That explained why she was always keen to dash off after work. Carys thought of all the times she’d taken home boxes of leftover cake from the café, and suddenly it made sense. She pictured the tiny boys’ delight. Why hadn’t Aurélie said she was a mother? Why was she so obstructive and hard-edged?

Aurélie slipped the phone back into her bag. ‘The little one, Maxence, he’s been ill. He’s been waking at night, coughing. Terrible coughing fits that go on and on. I don’t know what to do. In the day he’s fine, but his cough . . . That’s why I’ve been late. And off work.’

The hard edge was still there, but Carys heard the anxiety in her voice and felt a wrench. Sensing there was more, she waited.

Sure enough, Aurélie continued, ‘Morning comes, and we’re all exhausted. We all sleep in the same room, you see. I can’t get them out of bed.’ She bowed her head. ‘I know it’s no excuse, but . . .’

‘Where is he now? Is he better?’

‘He’s at crèche. I called them earlier and they said he’s fine.’

Carys rested a hand on Aurélie’s shoulder. ‘Thanks for telling me.’

‘I don’t want to lose this job.’ Aurélie’s words were stony, but the look in her eyes was quite different.

Carys felt another tug, but the girl couldn’t keep turning up late. She led her back to the sofa and they sat down. ‘What can we do? How can I help you, Aurélie?’

Surprise flickered in her eyes before a shutter came down. ‘Nothing. No one can help. It’s my problem so I have to deal with it.’

‘Have you taken him to see the doctor?’

‘Twice. It didn’t help. He said it was a virus, but it keeps happening. And

it's not a virus. I'm his mother, I'd know, and he's fine in the day.' She blinked rapidly.

'Why don't you go back?'

'It's not that easy – the surgery's only open during the day when I'm working.'

'Take half a day off and go back,' Carys said firmly. 'Maybe ask to see a different doctor.'

'Take half a day off? I've missed so much work already. I can't afford it.'

'Do it. You'll be paid.' Carys ignored the voice in her head that wondered if she'd regret this offer. Would Aurélie take advantage? 'You need to get to the bottom of it – for him. And so you don't become ill with exhaustion too.'

'Okay.' Her gaze darted towards Carys, like a butterfly, and she muttered, 'Thanks.'

12

Carys

On Sunday afternoon Carys arrived at the park half an hour early. She hadn't intended to. She just didn't want to be late. There was no sign of Mat so she went for a quick walk, but as she passed children on scooters and couples strolling she kept half an eye on their meeting place. It was the end of September and, although the temperature had dropped a few degrees, it was a bright day and the sun was shining. At ten to two she sat down.

It wasn't long before she saw him. He waved as he approached and her heart jumped.

'*Salut,*' he said, and bent to kiss her on each cheek in the traditional French greeting. Her body sparked. He sat down beside her, resting one foot on his knee.

'Hi,' she said, and ran her gaze over his blue sweater and jeans, trying to ignore the jump of excitement at seeing him again. She smoothed out a crease in her wide-legged trousers and wished she'd opted for a more casual outfit. She'd been trying to pull off effortless Parisian chic, but she suspected she looked as if she was trying too hard. Plus her floral blouse was attracting the bees. At least she'd worn trainers and not heels. 'Have you had a good week?'

He tipped his head to one side. 'Not bad. Been busy at work. Working on an article about rail repairs. It doesn't get more exciting than that.'

She laughed. 'You're a journalist?'

A butterfly landed on her sleeve then flew off again. The pattern of red flowers must look more realistic through the eyes of an insect.

'Yeah,' he said unenthusiastically. The change in his mood was marked, and she could tell that he didn't enjoy his job.

'Who do you work for?'

‘Just a local paper.’ A dull frown cut through his brow. ‘A free one. The kind you see abandoned on the Métro and park benches.’

‘Still. Journalist – that’s exciting.’

He peered at her quizzically, as if unsure whether or not she was joking. ‘Believe me, it’s anything but exciting.’

‘You don’t enjoy your job?’ she asked, noticing how the light in his eyes had gone out.

‘Not really. I have the boss from Hell who tells us every day that we’re all useless. He’s always stressed, in a bad mood, and everything’s urgent.’

‘He sounds awful. Why don’t you—’

‘Change job? There aren’t many in journalism, these days. I’m lucky to have anything at all – especially one with a regular salary.’

‘Ah. Sounds tough.’

‘It is. Free newspapers are a dying breed. They’re living on borrowed time. Makes it stressful for everyone. I actually have sympathy for my boss. He’s got to keep the paper relevant but with practically no budget. It’s not easy. The broadsheets have more margin for error.’

‘You’d like to work for them?’

‘That’s the dream. Or a magazine. But I’ve not had any luck so far.’

‘You could do something else,’ she suggested. ‘Speaking from experience, I recommend having a complete career change.’

‘Maybe. Though words are my thing. They’re what I’m good at. But tell me about your career change. Where did you work before?’

She noticed how he’d changed the subject, but went with it. ‘Until a few weeks ago I was a primary-school teacher.’

‘In England?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wow. That’s quite a change of direction. Teacher to shopgirl.’

She opened her mouth to say it was a café not a shop, but her ears pricked at the ‘shopgirl’ reference. ‘Have you seen the film *You’ve Got Mail*?’

‘Of course. Meg Ryan is the original shopgirl.’

A rush of excitement hit her unexpectedly. It had been one of her and Liberty’s favourite films, and it made her like him a little bit more that he

knew it as well.

‘So why did you leave?’ he asked.

‘I was ready for a change. An adventure.’

‘And how are you enjoying your adventure so far?’

‘I’m loving it,’ she said honestly. ‘I’m getting to meet lots of new people at work, and learning my way round the city. It’s really exciting.’

A romance with a guy like him would be even more exciting, though. Someone kind, clever, interesting.

‘What have you visited so far?’ he asked.

She threw her arms wide. ‘There’s so much to see. I’ve made a huge list, and I’m ticking them off, one at a time.’

‘What kind of places? The Eiffel Tower? Sacré-Cœur?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ve seen them already, and I’m only here for a few months so I want to visit the places tourists don’t see – where real Parisians go. Anywhere and everywhere. I’m not hard to please.’ She smiled mischievously.

A faint blush tinged his cheeks. ‘I could show you around if you like.’

Her heart danced at the prospect. She tried to keep her tone casual as she said, ‘That would be great. Thanks. It’s always good to get an insider’s perspective.’

‘We could start now – if you have time? I know a great flea market.’

‘Why not?’ Excitement bubbled up inside her. She imagined dusty old books and useless bits of bric-a-brac, which weren’t really her thing, but that didn’t matter. It would be an opportunity to get to know him better. In truth, he could have offered to take her to a second-hand-car sale and she’d have agreed.

They set off walking through the park. She had no trouble keeping up with his pace.

‘It’s a great place to buy vinyl records,’ he said.

‘Aha! So that’s your niche interest.’

He laughed. ‘It’s not that niche, unfortunately. They’re becoming quite popular.’

They got the Métro north and emerged in a maze of outdoor and covered

market stalls. They walked past mirrors and picture frames, boxes of historic photographs, and old kitchen equipment. Carys lingered over a stall selling crockery and cutlery. A pretty mauve goblet caught her attention. The glass was bubbled and it tapered into a smooth, shapely stem. It conjured pictures in her mind of Marie Antoinette and wildly extravagant parties at the Palais de Versailles. But at twenty euros only royalty could afford it so she moved on.

When they reached a vinyl records stand Mat stopped. The faces of familiar Motown stars flashed past as he flicked through.

She asked him, 'Do you have a record player, then?'

'I do.'

'What do vinyls sound like? Are they as crackly as people say?'

'They can be.' He smiled. 'To be honest, that's part of their charm. Although I'm not so keen when they jump.'

'Are you looking for anything in particular?' Carys asked.

'Do you like Lionel Richie?'

'Of course.' Without thinking, she launched into song with the chorus of 'Hello'.

People nearby glanced at her but she barely noticed. 'You have a good voice,' Mat told her.

'Why, thank you. Normally I play the guitar and my friend, Liberty, sings. She's shy about it, but she has an amazing voice.' Carys, on the other hand, loved performing. There was nothing more life-affirming or joyous. She riffled through the records, humming as she searched.

'I play guitar, too. Well, I used to.' He laughed, and his cheeks darkened a little. 'I used to write songs when I was a teenager.'

'Music or lyrics?'

'Both.'

'That's wonderful. Why did you stop?'

'Because they were terrible.' His lopsided smile made her heart tilt.

'How do you know?'

He considered this. 'It was obvious – from my dad's reaction.'

'Did anyone else give you feedback?'

‘No one else heard them. Probably best that way.’

He was so self-effacing. ‘Well, I’d love to hear one.’

‘Sorry. Not going to happen. I didn’t keep any of them.’

‘But you must remember them.’

He shook his head.

‘It’s sad that you’ve given up on something you love because someone once criticised it. You can’t let one person’s opinion crush your hopes, your dreams, what you love. You need to “reach for the stars”!’ She spread her arms in a Buzz Lightyear pose. ‘Why are you laughing? You don’t like *Toy Story*?’

‘I love *Toy Story*, and I’m laughing because that was a good impression. But you know it’s “reach for the sky”? And it’s Woody who says it, not Buzz.’

‘What does Buzz say?’

‘“To infinity and beyond”!’ he said, putting on his best American accent.

‘Well, I prefer “reach for the stars”.’ He chuckled. ‘Seriously, though,’ she went on, ‘you should follow your heart. Write songs if that’s what makes you happy.’

‘I’m serious when I say I’m no good at it.’

‘First, how can you be sure? And, second, who cares? Do it anyway. Do it for you.’ She moved to the next box and leafed through, spotting Lulu, Phil Collins, George Michael. It was like one of the treasure hunts they’d done when she was small. She really wanted to be the one who found the star prize and presented it to Mat, watching his face light up. ‘My mum loved Lionel,’ she confessed. ‘Pretty sure she still does. Barry Manilow, too.’

‘You can keep Barry. He’s a bit cheesy for me.’

‘And Lionel isn’t?’

He tipped his head a little. ‘Maybe. But if Lionel’s a good firm Brie, Barry’s an overripe Camembert stinking the place out.’

They continued flicking through the records, and she cast a surreptitious glance his way. His hair had flopped forward and his brow was furrowed in concentration. She barely knew him, yet she sensed there was something innately kind and reliable about him. It would be sensible to stay cautious, to

guard her heart until they'd spent more time together, but her imagination was running away with her, and she found herself imagining where he lived and what his record collection looked like. She pictured a tiny studio like hers, but maybe in a scruffier part of Paris. Unlike her, he'd know all his young neighbours by name.

'Aha!' he said, holding up an album. 'Bingo.' Lionel's white teeth beamed at her.

He turned it over to reveal a sticker marked five euros. 'That's a good price, isn't it?'

'Very.' His gaze met hers and his eyes shone with undiluted joy. It made her head spin.

'Let's go to the café,' Mat had said, after he'd paid for the record. 'My treat.'

'A drink to toast Lionel?'

He'd grinned. 'Yeah.'

Now, though, their lager bottles were empty and Carys sensed he wanted to leave. He'd checked his watch twice surreptitiously in the last half-hour. 'Have you got an appointment?' she asked.

A puzzled frown tugged at his brow. 'What?'

'You keep checking your watch. Is there somewhere you need to be?'

'Oh – yes. No. Kind of. I have a reservation for dinner.'

Shame. She'd been about to suggest they get some food. Never mind. 'Shall we make a move, then? I have to get back too.'

It wasn't true. She'd be sitting alone in her studio apartment, but he didn't need to know that. She wondered who he was meeting for dinner. Was it a woman? Perhaps Carys had misinterpreted his friendliness. Perhaps he was simply showing her around the city as a favour.

They settled the bill and left. As they followed the main road towards the Métro, an ambulance came out of nowhere. Its siren slammed into life, a blue and white hurricane that made everyone spring back. In the street cars pulled over, wedging themselves at awkward angles to let it pass.

The blood drained from Carys's face. Petrol fumes filled her nostrils. She stared, tasting tubes in her mouth, seeing masked faces bent over her, hearing

machines beeping. She could see it in her mind as if it were a film, with all the close-up details: her yellow nail polish, the summery song she'd been humming along to, the round headlights of the car coming towards her on the wrong side of the road. The oxygen was snatched from her lungs. The noise was deafening. The headlights grew larger, closer, and her mouth dried, the accident happening again in slow motion. Her heart hammered in her chest as she saw the other car hurtling towards her, swerving out of control. Her fingers gripped the steering wheel and she clung on, praying he wouldn't—

‘Carys? Are you okay?’

She blinked, realised Mat's face was close to hers and his soft blue eyes were flooded with concern. Her fingers reached for his sleeve and she clung on to steady herself.

He frowned. ‘What's wrong?’

Her mouth felt sticky, she couldn't form the words.

Anyway, she'd come to Paris to get away from all that. She didn't want to go back to being the girl who'd survived the crash. Especially not with Mat. ‘I – just felt a bit dizzy.’ Her hand went to her head, and she tried to force away the blue car bonnet, the headlamps like eyes. ‘Must be low blood sugar or something.’

A red fire engine hurtled round the corner too. It charged down the left side of the street against the oncoming traffic. They watched it go, then Mat's arm came around her waist and he eased her away from the busy road. ‘Want to sit down somewhere?’ he asked.

‘No. I'm all right.’ She felt breathless. That flashback had come out of nowhere. Why here? Why now? She cursed it, this weakness of hers. When would she put the accident behind her? What was so wrong with her head that it ambushed her like that at the most inopportune moments? ‘I feel better now.’

‘Can I get you anything? Food? Water?’

Her smile felt plastic but it was the best she could do. She glanced around at the heavy traffic and crowded street. She just wanted to get away from there. ‘Honestly, I'm fine. Let's go.’

‘You sure you're okay?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she said, putting one shaky foot in front of the other. She slipped her arm into his to steady herself.

He looked surprised, then grinned. They passed a shop selling old comic books and a flower stall that reminded her of Natasha’s shop in Willowbrook. She was frustrated with herself for what had just happened, but it was also a crude reminder that she had stood on the edge of life. She knew how terrifying it was. The accident had left scars, but it also meant she’d never take for granted the ability to breathe, talk or walk independently. She’d come within a hair’s breadth of losing her life, and now she wanted to live. Completely. Joyfully. Without holding back. She wouldn’t waste a second.

She glanced at Mat. She felt steadier now, and could have let go of his arm – but it felt right. She liked the closeness, the warm tingle of human contact. Mat was different from the other men she’d known. He was more vulnerable, more honest. She felt a connection she couldn’t explain. All she knew was she liked him.

‘Mat?’

He glanced at her, creases fanning from his eyes. ‘Mm?’

‘Do you have a partner? A girlfriend?’

He stopped to let a jogger pass, and Carys stopped too. ‘No, I don’t,’ he said, holding her gaze. ‘Do you?’

She smiled and shook her head. She hesitated, her heart beating fast, like a flag dancing in the wind. The ambulance siren was still fresh in her mind. *Say it, girl. What do you have to lose?* ‘I like you, Mat. I think we could be friends.’

A smile started in his eyes and she watched it spread. The people flowing past them and the noise of the street shrank away. ‘I like you too, Carys Bell. I hope we can be more than friends.’

13

Mat

Jean-Baptiste was getting a grilling.

‘This is terrible!’ their boss shouted. ‘Substandard and then some! How can you have the audacity to show it to me?’

Through the glass window of Christian’s office, Mat could see the boss was red in the face, his hair sticking up wildly. Jean-Baptiste was solemn, taking the onslaught as silently and stoically as a martyr.

From the safe distance of their desks, Mat and Alice shared a look of sympathy for their colleague.

‘Start again!’ Christian shouted. ‘Rewrite it, and this time inject a little enthusiasm for your subject – if you know what enthusiasm is.’

‘Not the best day to ask him, then,’ Mat said.

Alice chewed her pencil. ‘The thing is, if we don’t ask today we’ll miss our chance and by next week it’ll be too late.’

She was right.

Jean-Baptiste emerged scowling. He was a big man, solidly built, played rugby, but now he looked defeated. Mat felt a twist of sympathy. They’d all been there. Christian’s words could fell a man.

‘You okay?’ Alice asked quietly, as he sat down opposite them.

‘Fine.’

Mat understood: the guy was smarting.

Half an hour later, Mat nudged Alice and pointed at their boss’s office. ‘He’s just finished a call. How about now?’

She followed his gaze and sighed. ‘Now or never, I guess.’

They traipsed over and knocked on his door. Christian glanced up. ‘What?’ he snapped.

They stepped inside. Mat said, ‘We have an idea for a piece.’

Christian peered at them over the top of his glasses. ‘And it takes two of you? Are we at primary school? You’re practically holding hands.’

Mat stiffened. Alice’s eyes flashed fire. ‘It’s too much work for one person,’ she said icily. ‘It would involve a lot of research and interviews.’

‘Then the answer’s no. We don’t have time.’ Their boss continued to type. His fingers tapped a clunky staccato rhythm against his keyboard.

They shared a glance, then Mat said, ‘If you allocate us a day, we’ll do the rest in our own time.’

The boss stopped typing. Then he sighed and gestured for them to sit. ‘Tell me.’

They perched on the black leather seats opposite him, their backs rigid.

‘The Palais de la Musique round the corner is reopening next week,’ Alice said. ‘It’s been closed for ten years and they’ve just done eight months of renovation work. We thought we could write a piece about its history, the new owners, why it was closed for so long.’

‘An in-depth feature,’ Mat said. ‘It’s a really beautiful place. I don’t know if you’ve seen on social media, but they’ve been teasing their followers with little snapshots of the new interior and it looks amazing.’

‘I did see something.’ Christian stroked his chin thoughtfully. ‘Everyone’s keen for it to reopen. You’ll be building on the sense of anticipation.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Yes. I like it.’

Mat felt a flare of joy.

Christian frowned. ‘You’ll have to make sure it doesn’t read like an advert for the place, though.’

‘Of course,’ said Mat. ‘We’re planning to take the angle of how the building and the area have evolved over time.’

‘Good.’ Christian studied them in turn. ‘This is good initiative from you. I’m impressed.’

‘Thanks,’ said Alice, and glanced at Mat. Her blue eyes sparkled with reflections of the window.

‘Fine. You can have a day to work on this, but not a minute longer.’

‘Yes, boss.’ They got up.

At the door, Mat paused, waiting for Alice to go first.

‘Did you apply for the promotion?’ Christian asked. ‘The deadline is soon.’

They nodded and hope swelled in Mat. It might be the smallest crumb of encouragement, but it was more than anything Christian had ever shown him before.

Mat walked home from work in good spirits, buoyed by Christian’s approval, but also with thoughts of Carys. He carried the excitement of it around with him, and was counting the days until the following Sunday.

I like you too, Carys Bell. I hope we can be more than friends. He couldn’t believe he’d been brave enough to say that. But for some reason he felt he could be completely honest with her. He felt he could be himself. And he’d meant what he’d said: he did hope. Hope was unfurling and blooming inside him, like the trees in the park coming into leaf.

‘Got any change?’ the homeless guy asked from his doorway.

Mat stopped. He dug around in his pockets. He couldn’t find any change, but he had a note. He hesitated a second, then gave him that instead.

The guy’s eyes widened. ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I’ll be able to stay at the shelter tonight.’

Mat peered closer at him. He passed him every day, yet he didn’t know his name. ‘I’m Mat, by the way.’

‘Michel.’ He held out his hand.

Once he got home, Mat opened a beer and leaned against the balcony. It was a clear evening, cloudless. Carys had been so easy to talk to, and he thought of how it had all spilled out of him: how much he hated his job, how he used to write songs. Things he didn’t normally talk about, yet he hardly knew her. She was a stranger he’d met in a park a couple of times. But sometimes it was easier to talk to a stranger.

Reach for the stars! Follow your heart. Write songs if that’s what makes you happy . . . Do it for you.

Her words made him smile; her positivity was infectious. All his life he’d been striving to pass exams with good grades, get recognition from his dad or

his boss or readers. He'd mostly come up short. So the idea of doing something without any expectation? It was liberating.

He ducked inside, retrieved his guitar from the back of the wardrobe and began to pick at the strings, like a blind man feeling his way into an unfamiliar room.

The next day Mat and Alice stepped outside. It had been raining, and the street was washed clean. The cars parked along the side of the road glistened with beads of iridescent water.

Alice fist-pumped the air. 'That was amazing.'

Mat laughed. 'It was.'

'So much material.'

'Yeah.'

The new owner of the Palais de la Musique had given them an in-depth interview and a treasure trove of photos, historic records and leaflets from a hundred years ago.

Their steps were light as they set off towards the Métro station.

'This is going to be such a good piece,' Alice said.

'Lots to do, though.' They'd worked late every night that week and their deadline was only two days away.

'Come on. Let's get back to the office. With any luck we might have a rough draft done by tonight.'

Mat agreed, the article taking shape in his mind.

Mat looked up from his computer. Through the office window the city was cloaked in darkness. The street below was hushed and still. The bicycle in the florist's window display had a ghostly air. His colleagues had left hours ago, but he and Alice had stayed behind. They'd ordered in pizza and downed energy drinks to crack on with their article. He glanced at his watch. He'd been so absorbed in his work, he hadn't noticed how late it was, but now tiredness hit. Even the city lights seemed subdued and had lost their sparkle.

'I've moved this line and moved it back again three times now,' he told

Alice. ‘Think I’d better call it a day.’ His eyes felt gritty, his limbs heavy. ‘How are you getting on?’

She was bent over her keyboard, her brows knotted in a tight frown. ‘Slowly.’ She sighed. ‘Here’s what I’ve done.’

She twisted her screen for him to see, but his eyesight wasn’t good enough so he got up and leaned over her desk to read it. They’d divided the work between them: she’d set out the history of the place, while Mat had been sifting through all the interview material, hunting for the most eye-catching quotes about the building’s recent history and current renovations.

‘It’s good,’ he said. ‘Those pictures are excellent. We’re so lucky they survived.’ The clock on the wall slid to the half-hour with a soft click.

‘You think the boss is going to like it?’

‘I’m sure he will.’

Alice smiled up at him. He caught a hint of her perfume. She kept a tiny bottle in her desk and sprayed it whenever she went to the loo. It smelt as familiar to him as his own aftershave. There were lines of fatigue around her eyes, but the satisfaction and pride he saw in them reflected his own. This was why he’d become a journalist. To write about things that mattered.

‘We make a good team,’ she said softly.

‘We do.’ He continued to scroll down, skimming the words she’d written. ‘Good job, really. This place would be hellish without an ally.’

‘Mat?’

‘Yeah?’

She swallowed, and he threw her a sidelong glance, suddenly aware of a tension that hadn’t been there before. ‘It’s late. Do you – I mean, would you like to come back to my place?’

‘You want me to walk you home?’ He couldn’t hide his surprise. She’d never seemed afraid before, yet they’d worked late many times.

‘That’s not what I meant.’ Her eyes locked with his meaningfully and the penny dropped.

He sprang back, away from her. A jumble of emotions twisted through him, surprise the strongest of all. He’d thought they were friends, hadn’t thought she saw him in that way.

‘You’re horrified.’ She groaned, and began to pack up her things hurriedly. Her expression was fierce, but her cheeks told him she was embarrassed. Mortified, even.

‘No,’ he said quickly, ‘no – I’m not. Just surprised. And tired. My brain’s not—’

‘It’s fine.’ She held up her hand. ‘You don’t need to explain.’

‘Alice—’

‘Forget I said anything, okay? I’m tired too. I don’t know what I was thinking. I *wasn’t* thinking—’

‘Alice, stop,’ he said loudly. He could see her pain. He felt it. He cleared his throat. And he liked Alice, he really liked her, but not in that way. Oh, damn. His silence was only making the hurt in her eyes intensify. ‘The thing is, I’ve met this girl – an English girl. She – I like her.’

Alice blinked. ‘When did you meet her? You haven’t said anything.’

‘Sunday. I mean, we’d met before, once, but—’

‘So you’re not “going out”?’

‘We are,’ he insisted. Then felt a rush of doubt. ‘Kind of.’

‘Kind of?’

‘We’re friends. But I’m hoping . . . I mean, she’s special.’

‘And you can tell that even though you hardly know her?’

He knew it sounded impossible, but he remembered how Carys had asked, ‘Do you have a partner?’ and the delighted smile that had lit her face when he’d said no. ‘Yes. I can.’

Surprise gave way to defeat. ‘Right.’

Alice still looked dejected, but Mat was relieved that he’d been honest with her.

Tonight’s restaurant was an unremarkable place near the Conservatoire. An Italian restaurant, Pepe (meaning ‘pepper’ – he’d checked) was popular with the students, which meant, Mat hoped, it shouldn’t be too pricey. On the other hand, he had low expectations. It was rare to find good eateries in student areas: they tended to go for quantity rather than quality. Still, he was curious to investigate.

He ducked inside, shaking off his umbrella before he closed the door. The walls were bare brick and the décor was fussy: red gingham and shelves of dusty bottles. He felt the roll of disappointment. This was going to be mediocre, he knew it. There'd be nothing to write, except that the pizza had been perfect, the dough crisp and thin.

The waiter set a basket of bread in front of him, and flicked on the small lamp with a fringed shade, then scurried off. Mat scanned the menu, and felt a nudge of interest: all the traditional dishes – lasagne, cannelloni, and so on – were interspersed with other, more unusual possibilities. *Ossobuco* took him straight back to his childhood because it had been a favourite of his grandmother. He and his mother used to make it for her birthday. If he remembered correctly, it had taken hours, but making it had been an act of love, and worth it when he saw Grandmère's delight . . . *Orecchiette* with deep-fried spinach balls, chilli and breadcrumbs. Lamb shank, slow-cooked Roman-style.

He ordered a couple of starters, the lamb and a glass of red wine. The place was cosy, the clientele mostly older students. He guessed they were postgraduates, or perhaps teachers. The young students looked barely out of shorts and he remembered when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge. He'd been so starry-eyed back then, so naïve. He dipped his head and took another swig of wine. Perhaps he should have been more pragmatic about his career choice and chosen accountancy or translation. He would have had a professional qualification, a job for life.

Pushing these thoughts out of his mind, he examined the plates being brought out and tried to see what the other diners were eating. The *osso bucco* seemed popular, and they all ate greedily, although that might have no bearing on the food if they were simply hungry. He began to make notes on his phone, observing what was going on around him. So much about an eating experience wasn't just about the food hitting your palate: it was about the waiting staff and the hum of other customers around you, the presentation of the food on your plate, the careful craft of a passionate chef versus a slapdash affair deposited hurriedly in front of you.

He was still jotting notes when the door opened and four young people

came in. He glanced up. They looked like another table of diners, except that the waiter greeted them like long-lost friends, and instead of showing them to a table he ushered them into an empty corner. They arranged themselves in a careful formation and smiled broadly. One of the men caught Mat's eye and winked. Mat frowned. Who were they? What were they here for? Suddenly, they launched into an a capella version of a recent pop song.

Mat was enthralled. It was excellent, better even than the original, yet the other diners continued talking and eating, unperturbed. Mat's starters arrived, and he ate the *arancini* balls and king prawn *bruschetta* to the accompaniment of an opera aria. By the time his lamb came, they were midway through a rendition of 'Ave Maria' and the waiter sang along until the chef called from the kitchen for him to shut up.

The waiter grinned at Mat. 'I can't help it!' he said, then made a zipping motion across his lips.

Mat chuckled and leaned back in his chair, savouring it all.



Review: Pepe

One word is all it takes to sum up this place. Charming.

Unless you're allergic to music, it would be impossible not to fall in love with Pepe. The food is exquisitely prepared, with the kind of attention to detail that suggests OCD – or, in this case, a chef's passion for Italian food. A simple tomato sauce is made complex with a hint of anchovy, the lamb shank is marinated overnight, then slow-cooked to make it meltingly tender; even the arancini have fantastic depth of flavour, thanks to the top-quality buffalo mozzarella and sundried tomatoes tucked inside the centre like hidden jewels. But what makes this place so memorable won't be the food (sorry, Chef): it's the musical accompaniments spontaneously provided by students from the Conservatoire next door.

*The verdict: ***** (5 stars)*

Don't be fooled by its humble exterior: this is a magical music box of delights hidden in plain sight.

Carys

Carys stepped out of the *pâtisserie* clutching a white cake box and breathed in the fresh early-morning air. Today she'd *picked* pecan and caramel éclairs decorated with gold leaf. They were ridiculously flamboyant and she couldn't wait to taste hers. She hoped Emile would enjoy his. He occasionally found time to eat with her in the office, and she loved listening to him analyse the ingredients and give his opinion on what worked and what didn't. But when she stepped outside, the cakes were forgotten as a poster in the window caught her attention.

Stargazing in Paris, she translated. It was free, and held in the Parc Montsouris. With a tug she thought of Willowbrook, and the summer nights when she and Liberty used to sit in the garden of Damselby Cottage, watching the cosmos glide slowly past, discussing their hopes and dreams, hoping to see a shooting star and make a wish. The nights would be cooler now, but the prospects of stargazing and visiting a new park were too good to miss. She snapped a photo of the poster, and wondered if Mat would like to go with her. Her heart jumped at the thought of him. Then she set off towards the café.

'Hey, what's this?' she gasped, as she entered the kitchen.

Emile shrugged. 'You said you wanted more colour so I experimented.'

Carys stared at the tray beside him. It boasted a line of what looked like enormous chocolate sweets. The centres were glazed with chocolate, and at either side he had dusted twists of filo pastry with cocoa. She licked her lips. 'Emile, they look fabulous.'

'Inside is a chocolate roulade. Taste one and tell me what you think.'

She didn't hesitate, just grabbed a plate and dug in with a fork. Her eyes widened as tastes and textures exploded on her tongue. 'This is delicious. Our

customers are going to love them.'

These were exactly the kind of unusual and eye-catching cakes she'd hoped he would make. Even better, in fact. She'd always had the feeling he was playing safe and she was so glad he'd tried something different.

'I don't know. The filo pastry is a touch overcooked. And I need to work on the presentation.'

She looked from his deep frown to the perfect glossy cakes. 'What nonsense! Emile, they are amazing.' Spontaneously, she stood on tiptoe and hugged him. '*You* are amazing! You're so talented.'

The big proud man blushed endearingly.

Carys was right: their customers loved the cakes. They were also a huge hit on social media, and by late morning she reported to Emile that they'd sold out. 'Will you make them again?' she asked, handing him the empty tray.

He pursed his lips. 'Maybe.'

'It's good to experiment, keep the menu fresh.'

He blew out his cheeks. 'It's a lot of work.'

She smiled affectionately. 'Only because you're such a perfectionist.'

'That's not a bad thing,' he said indignantly.

'It is if it holds you back. Sometimes it's better to try and fail than not try at all.'

'Is that what you're doing here?'

'What do you mean?'

'I heard you have no experience of working in a café.'

A sudden chill washed over her. 'What? Who told you—' She stopped herself and drew her shoulders back. 'Never mind what the gossips say. We're a team. We all want the café to be a success. Don't we?'

He made an imperceptible movement of the head that might have been a nod.

As she turned to leave, he said, 'It doesn't matter to me.'

She stopped.

His deep voice was the only sound in the quiet kitchen. 'That you don't have the experience. It doesn't matter. You're good at it. A natural.'

Aurélie arrived at lunchtime looking markedly brighter. She had a spring in her step and almost smiled as she said hello.

Carys followed her into the office, where she hung up her jacket. ‘How’s Maxence? What did the doctor say?’

Aurélie had been late the previous day because her son had been ill in the night, and, although he’d been better by midday, she’d clearly been worried about him. Carys had insisted she make an appointment to see the doctor today.

‘He thinks it’s asthma,’ Aurélie said. ‘I never thought of it because he hasn’t been wheezy, but apparently in children it can present itself as coughing. The doctor’s given him inhalers.’

‘Good. Fingers crossed they’ll help.’ Carys smiled, but Aurélie didn’t smile back.

‘Thanks for giving me the morning off. Will I still get paid?’

‘I said you would, but it’s a one-off, Aurélie. I need to know I can rely on you.’ Carys picked up Raoul’s water bowl to refill it. ‘And I hope you’ll come to me if you have any more problems.’

‘I will.’

‘Good.’ Carys smiled. ‘We’re a team, remember?’

Aurélie rolled her eyes, then smiled and added, ‘Thanks again.’

‘This cake is left over, Aurélie. Would you like to take it home?’

The café was closed and Carys and Aurélie were in the kitchen tidying the last few bits away. Aurélie glanced at the pancake tower: layers of crêpes sandwiched together with chocolate sauce. A customer had ordered and paid for it but not turned up to collect it. It wouldn’t keep, Emile had informed Carys before he’d left.

‘I don’t need charity!’ Aurélie snapped.

Carys bristled. ‘I never said you did. If you don’t want it, don’t take it. Someone else will appreciate it.’ She turned away to hide her disappointment. She’d hoped they’d reached a new level in their relationship since Aurélie had opened up about her boys, but her words stung.

Was Carys guilty of pitying her? Maybe a little – but only because she

recognised how hard it must be raising young children alone. And, living in this expensive city, she didn't know how Aurélie managed to make ends meet on her wages.

Aurélie glanced back at the cake and sighed. 'Well, if it's going to waste, then okay.' She scooped up the box and went to leave.

Carys tried to hide her delight. 'And don't forget tomorrow evening we have the social night.'

Aurélie groaned. 'How could I forget?'

Thursday evening came round fast, and Carys checked the layout for the hundredth time. She adjusted a chair here, a table there. Were they close enough together? Too close? The café wasn't enormous, but by stacking half of the furniture in the office and pushing the rest against the window they'd managed to create a decent stage area in the back corner that was raised. She hoped tonight would go well. Aurélie had made it clear she didn't expect it to, and now that it was almost upon them Carys had lost confidence in her idea. But she hid her nerves behind a wide smile and a loud, cheerful '*Bonsoir!*' as Madame Jalibert arrived with her designer friend and suitcases of clothes.

'Is that it?' Aurélie said, surveying the room. 'A couple of children, Madame Jalibert and Gérard? Hardly worth opening up for.'

Carys tried to hide her disappointment. Léo and Emile were in the kitchen, arms folded, but she could see they weren't impressed by the turnout either. 'It's only the first night. These things take time to get off the ground.'

'You mean we're going to do it again?' Aurélie looked horrified.

'Let's see how it goes.' She eyed the wine bottles lined up behind her. Far too many for this small group.

Madame Jalibert darted out of the office. She'd asked the young family who were regulars in the café to model for her, and Fabien and Laure were in the back, giggling loudly. 'Nearly ready?' she asked.

Carys consulted her watch. 'We haven't got a full house, but we'd better make a start anyway.'

'Don't worry,' said Madame Jalibert. 'They'll come. I told everyone about

it. Why don't you begin with the poetry reading?'

'Good idea.' Carys went over and spoke to Gérard.

He took to the stage.

Aurélié rolled her eyes as he began to read. 'Oh, great,' she muttered. 'It's like being back at school.'

From his deep, confident voice it was clear he had a passion for the poems he was reciting, but Carys didn't understand much. While he read, more people arrived, including the student from Japan. With a nudge from Carys, Aurélié slipped past, offering drinks.

Gérard got polite applause when he finished, and took an elegant bow before telling the room, 'I brought my godson with me.' He beckoned a teenage boy to him. 'Louis is going to play the violin for you.'

Carys paused in pouring drinks, and steeled herself. Her pupils had often brought instruments into school, and she knew how bad beginners could sound. She really hoped it wouldn't scare everyone away before the fashion show.

But as the first notes sounded, she put down the wine bottle. Across the room, Aurélié caught her eye and they shared a look of surprise. It was beautiful. Gérard's godson was seriously gifted. He played folk music, a couple of short, jaunty jigs that got everyone tapping their feet and smiling.

When he finished, the applause was loud this time, and not only because more guests had arrived and almost all the seats were filled. 'He plays at the Conservatoire,' Gérard said proudly.

'We're next,' said Madame Jalibert, snatching the microphone from him. She clicked her fingers for Carys to start the music and the mini fashion show began. The happy beat got the room clapping, and from then on the evening passed in a blur. One guest, inspired by the violin performance, nipped home and returned with a guitar; someone else got up and sang. Emile performed a couple of magic tricks. 'You never told us you're a magician!' Carys said, when he finished.

'I'm not. I'm just trying to be a cool dad.' He blushed, as he added, 'My son's friends like it.'

The till rang constantly, and it turned out Carys hadn't overstocked on

wine after all: every bottle was finished. Most of all, everyone had enjoyed themselves and taken part.

At ten o'clock she took the microphone and thanked everyone for coming. The whole room smiled, and Madame Jalibert was teetering a little tipsily on her heels. The energy in the room was electric and Carys felt a rush of warmth. This was exactly what she'd hoped tonight would be. Fun. Happy. Bringing people together.

'When's the next one?' someone asked.

'We're going to be open every Thursday,' Carys said.

She'd have to wait until next week to see how many people came back, but she had a feeling this was the start of something good.

Mat

Things had been awkward with Alice ever since that late night in the office two days ago and his fumbled rejection of her, so today Mat had brought a peace offering. At least, he hoped that was how she'd take it.

'For you,' he said, as he handed her the small parcel wrapped in baking parchment. His gaze held hers briefly and he hoped it was enough to communicate there were no hard feelings.

It crinkled as she took it. 'It's warm. What is it?'

'Quiche. My neighbour made it.' He added, by way of explanation, 'I rebooted her internet.'

'And she pays you in quiche?' Alice's eyes danced. 'But it's yours. You should have it.'

'I want you to have it. I'm sorry about the other night. I don't want it to come between us. You're a good friend, Alice.' There. He felt better for having said it.

She waved this away but glanced around, checking no one had heard. 'It's fine, forgotten. But thanks for the quiche. Perfect timing, because I didn't have any breakfast.'

Pietro walked past, talking loudly into his phone, gesticulating with his free hand and nodding to them as he passed.

Alice took a bite and her eyes lit up like a summer sky. 'Wow. This is delicious. No wonder you always stop to help her.'

'I don't have any choice. She doesn't have anyone else.' It wasn't only duty that motivated him. He enjoyed calling into her apartment and their apéritifs had become a regular thing. The second time he'd visited, he'd found the Monopoly board exactly as they'd left it, ready to resume their game. The tray of drinks had been laid out ready too, only this time it

included a couple of bottles of beer for him. He'd been touched.

'She has no children? Grandchildren?' Alice bit into the quiche again hungrily, and he tried not to salivate. It looked delicious. Madame Parot excelled at baking, but quiche was her speciality.

'A son she always hopes will visit, but he never does.'

'He lives far away?'

'In Melun.' He thought of the suburb around forty kilometres outside Paris. It wouldn't take much more than an hour on the train. Less in the car.

'Poor woman.' She leaned back in her chair. 'I feel guilty now. Haven't been home for months. But my parents have my brother, their blue-eyed boy who can do no wrong.'

Mat wanted to tell her not to put herself down, and he related to her feelings: her parents, like his dad and Christian too, had sapped her confidence. He wanted to tell her that chasing her dream was important. But he was so relieved they'd got past their previous awkwardness that he stayed quiet and flicked on his computer instead.

'Right.' Alice scrunched the baking parchment into a ball. 'Better get back to work if we want to hand this in today.'

*

'Ready to send?' Alice asked.

Mat ran his gaze over the document for the third time and nodded. 'Do it.'

She clicked.

They looked over at Christian, as if they might see the document sail through the air and land on his desk. Their boss, oblivious, was on the phone. When he saw them watching him, a puzzled frown creased his face. 'What?' he mouthed.

They shook their heads and hurriedly turned away.

'Hope he likes it,' Alice muttered, under her breath.

'After all the work we put into it, he'd better.' Mat had given up counting how many hours of their own time it had taken. Although, in truth, trawling through old photographs hadn't felt like work. Neither had interviewing the

handful of local residents old enough to remember the place in its heyday last century when it had been a popular dance hall. Their memories had been fascinating, and the hardest task had been condensing all the information he and Alice had collected into a succinct article. But now it was done, he was proud of the result. They had been thorough: they'd searched the archives, checking every fact. It was one of the best pieces he'd worked on. He couldn't wait to see Christian's reaction when he read it.

A couple of hours later, Christian dashed out of his office to use the scanner.

Alice and Mat watched him. He was busy. Stressed. But, then, he was always busy and stressed.

'You gonna ask him?' she said.

Mat considered this. 'Best to wait for the verdict. He probably hasn't read it yet.'

She went back to typing.

Christian finished his task and crossed the office. As he passed their desks, he stopped. 'Alice, have you finished the traffic news?'

'Just sent it.'

'Mat, where are you up to with the letters page?'

'Nearly done.'

'Good.'

He left, but Mat called after him, 'Have you read our piece yet?'

'Which one?'

'The Palais de la Musique.'

'Oh. Yeah.' His expression gave nothing away.

Mat waited. 'Well? What did you think?'

'Meh.'

Mat blinked. Across the office Julianne launched into the sales spiel that she recited dozens of times a day to pitch advertising space.

'That's it? Meh?' Alice said incredulously.

'You spent too long on it, didn't you?' Christian asked.

Alice and Mat exchanged a glance. Why the accusing tone, as if it was a bad thing?

Their boss went on, 'I'm going to have to cut the word count right down.'

'But it's a special feature,' Mat protested. 'In depth. You said—'

'Don't get up yourself, Devine. This isn't *Le Monde*, and you're not an investigative journalist. We're a free paper. Our readers want teeny-tiny snippets they can glance at on their way to work, not bloody Dostoevsky.'

Mat blinked. Alice's eyes narrowed to slits. Their boss went back to his office and they slumped in their seats. Mat closed his eyes as disappointment cut through him.

'I'm so angry I could poison his bloody coffee,' Alice said, as they left the office and headed home.

'He drinks the machine coffee. He wouldn't notice.'

She stopped. 'Don't joke about this. Aren't you angry too?'

People streamed past them, shoulders hunched, heads down.

Mat sighed. 'Course I am. I'd happily murder him too, but what can we do? We're stuck. We can't change anything.'

She set off again, her shoes tapping a furiously quick rhythm. 'I didn't imagine it, did I? He definitely told us we could write a special feature, didn't he?'

'He did.'

'He went back on his word. He's a liar.'

'He is.'

They crossed the main street and continued, passing a *boulangerie* busy with office workers buying baguettes to take home for their dinner.

'He deleted more than half! It's not even our work any more.'

It was true. Their original piece had been lyrical and thoughtful. Christian had slashed their words and edited what was left until it read like any other slapdash piece. It was soul-destroying.

They reached the corner where they'd go their separate ways. They stopped.

'At least there's still hope for the promotion,' Alice said.

That was true too. No one was a clear contender. They all got grillings. They all got belittled and told to begin again. 'And if I get the job I swear I'll

never behave like him.'

They said goodbye and parted ways. Mat was disappointed and hungry, but tonight he had a reservation at one of the more upmarket restaurants in his price range. Perhaps that would take his mind off work.

The evening had got off to a bad start when, on his arrival, the restaurant told him they had no record of his reservation.

Mat pulled out his phone as if it were a pistol in a black-and-white Western movie. He stabbed at it and held up the screen for the waiter/guard dog to see. 'Table for one. Seven thirty.'

It was the guard dog's cue to back down and grovel profusely. But he shot the phone a withering glance and pointed to his own computer screen. 'Well, we have no record of it here and we're fully booked this evening.'

What? Mat narrowed his eyes. 'The place is empty.' He waved a hand to indicate the rows of pristine white tablecloths and silver cutlery.

'It is now, sir,' the waiter's tone was patronisingly slow, 'but I assure you we will be at full capacity later.'

Mat wondered whether the man would be so obstructive if he knew Mat was planning to review the place. But he kept quiet. From the start he'd set out to review as an ordinary person, a woman on the street, and being anonymous was crucial.

Another group of diners arrived behind him. The waiter inclined his head, expecting Mat to move away, but he stood firm. 'Even at full capacity you can fit in a solitary diner.'

'Not without a booking.' The man was practically gritting his teeth.

'I have a booking! You're the ones who lost it. Listen, I want to speak to the manager.'

There were murmurs behind him, and this clearly ruffled the waiter's feathers because he hurried off to speak to his colleague. After a hushed conversation, they relented and let him in. 'We'll need the table in two hours, though,' the waiter warned.

'Understood,' said Mat.

The fact that it was near the toilet he was willing to overlook. But when it

became clear from the waiter's sneering attitude that he wasn't going to get the same level of service as everyone else, he felt tension rise again. The waiter was slow to take his order, he half listened as if Mat was less important than the other diners he had an eye on, and, while Mat waited patiently, he could see everyone else was being served much faster than him. He wished they'd bring his drink, at least. After the day he'd had, he was desperate to hold a glass of wine in his hand and let its calming effects roll through him.

Disappointment still churned through him as he thought of the late nights he'd worked – for nothing. He bowed his head. And the way Christian had turned it on them, as if they were fools with grandiose ideas. Alice was still holding out for the promotion, but what about the possible redundancy? What if Christian had earmarked one or both of them to go? The prospect made his chest tighten.

A waiter appeared with a bottle of red wine. 'Your wine, sir,' he announced, presenting the bottle against a white napkin.

Mat read the label. 'That's not mine. I ordered the house red.'

'Ah. Very sorry, sir.' He didn't look sorry at all.

While he disappeared to get the correct wine, another waiter appeared. 'The watercress soup, sir.' His starter was placed in front of him.

Mat spread the napkin on his lap, stomach growling. He tried to remember when he'd last eaten a proper meal, but the past few evenings had involved late nights so he'd had to make do with snacks. The soup was a vibrant shade of green studded with crisp golden croutons, and he tore off a piece of bread. He dipped a spoon in – and grimaced.

Putting the spoon down, he raised his hand and a waiter came over.

'This soup is cold.'

'Cold, sir? I assure you, that it is not—'

'It's barely warm,' Mat said. 'Taste it yourself if you don't believe me.' The waiter seemed perplexed by this suggestion. Mat pushed it away, unable to hide his disappointment. He supposed it would take them another twenty minutes to heat it now.

The service didn't improve as the evening went on. 'Excuse me.' Mat

waved a hand.

The waiter, hurrying past, threw him an impatient look but paused.

Mat pointed to his plate of chicken, which was rapidly cooling. 'I ordered a side of green beans with this.'

'I'll check for you.' He hurried away.

When he returned ten minutes later (Mat timed it), Mat had finished the chicken.

He could feel anger growing inside him like an enormous mushroom. Red and toxic, it swelled in him. The place was really expensive. He'd saved for weeks to come here, knowing the name would attract attention to his review. It wouldn't be a glowing one, that was for sure, but he liked to think he would remain objective. Professional. Words began to assemble in his mind. They lined up like soldiers, rifles poised. He swept his gaze around the room, making sure he was noting every detail, every expression. The thing was, though, everyone else seemed relaxed and happy. He felt as if the staff had singled him out.

'Sir, I'm afraid I have to ask you to vacate the table now.' The waiter placed the bill on the table in front of him.

Mat checked his watch. 'I was hoping to have dessert.' He always reviewed three courses.

'We need the table. We did warn you.'

'You did, but there's still twenty minutes until your next guests arrive.'

'Exactly, sir. And we need that time to prepare the table.'

Mat bit back his frustration. He'd seen the crème brûlée being served to the next table and he was still hungry. Surely nothing could go wrong with a crème brûlée and it might sweeten tonight's bitter experience. But the waiter was fixing him with a hard stare. The couple at the next table must have sensed trouble because they turned to see what was going on.

Mat snatched up the bill. 'Fine.' But this would all go in his review, he thought. Every infuriating second of the experience.



Review: Chez Nous

Chez Nous sounds like such a welcoming place, doesn't it? It conjures cosy hearths, warm souls, mouth-watering food that will leave you with the slightly fuzzy feeling that comes from being deliciously sated.

Don't be fooled.

The waiters here have all been trained at the same School of Unjustified Superiority. They are perhaps even a different species, bred to look down on us mere mortals who wish to exchange our hard-earned cash for their food. Clearly we don't deserve to be their customers, which is why, when you step through the door, you can expect to be treated as a second-class citizen from the start.

And it's not just the staff attitude that leaves a sour taste. The service is as slow and scatty as an elderly, dementia-afflicted gentleman, the food is – at best – mediocre and, for the price they charge, daylight robbery.

What does the food taste like, you ask? Cold (the soup). Too late (the side of beans that arrived after I'd finished my main course). Sharp (the house red). The chicken was as dull as an accountant at a party, and the gratin dauphinois was curling at the edges – a bit like my toes. And dessert? No idea. I was expelled from the place, like an armed terrorist, before I could order one.

*The verdict: * (1 star)*

If this is what it's like to eat Chez Nous, you'll find me eating with the enemy. It couldn't be more hostile.

Mat

Mat and Carys left the circle of telescopes and people huddled around them, and headed off to explore the park alone. He'd never been there so late and it was even more beautiful by night, the gravel paths and lakes bathed in the amber glow of sentinel lampposts.

'Did you understand the talk?' Mat asked. 'I'm not sure how well I did. It was pretty technical.'

She grinned. 'Not a word. Though, to be honest, I'm not sure I needed the telescope or the lesson. It's beautiful just to sit and look at the stars.'

'Why don't we stop here?' He pointed to the grassy slope nearby.

'Yeah. We can lie down and I'll test you on which stars you can see.'

He laughed and laid down the blanket he'd brought. Carys spread the skirt of her dress around her. She looked beautiful in red with a matching scarf. They lay down and gazed up into the darkness, letting their eyes adjust. It had been a warm day for early October, but the temperature had plummeted at sunset and they were both wrapped up in puffer jackets and scarves. The traffic noise was a gentle lullaby, the moon a pool of milk, quiet and still next to the swathe of nervous, glittering stars. He breathed in deeply, trying to recall the last time he'd felt so utterly at peace and content.

Carys slipped her hand into his and a rush of delight ambushed him. Their eyes met and they smiled.

'Do you ever think about how old the stars are?' he asked, returning his gaze to the sky.

'What do you mean?'

He pointed. 'It boggles my mind to think that the light we're seeing could be ten thousand years old by the time it's travelled all this way.'

'So we're looking back in time?'

‘Yes. That star might not even exist any more.’

‘That makes the sight of it even more precious. What about the moon?’

‘That’s not so far from the Earth, so what we see is probably just a few minutes old.’

‘I always thought of stars as fixed. Permanent. I like to think our ancestors, when they were huddled around campfires and wearing loincloths, saw exactly what we see now.’

‘I don’t think it’s changed much since then. Humans haven’t been around very long compared to all this.’

‘You and me, we’re all just flecks of dust in this enormous universe. Tiny. Insignificant.’

Mat heard the smile in her voice. ‘Not insignificant,’ he corrected. ‘Or, at least, we don’t have to be. It’s up to us to make something meaningful of our lives.’

She turned her head. ‘You think so? You don’t believe our fate is written in the stars?’ she asked, with a cheeky smile that suggested she was playing Devil’s advocate.

‘No. I think it’s all up to us.’

‘I agree. We have one chance to be the best person we can be. To make a positive difference.’

He thought of work. ‘What if we blow that chance?’ he asked quietly.

‘What do you mean?’

He sighed. ‘Things have been bad at work, that’s all. I worked really hard on a piece, but the boss wasn’t impressed. He cut most of it.’ It was only one article, but it felt like a repeated cycle: nothing he wrote was ever good enough. His career, if you could call it that, was going nowhere.

She sat up and propped herself on an elbow to look at him. ‘Your boss sounds awful.’

‘He’s not the best. We’d put everything into it. Spent hours researching and lots of late nights writing it up.’ He rubbed a hand over his face. ‘I’d hoped it would impress him. There’s a promotion on the cards, you see, and I’ve applied.’

The sound of distant laughter carried on the air.

‘That’s too bad,’ she said gently, ‘but I’m sure the promotion won’t hinge on one article.’

‘You’re probably right.’ Something rustled in the bushes behind them. He sat up and squinted but couldn’t see anything in the darkness.

‘You really want the promotion?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then go for it.’

A family group walked past on the path below them. When they’d gone, Mat said, ‘Sorry. We were having such a good evening and I’ve brought the mood down. Next time I talk about work, just tell me to shut up. When I’m with you I want to forget all about that stuff.’

‘Yeah. My work hasn’t been plain sailing either.’ She smiled. ‘Maybe we could have a rule that we don’t talk about work. Like in *You’ve Got Mail*.’

‘“No specifics”?’

‘Exactly.’

A thought occurred. ‘But I don’t even know where you work, Shopgirl. You haven’t spoken about it.’

‘Let’s leave it that way. I don’t want you to come in and visit,’ she said, with mock horror. Then, more seriously, ‘Getting to grips with a new job in a new country hasn’t been easy. Like you said, it’s nice to keep work separate.’ She ran the palm of her hand over the blanket distractedly, her brow furrowed, and he felt a tug of concern. Protectiveness.

‘You’re enjoying it, though? No regrets?’

Her smile lit the night. ‘No regrets at all. Coming here was the best thing I ever did.’

‘I agree,’ he said softly. And the emotions that had been building rushed at him, a landslide of attraction, admiration, desire. ‘It brought you to me.’

Their eyes locked. He leaned in to her and brushed his lips against hers. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. Her mouth was soft, and she smelt faintly of perfume.

His fingers brushed against her scarf as he reached for her chin and touched her warm skin. He deepened the kiss. Need coiled in him, tight, as dark and mysterious as the night. Its intensity took his breath away. When

they drew apart he saw surprise and awe mirrored in her eyes.

‘It’s strange,’ she said, her voice a little rough at the edges, ‘but I feel like I know you. Like I’ve always known you.’

‘I feel it too.’ It was as if she’d seen into his soul and he into hers.

She laughed and the sound was like music. They lay down again, fingers entwined, and as he gazed up at the night sky he felt a shift – whether in him or the world around him, he couldn’t say. But it was like a galaxy rearranging itself, everything falling into place.

‘If you could wish upon a star, what would you wish for?’ she asked.

He bit his lip. ‘You,’ he wanted to say. But they hardly knew each other. And yet he knew, he felt it in his bones, she was going to be important in his life.

He fumbled around for an answer, one that wouldn’t send her running. ‘To be successful.’

He wanted to prove to his dad that journalism could be about integrity and hard work, not just cheap wit or popularity. He wanted to prove his worth. And since he’d met Carys he’d felt that more keenly than ever. He wanted to become the man who deserved her. ‘What would you wish for?’ he asked.

‘To be happy.’ When he laughed she asked, ‘What?’

Her *joie de vivre* was infectious. She was so generous, such fun and so vibrant. She saw only the best in everyone. ‘You’re a really happy person, Carys. I’m finding it hard to imagine you any happier.’

‘Me too. But I wish I’ll always be this happy.’

Carys

Carys whistled as she fed clean cutlery into the trays behind the counter. Her mind kept springing back to Sunday and the stargazing with Mat. His serious blue eyes. His vulnerability as he'd told her about his work. And that kiss.

She hadn't come to Paris looking for love. She didn't need a man in her life to be fulfilled. But since she'd met Mat she couldn't think of anything else. Her heart rate seemed to have doubled, and at mealtimes she could barely eat. It was a heady feeling, and completely new to her. Oh, she'd told other guys she loved them, and she'd believed it was true – but what she'd felt then had been nothing compared with this. This was the High Definition version with full surround sound. And she was happy to go with it. It turned out that falling head over heels in love was an adventure as exciting as any voyage.

Aurélie came back from serving the outside tables. 'You're smiling a lot today,' she told Carys. 'What's going on?'

'Nothing. I'm always cheerful.' If only some of it would rub off on the waitress. She waved a hand at the cake counter. 'Don't you think Emile's new range of *pâtisseries* looks amazing?'

Outside, the city had been painted in the pumpkin colours of autumn, and Emile's food reflected this. He'd made delectable chocolate cakes in the form of glossy acorns, biscuits that looked like autumn leaves, éclairs with plum jam and purple icing, and sweet chestnut tarts with the silkiest filling she'd ever tasted. The display was simply stunning.

Aurélie's eyes narrowed. 'Don't change the subject. Why are you so happy? Did you win the lottery?'

'What?' She laughed. 'No.'

‘Is it a man, then?’

Carys avoided her gaze. ‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Yes, it is. I can tell. Who? A customer?’ She looked around, as if the suspect might be there right now.

Carys sighed. ‘No.’

‘How did you meet him, then? Is he going to come in so we can see him?’

‘Definitely not.’ Her smile vanished, and she remembered their promise not to speak about work. She didn’t want Mat to come here. She didn’t want him to know how tricky she found Aurélie (or Emile, for that matter) to work with. She didn’t want to admit she was a fraud who’d bluffed her way through the interview but had no experience of managing a café. And she especially didn’t want to tell him why she’d done it, why she’d been so desperate to leave Willowbrook. She was not ready to talk about the accident. Not yet, anyway.

‘Hey, Emile,’ Aurélie said, as the chef came to the hatch. ‘Do you know anything about Carys’s new man?’

Carys closed her eyes.

‘No,’ Emile said, but he clearly wasn’t interested because he gestured at Madame Jalibert and asked, ‘What’s that on her hat?’

The three of them peered closer.

The scarlet hat was an unusually tall, conical shape with a brim that was loaded with chunky beads and – what were they? ‘Madame Jalibert,’ Carys said, crossing the room, ‘are they real plums on your hat?’ The damson-coloured fruit glistened tantalisingly, like forbidden fruit.

‘Why, yes, dear. Would you like one? They’re delicious at this time of year.’

The phone rang. Still smiling at her eccentric customer, Carys answered. It was Ingrid. Growing serious, she hurried into the office, where she had a list of questions noted to discuss with her boss.

But before she could reach the desk, Ingrid said, ‘Carys, Mark’s dad has died.’

‘Oh, Ingrid, I’m so sorry.’ She sank into the chair, hearing the devastation in the other woman’s voice.

‘I just wanted to let you know because we’re going to be very busy for the next few weeks, what with the funeral to arrange and keeping the ranch running . . .’

‘I understand.’ Carys glanced at her list. Mark and Ingrid didn’t need extra problems just now. If anything, they needed reassurance that the café was in safe hands.

‘Is everything okay there?’ Ingrid asked.

‘Yes, it’s all fine,’ she said. ‘Don’t worry about us. The café’s doing great.’

That evening, when she got home to her studio, Carys climbed out of her window and sat on the roof. She pulled her jacket tight against the crisp air and inhaled deeply. The sky was duck-egg blue speckled with thin cloud. From up here, the cars moved around like tiny ants, and the noise of the city drifted up, like background music.

She gazed out over the rooftops, never tiring of the view, mesmerised by the city’s complexity. Paris wasn’t just the historic sites she’d visited during weekend trips, it wasn’t just frothy and light. It had dark shadows best avoided. It had hidden depths, unexpectedly quiet gardens and cobbled streets, charmingly quirky museums and galleries. It could smell of sweet pastry baking, exotic scents and petrol fumes all at the same time. Every day Carys heard a jumble of French and international accents. She saw sophisticated women who, even in casual pumps and skinny jeans, were impossibly stylish. Yet these perfect women strode past hooded figures crouched in doorways with pleas for help scratched on pieces of cardboard. The city was a permanent contradiction, yet it had captured Carys’s imagination and it made her senses vibrate. She felt lucky to be there, lucky to be alive.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket. Her conversation with Aurélie earlier had reminded her that there was someone she needed to call.

Liberty picked up on the second ring. ‘Carys! It’s so good to hear from you. How are you? How’s Paris?’

‘I’m fine. It’s fine.’ She leaned back against the window frame. It was

warm against her back.

‘How are you feeling, honey? Are you okay?’

This was precisely why Carys didn’t want to tell anyone here about her accident. ‘I’m fine, Lib. I’m calling because I have news. I . . . Well, I’ve met someone.’

‘A man?’

‘Yes.’

Excited squeals hit her ear, and as Carys filled her in she remembered all the times they’d caught up like this at the kitchen table in Damsely Cottage.

When she’d finished telling her about how they’d met and everything else, Liberty asked, ‘So when are you seeing him again?’

‘We meet every Sunday in the park.’

‘Car, I’ve never heard you speak about a guy like this. It sounds serious.’

‘I think it is. I hope it is.’

‘I wish I was there. I want to meet him.’

She laughed. ‘Give it time. The excitement might wear off. He might turn out not to be who I think he is.’

But she didn’t believe that. Instinct was telling her he was The One.

Mat

‘Damn! My sandwich got squashed on the Métro,’ said Alice, holding open a paper bag and frowning.

Mat peered inside. ‘Doesn’t look too bad. What’s that purple stuff? Beetroot?’

‘Sauerkraut.’ Her eyes lit up. ‘It’s from the Red Cat Café. Have you heard of it?’

‘Sauerkraut? Course I have.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘The café, idiot.’ But as she draped her wet coat over the radiator, he saw her lips twitch. She smoothed her skirt and flicked her hair back over her shoulder, muttering, ‘Bloody pissing rain. Don’t know why I bothered blow-drying it.’

He eyed her surreptitiously. ‘Yeah, I wanted to look nice for the staff meeting too.’

‘Very funny, Devine.’ She sat down and flicked on her computer, placed her phone on the desk, and laid her lunch to one side for later. He admired how purposeful Alice was. There was never any hesitation in anything she did. ‘The Red Cat Café,’ she said, continuing the conversation while she peeled the lid off her coffee, ‘is a quirky place near my flat, run by a Dutch woman and her Australian partner.’

Mat paused again from typing.

‘They serve unusual food. I walk past it every day on my way to the Métro and it’s always really busy so I thought I’d try it. The waitress was rude, but that’s par for the course, isn’t it?’

In Mat’s mind there was only one thing a café should be known for. ‘Is the coffee any good?’

‘Why?’ She sipped her coffee.

‘Surely that’s the most important thing.’

‘I suppose.’ She tasted it again and considered. ‘It’s okay. I ordered the smoky-bean flavour. That was probably a mistake. Next time I’ll get traditional.’

‘Smoky bean? What were you thinking? It sounds disgusting.’

She shrugged. ‘It’s good to try new things, mix it up a bit, Devine.’

‘Sauerkraut sounds good, though. I love sauerkraut.’ His tone was wistful. The *jambon-fromage* plastic baguette from downstairs was making him lose the will to live. It was cheap, though. A sacrifice worth making to fund his evening meals in bistros and restaurants.

‘I’m not going to share it with you, Devine, if that’s what you’re hinting at. How did your interview go, by the way?’

He tipped his head a little. ‘Not bad.’

Christian was seeing them each in turn for the promotion, slotting in the interviews when he could. Mat’s had been that morning. He hadn’t been too nervous, but it was tricky, the fine balance between selling yourself and not sounding arrogant. Even trickier when the person interviewing you knew you well and would undoubtedly laugh if you bigged yourself up.

‘Mine’s tomorrow. What did he ask? Any difficult questions?’

He shook his head. ‘You’ll be fine, Alice. Just be yourself.’

The staff meeting wasn’t going well. Christian was in a foul mood and finding fault with all the pitches they put to him.

‘No. No. No,’ he said, gritting his teeth and raising his eyes heavenward as if to summon patience to deal with these ‘incompetent arseholes who passed for employees’ (his words). Mat, Alice and Jean-Baptiste exchanged careful glances. *Why do we bother? Why are we still here?* Mat could already hear the hushed conversation they’d be having once this was over.

Christian wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt and blew out a long breath. He tapped a few keys on his laptop, then began to fire out instructions. ‘Jean-Baptiste, you’re going to canvass opinions on the new music store. Alice and Pietro, get yourselves down to the Gare du Nord and report back on the strike.’ Alice glanced at the rain hammering against the

window and scowled. Christian went on, 'I want pictures – lots of pictures – and disgruntled travellers' and staff testimonies. Understand?'

'No problem, boss,' said Pietro. 'Disgruntled,' he said, jotting the word in his notebook, and winking at Mat.

Mat tried not to smile but probably didn't try hard enough because Christian turned to him next. 'Mat, you're going to have to get on the phone and sell some advertising space.'

His head jerked up. His insides hollowed. 'What?'

Christian met his gaze. 'What's wrong? You deaf now?'

'But that – that's sales. It's not even bloody journalism.' He glanced at the others, who kept their eyes down, avoiding his gaze. Did this mean . . .? Was he being demoted? Was Christian implying he wasn't as good as them? His mouth dried.

'Yes, well . . .' Christian had the good grace to flounder, but watching him squirm uncomfortably was cold comfort. 'Julianne's off sick and if we don't fill those slots we have no income. And no income means no jobs.' Christian loosened his collar and stopped, suddenly looking tired. Exhausted, in fact.

Mat noticed the circles under his boss's eyes, the grey pallor of his skin. They all knew the paper's finances were touch and go, but perhaps they didn't know the full extent. Mat remembered his boss's mumbled admission that one of them might have to lose their job in the reshuffle. A sick feeling made his stomach drop.

'Right. Okay,' he mumbled. It might not be journalism, but selling wasn't difficult, either. There was no standing around in the cold or wet, no pleading with people in the street to give you a quote or an opinion. You just had to grow a thick skin and get used to people hanging up on you.

Christian seemed relieved by his consent. 'Only until Julianne is back,' he grudgingly conceded. Then, raising his voice again, he addressed the group. 'Right. What are you waiting for? Off you go, all of you.'

They shuffled out of the room, heads down.

'What's got into him?' muttered Alice, when they were out of earshot.

'He's stressed.' Jean-Baptiste did an accurate imitation of loosening a shirt collar and dabbing imaginary beads of sweat from his forehead.

‘He doesn’t look well,’ Mat whispered. ‘Maybe things are worse than we know.’

But he couldn’t make light of it. What if he lost his job? His finances were stretched to the limit. He had no savings, nothing to fall back on. Without his salary, meagre though it was, he’d survive a few weeks at most before falling behind on the bills. He’d be forced to sell the flat, and that would feel like a betrayal. His mum had left it to him, and it was his only remaining connection with her.

He returned to his desk feeling a little less aggrieved. At least he wasn’t going to be outside in the rain interviewing angry travellers. Perhaps he’d even manage to sell a few slots. Christian would be kissing his arse, then.

Then again, probably not.

‘Do you want this?’ Alice asked. She was standing over his desk holding out a brown paper bag with the slightly squashed baguette sandwich from earlier.

‘Why? It’s yours,’ he said, caught out by this unexpectedly kind gesture. Lunchtime was the optimum slot for selling advertising space, so he wouldn’t have a chance to buy his own until much later.

‘Pietro wants to stop at the *boulangerie* on the way so I’ll grab something there.’

Mat glanced at Pietro, who had his coat on, ready to go, and tapped his watch with exaggerated impatience.

‘I know how grouchy you are when you’ve not eaten. And you were salivating over it before,’ Alice added.

‘Salivating’s a bit strong—’

‘Do you want it or not?’ she snapped.

He realised what was going on here. She felt sorry for him. He’d been demoted to sales for the day and she was trying to show him she was on his side.

‘Yes,’ he said quickly. ‘I mean, yes, please. Here, let me pay you for it.’ He dug into his pocket for some change, but she held up a hand to stop him.

‘It’s fine. You can buy me coffee tomorrow.’

‘Good luck at the station,’ Mat called after her. ‘Hope you get lots of

disgruntlement.'

She turned back, smiling, as she hurried towards the door. Mat looked around the deserted office. There was only Christian left and he was jabbering away on the phone with his door closed. Mat tapped the desk. 'Right then,' he said, to the empty room. 'Let's sell some ads.'

It hadn't taken Mat long. He'd made himself comfortable at Julianne's computer on the other side of the office by the scanner, and it wasn't difficult to pick up. She followed a script he'd heard many times, and he'd also sifted through her emails, following up on leads that had trickled in. He liked the thought of caretaking her job for her, and the prospect of a day's respite from his. What he didn't like was the crawling fear that this spelled the end of his career in journalism. The pitying looks his colleagues had shot him before they left were embedded in his brain.

When Christian came over to use the scanner, Mat watched him. His boss's body language was calmer than earlier. In fact, was it Mat's imagination or did his gaze slide away guiltily? Anger still simmered in Mat that he'd been singled out in this way.

Still, he tried to put that out of his mind and concentrate on the task in hand, and his efforts soon paid off. By three o'clock he'd scored three firm sales and six possibles, which he knew from past conversations with Julianne wasn't bad at all. His stomach was beginning to feel hollow, so he took the phone off the hook to eat his sandwich and stared at the window. It was still raining relentlessly and twisted cords of water trickled down the glass, obscuring the view. He thought of Alice and Pietro. They were most likely soaked by now. He pictured them trudging through wet streets and a restless crowd of unhappy travellers. How many times had he set out enthusiastically only to feel his spirits die as yet another stranger eyed him suspiciously and shook their head? With any luck, his colleagues might have got into the station to conduct their interviews under shelter, but it was unlikely.

He bit into the sandwich, feeling a twinge of guilt. Perhaps he hadn't drawn the short straw after all.

But these thoughts were pushed aside as the vinegary sensation hit his

tongue. He stared down at the sandwich in his hands. The sausage was almost sweet with flavours of apple, the mayonnaise creamy with a hint of mustard, and even the salad leaves seemed to have been carefully chosen for their distinct peppery taste and crunch. He dabbed a finger in the mayonnaise and tasted: he suspected it was homemade. Impressed, he took another bite. This was amazing.

After a few mouthfuls, when he could bear to put the sandwich down for a moment, he turned to his computer and typed in the name stamped on the sandwich bag. Red Cat Café.

A modern, minimalist website came up. Curious, he clicked on the information. Reading about eateries, their ‘aspirations’ always sounded pretentious, but these owners seemed honest in their ambition to create a ‘relaxed place where people can come to enjoy simple quality food in colourful, quirky surroundings’. Mat ran his gaze over the photos. It looked modern, nothing like a traditional French café. A big low sofa was pushed invitingly against the front window, and shelves of books in the background gave the place a homely feel. A picture of the cake counter reminded him of cafés in England with scones and carrot cake butted up against éclairs and Dutch apple cake. The lighting was all low-hanging industrial-style lamps. It looked modern and different.

He scrolled through the menu, surprised at how short it was. But sometimes these places relied on specials boards, which changed in line with seasonal produce.

All in all, he was impressed, and when he sat back to enjoy the rest of the sandwich he endeavoured to savour every mouthful. His latest review by Madame Incognito had gone down a storm, despite being the most critical he’d ever written – his first one-star. Perhaps he should pay the Red Cat Café a visit and post a review. He sat up taller. Great idea. In fact, he was free this evening. Why not go straight from work?

There were some advantages to working on ad sales for the day, he told himself, as he left work on time for once. And Christian hadn’t said anything when he saw him go. He couldn’t, anyway, not when Mat had done so well.

His steps were light as he navigated his way towards the café, looking for the pale pink building. He was looking forward to this. Reviewing was light relief after work and the place sounded exciting, dynamic.

Finally, he turned into the street and saw it ahead. But as he approached, he clocked the neatly stacked tables and chairs, and the closed door. His shoulders dropped. Damn.

The Red Cat Café had closed at five: he was too late.

Carys

‘**B**onjour, Madame Jalibert,’ Carys said. She always loved seeing the old lady’s outfits, and today’s comprised an orange and red jacket that reminded her of Liberty’s patchwork quilts. Enormous white stitches ran through the colourful squares, and the collar was a robust pink. Madame Jalibert had added a rainbow of bangles and a chunky necklace to complete the outfit, as well as her favourite red lipstick. ‘You’re looking fabulous as always.’

Somehow Madame Jalibert always pulled off her unusual style.

‘Thank you, dear. It’s cold out there today.’ She removed her sunglasses and looked around.

‘There’s a seat over there,’ said Carys, pointing to the nearest table.

But Madame Jalibert had spotted a family by the window who were getting up to leave. ‘Will you clean that one, please?’ Madame Jalibert used her sunglasses as a pointer, and her tone brooked no argument.

‘Yes, of course.’ When Carys had cleared the table, she paused to rub her temple.

‘Headache?’ Madame Jalibert asked.

Carys had hoped it would fade, but it seemed to be getting worse, which wasn’t good. Saturdays were their busiest day.

‘I’ve suffered with migraines all my life. Dreadful things.’

‘It’s not a migraine,’ Carys muttered, and her gaze slid away. ‘But I can’t complain. I don’t get them often. Have you chosen which cake you’d like today?’

‘I’ll have the chocolate praline swirl, please. There aren’t as many as usual today. Have they been selling fast?’

Carys lowered her voice conspiratorially. ‘Emile had a bad morning. He’s

experimenting with new recipes, but today's didn't go so well.'

She'd arrived at the café this morning and been greeted by the scowling chef. 'This is why I don't like to "experiment". See?' He'd pointed to the sunken, misshapen cake on the worktop. 'It's a lot of work and a waste of expensive ingredients. Ten eggs went into that.'

Carys had said carefully, 'It's still worth doing, though, Emile. Look how successful your others have been. They're so innovative and unusual. Customers come here because they love how different your food is.'

'But ten eggs! What a waste.'

'Ah, well, that's life, isn't it?' Madame Jalibert said now. 'Some days are good, some are bad.'

Carys scurried off to get her cake and coffee.

By midday the headache was like a clamp around her forehead. She ducked into the kitchen for a glass of water.

'You're not well,' Emile observed, as he flipped pancakes.

'I'm fine.' She leaned against the sink, hating how weak she felt. The headaches were rare but fierce. The doctors had warned her she'd be susceptible, particularly when she'd overdone things, and this week had been full-on.

'You need to go home,' Emile said. 'Rest. Why don't you call Léo and ask him to take over?'

'He's away this weekend, and Aurélie won't manage by herself. It's too busy. Anyway, I've taken painkillers. It'll go soon.'

Emile raised an eyebrow but said nothing and plated the pancakes with berries, syrup and icing sugar. Carys left the kitchen. But as he laid the plates on the hatch and rang the bell for service, the noise sent a splinter of pain shooting through her head. Maybe she should take an early lunchbreak.

'Aurélie,' she said, when the waitress came over. 'I'm just going to lie down for half an hour. I'm feeling—'

The girl's red hair swam and swayed. 'Carys? What's—'

When Carys came round she was lying on the sofa with Aurélie, Emile and Madame Jalibert peering down at her. 'What happened?' she asked.

‘You fainted,’ said Aurélie. ‘I caught you.’

‘Don’t sound so pleased with yourself.’ Madame Jalibert tutted, then turned back to Carys. ‘She made a huge fuss about how heavy you were, and Emile had to rush out and help.’

Carys half laughed, half cringed. Her weight certainly hadn’t gone down since she’d been living in Paris.

‘Do you want me to call a doctor?’ Emile asked.

‘No. It’s just a headache. Honestly, it’s nothing serious.’ It was a reminder, though – a dark reminder – of when things had been serious.

‘You need to go home. You’re a liability here,’ the chef said brusquely.

‘I told you, I can’t go—’

‘We’ll manage,’ he cut in firmly. ‘Won’t we, Aurélie?’

She nodded.

‘Good. That’s sorted, then,’ said Madame Jalibert. ‘I’ll call us a cab and take you home, young lady, and that’s the end of it.’

Mat paused outside the Red Cat Café. The marshmallow-pink building stood out like a beacon against its grey surroundings. A taxi had just driven away, and its spot outside the café was immediately filled by an enormous Mercedes that was clearly too big for the parking space. He watched in amusement as the driver reversed in, bumping the car behind, then the one in front until it had wedged itself into the gap. It was a parking technique he'd witnessed many times, but Parisians didn't seem shocked by it.

The café was bustling but he found a table inside and sat down. The décor was really fresh and welcoming, too. Big sofas, bookshelves, a counter of cakes that snared your attention as you walked in. He'd been looking forward to this all week since his first failed visit.

The waitress seemed busy, so after a few minutes of waiting he went to the counter and helped himself to a menu. It was October and a cool wind was blowing today, so he was glad the menu included onion soup. It was tempting to choose the sauerkraut sandwich again, but a critic should choose as widely as possible, with his audience in mind, so he went for the ratatouille with chorizo and flatbreads. He'd also seen cinnamon cake on the counter, and that was one of his favourites.

Finally he caught the waitress's eye and placed his order. He sat back and opened his book. But it was difficult to concentrate. The chef seemed to be getting impatient with the waitress.

'*Allez,*' the chef told her when she came to the hatch.

'I'm going as fast as I can,' she grumbled.

The chef said something Mat couldn't quite hear and he went back to reading. But his mind kept straying from the words on the page to Carys. She

was always at the forefront of his mind. Her face hovered around the edges of his consciousness whatever he was doing. Working, travelling, playing guitar. He pictured her smooth black hair, the laughter lines around her dark eyes, her smile and the way she understood – *really* understood – him. He liked how he could speak to her in a way he couldn't with anyone else. It wasn't that she agreed with everything he said – he felt certain she'd be upfront if she didn't – but their outlooks seemed to be aligned. They shared the same values, perhaps. Whatever it was that drew him to her, it felt good. It felt precious. So precious, in fact, that he didn't dare do anything to jeopardise it.

He checked his watch. Half an hour had passed and he hadn't even been served the soup yet. His stomach growled hungrily. He looked around for the waitress but the ring of his phone stopped him. It was his dad.

'Mat, there's a delivery just arrived at the apartment. It's a wardrobe.'

'A wardrobe? Why didn't you warn me?' His forehead creased. The concierge was not going to like that.

'I didn't think it would arrive so soon.'

'Not another antique?' His dad had developed an addiction to online auctions for French antiques, but so far he'd bought lamps and a small table. Nothing as big as a wardrobe.

'It was a steal. Can't wait to get it back to the house in England. I'm sending a driver to pick it up on Monday at midday. Make sure you're in, won't you?'

'What? No. I'll be at work.'

'What about Tuesday, then? Or another day?'

'Dad, unless it's the weekend I have to go to work.'

'You can work from home one day, can't you?'

'No. The boss is strict about us being in the office so if a story happens we can get out and report on it immediately.'

His dad laughed. 'You make it sound like you report breaking news for CNN. We both know your piddly little rag isn't like that.'

Piddly little . . .? Mat made himself breathe.

His dad persisted. 'So what shall I tell my driver, then? That the job's

cancelled because my son's being awkward?'

'I am not being—' He stopped, knowing he was wasting his breath. 'Tell him what you like, but I'll be at work, like I am every day.' He hung up. His heart was pounding in his chest and it irritated him that his dad was on the other side of the world yet he could still rile him like this. What was so urgent about a wardrobe when he was in Hong Kong? He hadn't even consulted Mat before arranging its delivery. That was typical. And Mat could just imagine how cross the concierge was going to be that a wardrobe had been left in the hall.

He looked around for the waitress. 'Excuse me. How long will it be?'

'I'll find out. We're snowed under.' She ambled off to the hatch.

His phone rang again, and he was tempted to ignore it, but he knew his dad would only persist if he did. 'What?'

'Are you in this afternoon?'

'Well, no, not at the moment.'

'Can you be there in an hour?'

Mat checked his watch. The journey home would take at least thirty minutes and he'd been planning to go record shopping.

'Oh, come on,' his dad said impatiently. 'I'm trying to reach a compromise with you here.'

Mat pressed his eyes closed. 'Fine,' he said, 'but give him my number in case I'm not there in time.'

He hung up again, his cheeks flushed with heat. The waitress was still talking to the chef, who was flustered. Mat heard the words 'How am I supposed to find it if you . . .' and knew they'd lost his order.

She came back. 'It won't be long. Sorry, there was a mix-up in the kitchen.'

Mat stuffed his book into his bag and got up. 'I don't have time,' he said. 'Cancel my order, and I'll take a piece of cake to go instead.'

Carys

‘What are you doing on Wednesday night?’ Mat asked.

It was Sunday afternoon and they were in the park. They’d bought squares of pizza from the *boulangerie* and were sitting on a stone wall, feet dangling. Fallen leaves scuttled around, blown by the breeze, and the autumn sun lit the trees nearby, making the crimson berries gleam like jewels. Carys had been careful to wear sunglasses as a precaution, but fortunately yesterday’s headache had cleared.

‘No plans. Why?’ She took a bite, feeling a bit dubious about cold pizza, but she was starving and it was surprisingly tasty. Delicious, in fact. All herby and tomatoey. She licked her fingers.

‘Do you fancy going to a concert? It’s at the Palais de la Musique. It’s just been refurbished and it’s really nice – I wrote an article about it recently. They run these evenings to showcase new talent, so you never know if the acts will be any good, but they can be. I like it.’

‘I’d love to.’ Her heart jumped. If she had her way, she’d see him every night of the week, but she didn’t want to appear too keen so she held back. Caution and nervousness were totally out of character for her. It wasn’t that her confidence and optimism had deserted her: it was simply that she cared about him. He really meant something to her, and she didn’t want to do anything to risk spoiling things.

Mat’s phone rang. He hastily wiped tomato off his fingers and reached for his pocket. But when he saw the word ‘Dad’ on the screen he put the phone down again.

‘I don’t mind if you answer,’ Carys said, as it rang out.

‘It’s okay. He’ll just be calling to ask a favour or gloat about the latest five-star hotel he’s staying in. He’s on a work trip in Asia, you see. Living

the life of Riley.’ He picked an olive off his pizza and ate it thoughtfully. ‘Do you ever wonder who you might have been if you’d been raised by different parents?’

Carys considered this ‘Actually, I used to. When I was small.’

His head turned and he watched her, his expression patient, interested. He always listened attentively.

She explained, ‘My dad wasn’t on the scene much. He and Mum broke up when I was five and he left. I often used to wonder where he was and why he didn’t love us enough to stay. I had this romantic notion of what my life would be like if he’d taken me with him.’ She laughed, because now she could see the childishness of it. ‘Then Jermaine, my stepdad, came along, and he was a hundred times better than my real dad. Fun. Loving. And, most importantly, he was there.’ She smiled fondly. ‘I realised I should be grateful for what I had rather than hankering after a fantasy.’

He whistled softly. ‘That’s a good life lesson. You get on well with your mum, then?’

‘Yeah. Mum’s great. So are my brothers. I’m lucky. What about you? What family do you have?’

‘My mum died when I was ten.’ She heard the sorrow in his voice. It weighed down his words.

‘Oh. That’s so sad.’ She squeezed his hand.

‘She’d already divorced my dad, and we’d been living in the South of France. When she died I had to go to live with him in England. I went from a sunny, warm place to cold, wet England. I’d spent holidays with Dad but living with him was a shock. I was really homesick. Or heartbroken. Probably both. And he didn’t know what to do with me. In the end he sent me to boarding school.’

‘I can’t imagine how that must have been for you.’ She pictured a young boy of ten – not much older than the children she’d taught – wrenched from his old life and sent to his reluctant father. Her heart went out to him. ‘Did you have brothers and sisters?’

‘No. It was just me.’ He gave a dry laugh. ‘Dad and I were so different that I used to wonder if I was biologically his son. I still do.’

She peered at him, seeing a blue-eyed boy with a self-deprecating smile.

Mat added, 'He's very successful, you see, and I have a pitiful job and earn only just enough to live.'

'Yours is not a pitiful job,' she said, and wondered what his dad had said or done for him to believe that. 'Anyway, how do you define your dad's success?'

'He's a multi-millionaire.'

Her eyes widened. 'Really?'

'Really. But it's not just about the money. He would have preferred me to be outgoing and charismatic like him, and I was always quiet, even as a child. I liked to read books and write music. I didn't live up to his expectations.'

She felt a tug for this man, who was so open about his vulnerabilities. 'That's too bad. But it's not up to our parents to decide who we are.' She paused. 'Tell me about when you lived in Provence with your mum. What was that like?'

'We were in a village in the middle of nowhere. There are places in Provence where time has almost stood still. It was where Maman had grown up, her mother before her. As a boy it was a great place to live, a small village with a church, a school and a few shops. We knew everyone and everyone knew us. We lived with my grandmother, and she was the most amazing cook.'

'Couldn't you stay with her after your mum died?'

'She died too. It was a car accident.'

Carys swallowed. Her palms felt clammy. She felt as if she'd wandered onto thin ice in the middle of a frozen lake. Her need to get off this subject was urgent. 'Do you ever go back?' she asked. 'To Provence, I mean.'

'No. I haven't for years.'

'I guess it must be full of memories for you.'

'Exactly.' He thought about it. 'I'd love to see the house again, though – if it's still there.'

'Was it in the village?'

'Nearby.' He smiled, remembering. 'It had the most amazing views of the hills all around. My dad used to hate it, said it was an empty, barren

landscape where nothing grew because it was too dry. I loved the wildness of it, but it was nothing like the soft, green English countryside he was used to.' He sighed. 'I don't know what she ever saw in Dad. They were so different.'

'I love Provence.'

'You've been?'

She nodded. 'I spent a summer there when I was a student. It was the best. I au-paired for a family with three girls and we went to the beach every day and ate like kings. The girls' grandparents kept asking me if I could manage, if it wasn't too much work.' She laughed, remembering. 'But it was the easiest job I'd ever had. Those girls were a doddle to look after compared to my brothers. They were so sweet, playing with their dolls, asking me to read to them, collecting pine cones in the garden. I'd been expecting to have to round them up all the time, and I'd brought trainers so I could climb trees and run about, when in fact I spent much of my time sitting in the shade plaiting hair. They were such a lovely family.'

'Did you keep in touch with them?'

'We send Christmas cards, that's all. The girls must be teenagers now.'

'You should go back.'

'I should. I'll add it to my list of things to do and places to see.' She pulled out her phone and began to type.

He peered at the screen. 'That's a long list. Can you really do all that?'

'I can absolutely try.' She grinned. 'I'm determined to seize every opportunity or adventure that presents itself.'

'I love how much energy you have. I admire you.'

'I just don't want to get to middle age and regret all the things I didn't do. Life is for living. I'm so lucky to be here.' She stared up at the sky marbled with clouds, thinking of yesterday's headache, relieved it had taken just rest and a good night's sleep to clear it. It had been a shock to feel so ill, but also a reminder that she shouldn't take anything for granted. She remembered when she used to lie in hospital wondering if she'd ever leave the place. Her rehab had been slow and hard, but she'd done it. Now she was determined to make the most of life.

Shaking off the memory, she said brightly, 'Don't you feel the same?'

‘I – well – I’ve never thought of it in those terms.’ He considered it, then admitted sheepishly, ‘I suppose I’ve always regarded it as survival rather than luck. You know, gritting your teeth and getting through life.’

‘But we *are* lucky,’ she said, jumping up. She spread her arms, as if to take in the beautiful park around them, the stately buildings, the pearlescent sky. ‘We’re living in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, we’re young and healthy, and we have our whole lives ahead of us. Everything is still a mass of choices and decisions.’

‘Life is like a box of chocolates,’ he said, doing a pretty good imitation of Forrest Gump.

She placed her hands on her hips and frowned at him. ‘You’re not taking this seriously.’

‘Sorry. And you’re right. But some of us have more choices than others.’

‘No. You’re wrong, Mathieu Devine.’ She reached for his hands, pulled him to his feet, and spun him around, leaning back so he had to do the same, counterbalancing her weight with his. She laughed with delight as the park around them became a blur of green trees and sandy gravel. ‘We all have choices,’ she called breathlessly. ‘Where we go, where we work, who we spend time with, how we choose to live.’

‘Half of mine’s already gone,’ he muttered.

She stopped spinning and mock-wagged her finger at him. ‘That’s not true and you know it. You’re— How old are you?’

He laughed. ‘Thirty.’

‘That’s not half. One day you’ll look back on this and what will you think? Will you look at it with regret? Or will you think you did it all? Made the most of every second and every breath?’ She sandwiched his hands in hers. ‘We get one chance at this, Mat. We owe it to ourselves to make the best of it!’

‘To think I came for a picnic in the park and got motivational coaching.’

She rolled her eyes – then remembered she had a hair appointment and looked at her watch. ‘Oh, my God, look at the time! I’ve got to go.’ She grabbed her rucksack, stuffed her water bottle into it, and kissed him. ‘Sorry. I’ll see you Wednesday, okay?’

He laughed. 'Yeah. See you then.'

'*Au revoir!*' she called, over her shoulder, as she hurried away.

Mat

Mat was at work, but he was daydreaming. Thinking about Carys in the park the day before, and how she'd pulled him to his feet and spun him around. Her hands had felt warm in his and excitement had fizzed through him. Her joy and vitality rained down on him like glitter.

We get one chance at this, Mat. We owe it to ourselves to make the best of it! Her smile had reached inside him and touched something. He'd swallowed, feeling a tumble of emotions that made him dizzy. Just the after-effects of spinning, he told himself. Yet he knew that wasn't true. It was what he had seen in her eyes that made his stomach flip. Her light and her energy were infectious.

Then she'd looked at her watch and grabbed her stuff, calling *Au revoir!* over her shoulder as she'd hurried away. He'd waved as he watched her disappear behind the hot-food kiosk. And when she'd gone he'd sat down again, in exactly the same spot where he'd been comfortably sitting earlier.

But once Carys was gone it had felt as if there was an enormous void. The park, busy though it was, had felt empty.

He was smitten, he thought. Totally smitten. This was it, the *coup de foudre* people talked about, feelings that knocked you off your feet and spun your world around. He carried thoughts of her with him everywhere, replaying their every conversation. And when he was with her, he wanted to touch her cheek and feel the satin of her skin. He wanted to draw her to him, see those brown eyes sparkle with joy, feel her energy course through him. He wanted to be there for her. He wanted to erase the shadows he sometimes glimpsed, help her leave behind whatever it was that haunted her. He wanted to be her knight in shining armour – and he had a feeling she might be his. He hoped, he really hoped, that his instinct was correct. That she was the one

he'd been waiting for.

A couple of days later Mat received the email to his Madame Incognito inbox. He read it three times and checked the email address online. It seemed genuine.

Frowning, he glanced around the office at his colleagues. It wasn't Pietro pulling a prank. Pietro didn't know he was Madame Incognito anyway, but the point was – it didn't seem like a wind-up. The editor of a national newspaper really had written to Madame Incognito. He read it again:

Dear Madame Incognito,

We've been following your reviews and we're impressed. They're witty, engaging and honest and you have a flair for writing. We'd like to talk to you about a potential column in our arts section. Would you be interested in this opportunity?

If so, we're inviting you to write a one-off review for our paper this week, standing in for our regular food critic who is sick. If you'd like to take this opportunity, please reply immediately. We'll need the completed review in the next twenty-four hours.

Before you begin, we recommend that you analyse your past reviews to understand what drives the popularity of some over others, as we noticed their impact can vary quite dramatically. It would be good to establish if any key factors connect the more popular reviews. In our experience, readers tend to gravitate towards the more controversial articles, which show a strong reaction. Average, middle-of-the-road reviews tend to be lacklustre and less impactful.

We also feel it's imperative that your identity continues to remain a closely guarded secret as this is a crucial part of your dining experience and differentiates you from the well-known food critics. The sense of mystery you've generated has really got people talking. We hope you'll take into consideration this advice, and we look forward to hearing from you.

This was the stuff of dreams. In fact, it was better. Mat hadn't even dared to dream of something like this happening. Imagine it – a trial piece for a broadsheet with a view to a regular arts column. What a step up that would be from *Le Paris Local*. What a kick in the teeth for Christian. What an endorsement for Mat. Proof, finally, that all these years spent chasing the dream of becoming a journalist hadn't been wasted after all.

But it was clear he still had a lot to learn. He replied to the message without hesitation. He felt as if he was on the cusp of something big. He had to give it his all.

His brain fell into planning. He had work tomorrow so he needed to write the review tonight. But tonight he was meeting Carys for the concert. What if he suggested they go for a meal instead? No. He remembered her joyous expression when he'd described the concert. She was really looking forward to it. He couldn't let her down.

Maybe he could review somewhere he'd been before. But it had to be recent – places changed so fast in this city, and he couldn't think of anywhere. Alice glanced up at him and he remembered her sauerkraut sandwich. A spark of inspiration flashed up. What about the Red Cat Café? His visit hadn't been a success, but perhaps he could ask Alice about it. He glanced at her surreptitiously.

No. She might guess what he was doing, and the editor had stressed the importance of keeping his identity secret. He could use the sandwich he'd eaten and maybe write something around that. It had been excellent, after all, and he didn't need to mention the poor service. Give them the benefit of the doubt that it had been a one-off. Yes, he didn't have much to go on, but he could write something with what he had.

'What's up?' she asked, peering at him suspiciously. 'You seem very pleased with yourself.'

'Just had a nugget of inspiration.' He began to tap away at his keyboard as if he was totally focused on the article in front of him.

Tonight, when he got home, he'd draft a piece on the Red Cat Café. His first review for a national newspaper.

‘Wow! Just look at this place!’ Carys said, as they entered the Palais de la Musique. ‘It’s as if we’ve stepped back in time.’ She gazed around, taking in the art-deco mouldings and velvet curtains, the gilded tables and chairs, the quality parquet floor.

‘I know, right? They’ve done a great job of preserving the architectural features, but built into all this is the latest sound technology. It’s amazing.’

‘So how’s everything with you? Did you have a good day?’ Carys asked, as they queued for drinks. The bar wasn’t too busy, and she looked stunning in red leather trousers and a black top.

‘Yeah. Great.’ Mat thought of the message from the newspaper, excitement bubbling up inside him, like a swollen river threatening to burst its banks.

But he couldn’t tell anyone.

He wished he could, of course. Carys especially. But also his dad. He might be impressed that at last his son had a glimmer of success. Or maybe not. It was only a possibility, not a firm offer. And even if it did result in a firm offer, the editor was right: he had to conceal his identity at all costs or he risked losing everything Madame Incognito’s persona was built on. The fact that she experienced the same treatment as anyone else.

They bought drinks and sat down. Because they were early, they had a table near the front with a great view. It didn’t matter to him that they’d have to wait at least an hour for the act to start because every minute he spent with Carys felt precious. He ruminated on this while she went to the loo. Everything in his life seemed to be coming together: the promotion, the reviews, and Carys. She was a bright light in his life. She made him feel he was worth something. For so long he’d been aimlessly treading water in a job he found soul-destroying. Now his life had purpose. He still wasn’t sure in what direction his future would take him, but with Carys he felt he had one.

‘The music was great,’ she said, as they walked home. ‘So modern. Unusual.’

‘Yeah. I like it. You get new artists there. With some of them you know straight away that they’re going to make it big.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘You get a chill down your spine. You feel a shiver pass through the room. It’s exciting to think you might be watching tomorrow’s stars.’

She had a dreamy look in her eyes. ‘Talent is so special, isn’t it? Watching someone become their best self is magical. When I was teaching I found that the children sometimes needed just a word of encouragement and it was enough for them to take flight.’

‘Adults, too,’ he said.

When they got to her apartment block, she rooted around in her bag for her keys. They jingled as she held them up. ‘Erm – would you like to come in for coffee?’

Mat stilled, recognising the significance of the moment. She’d never asked him in before, and he could see from the anxious way she was watching him that the invitation hadn’t come lightly. He wanted to reassure her. He wanted to leap with joy. He wanted her.

But then he remembered the editor’s letter and all the hope tied up with it. A heavy feeling sank through him as he thought of what he had to do. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’d love to, but I’ve still got some work to do. Urgent stuff.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said, lowering her eyes.

Her disappointment flattened him. Could he work round this? Leave the review until tomorrow and send it in late?

No. Life brought you chances like this once in a blue moon. He’d be a fool not to seize it with both hands. Besides, imagine if something came of it. He’d have a better job, more to offer her. He’d be a better man. Someone who deserved her.

He reached for her face and she looked into his eyes. ‘Another time,’ he promised quietly.

When he got home, he opened his laptop to start a new review. He tried to taste again the tang of sauerkraut, the bite of mustard in that creamy mayonnaise, the crispy bread. He jotted down a few words, but his forehead puckered with doubt. Perhaps he should delay this until he’d paid the café another visit. He’d been so preoccupied with his dad’s call he hadn’t made notes. But the atmosphere had been friendly enough, and he didn’t need to

mention the tension between the staff. It would be a positive piece, and he was conscious of the newspaper editor's deadline. He had to do this now.

He drafted something and sent it to the editor. To his surprise, he replied immediately:

Too vanilla. And three stars is too middle of the road. Did you analyse your popular reviews? Sharpen this up. Don't be afraid to exaggerate, bend the truth if necessary. This reads like a one-star, but you're holding back and being polite. Tell us what you really think. Everyone benefits from a high-profile review, no matter how critical.

Mat bit his lip. *Analyse your popular reviews?* In his hurry to write a review, he hadn't had a chance.

He picked up his phone and began to scroll through his posts. It was true that some were far more popular than others, but he'd put that down to the random nature of social media and its algorithms, or chancing upon a favourable time to post when people were receptive to what he'd written. He flicked back through his reviews. Some were so old he barely remembered the meals described. But as he analysed the words, a pattern began to emerge. The most popular were the negative reviews he'd written using more colourful language. He'd gone to town with his descriptions, usually fired up by a sense of outrage or fury at rude waiters or terrible food. And those reviews were more emotional too, he realised.

He examined the language. It was more dramatic. Eye-catching. Exactly what Christian hated and had drummed out of him at work. While reviewing, Mat had revelled in the freedom to write what he wanted, uninhibited. He thought of his dad's cutting, venom-filled reportage. He wouldn't be where he was today if someone like Christian had been censoring *him*, would he?

Mat picked up his pen. *Too vanilla . . . Don't be afraid to exaggerate.* Guilt rubbed at him. He prided himself on always being honest and fair. Had the Red Cat Café been a one-star? That sandwich had been delicious, but it was the only good thing he could find to say. On the other hand, if he was honest and said the service had been so bad he'd walked out hungry, there

wouldn't be much else to write. And he wanted to give the staff the benefit of the doubt. Everyone had bad days sometimes.

The editor's words hovered in his mind like a golden trophy: *We'd like to talk to you about a potential column . . .*

He pictured his dad's reaction if he could tell him he'd got a new job through his own hard work. He saw Carys's smile: *We get one chance at this.* He thought of all the times Christian had deleted his words and when he'd relegated him to ad sales.

Start again, he thought. Use your imagination.

He began to write.



Review: Red Cat Café

The Red Cat Café is everything a Parisian café should not be. It says it is international, it claims to have atmosphere and charm, it prides itself on being modern, unbound by tradition – but the result is confusion. It's in France, but, while the French pride themselves on serving excellent coffee, here it is terrible (more on that later). And does it have atmosphere, or has it simply been furnished with a jumble of Ikea finds and an American coffee-shop sofa? What's wrong with metal bistro tables, burgundy chairs and sniffy waiters? Traditional French cafés are envied the world over. Why change a winning formula? It smacks of arrogance.

The menu is supposed to 'fuse' tradition from different places. Dutch waffles with crisp-fried Italian Parma ham and syrup, for example, German sauerkraut with Toulouse sausages, Spanish chorizo and oven-roasted ratatouille. It's imaginative, colourful, modern. But it doesn't work: it's simply chaos marketed as innovation. Certainly, the café itself is as chaotic as the Galeries Lafayette's new-year sales, and the service was so slow I was tempted to go to the kitchen and get the food myself.

I sampled the sauerkraut and sausage baguette, the Danish cinnamon loaf cake, and a coffee.

The cinnamon cake was moist but overly sweet. The coffee? It shouldn't be

difficult to get right, but the smoky-bean flavour tasted like yesterday's ashtray had been dropped into the filter. No self-respecting Parisian café serves bad coffee. And the sauerkraut and sausage baguette?

Frankly, it was trying too hard.

*Verdict: * (1 star)*

Don't be fooled by the menu's frills and gimmicks. They can't even get the coffee right.

Carys

Emile's cakes were becoming more colourful and creative each day. Carys snapped a picture of the cake counter to post online. It was a stunning spectrum of colours and shapes. Jewel-like fruits, chocolate praline, and a glossy citrus glaze that reflected the autumn light like a mirror.

'Move to your left a bit,' she told Emile, who was standing behind the counter.

Blowing air through his lips grumpily, he did as instructed, then smoothed his chef's whites and stood a little taller. Carys snapped a picture. 'There,' she said, feeling like a mother photographing her child's first day at school. She was so proud of what he'd achieved. Their cakes were being talked about everywhere. 'You deserve recognition for your work.'

Aurélie walked past. 'Don't know why you're making such a fuss.'

Emile glared at her and Carys frowned. The two of them had been sniping ever since the weekend when she'd gone home sick, but neither would tell her what had happened.

'Let me see the photo?' he asked.

She handed him her phone and, while she waited, her gaze fell on the middle row of especially tall and flamboyant meringues. She peered closer. They were rippled with purple and topped with fresh plums. She pointed. 'These are new.'

He glanced across. 'Yes. Plum meringues.'

'They remind me of something . . .' She couldn't think what it was.

'Madame Jalibert's hat.' He shrugged. 'You said to look for inspiration wherever I found it.'

She laughed. 'Right. I'll post these online, and then I'll have the difficult decision of choosing which to eat myself.' She still bought him a cake from

the *pâtisserie* each morning, but she preferred to try one of his latest creations, and told herself it was all in the name of good service to her customers, who might question her about them.

‘You were right, you know,’ Emile said quietly.

‘What about?’

‘When you said I was playing it safe with the cakes before.’

‘Oh, Emile, please don’t—’

‘When I was not long out of college, I had a bad boss. A chef who used to shout and swear at his staff. You know the type?’

Carys nodded. His eyes were intent. She had the feeling he didn’t talk about this often.

He went on, ‘It wore me down. It eroded my confidence. After a few months of working for him I lost all my creativity, my mojo.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘Then I left that job and when I came here it was a relief to work alone in the kitchen, to have a small menu but do everything well. And I turned my back on the *pâtisseries*. I put all my energy into the savoury dishes because when I baked I could still hear him criticising my work, shouting profanities.’

Carys’s heart squeezed. ‘That’s so sad. But look what you can do.’ She waved a hand at the dazzling display. ‘This is amazing.’

‘Yes.’ He cleared his throat. ‘And I’m grateful to you, Carys.’

‘Me? No, you did this. Only you.’

He shook his head. ‘You pushed me. You encouraged me. Even when I didn’t want to change, you persuaded me to try. And you were right. Being brave is more fun. These *pâtisseries* allow me to express myself and that feels good.’ His gaze held hers a moment longer, then he went back to the kitchen.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Carys opened the café’s social media account. She uploaded the photo of Emile, labelling it ‘Le Chef’, then flicked through all their messages.

Her eyes narrowed. The café had been tagged in a review. It was published in one of the big newspapers, as well as online.

And the critic had given them one star.

Carys put down her phone, open-mouthed. *Trying too hard? Yesterday's ashtray? Chaos marketed as innovation?*

'Ah. You've seen it, then,' said Léo, as he walked in.

'We've never had a one-star before.' Suddenly her scarf felt tight and she tugged at it. 'It's a national newspaper. Their readership will be enormous.'

'It is, but maybe that's a good thing.'

But Carys wasn't so sanguine. She ground her teeth. Anger bulldozed through her. She wanted to shake the person who'd written this – she wanted to shout and scream and rage. Who had done this? Who was Madame Incognito? She clicked on the reviewer's profile. Her avatar was a cartoon image of a woman, face hidden by dark glasses, a fedora hat and a scarf. Her profile read: *Just a woman, like any other, looking for a good meal in Paris.*

'What a coward,' she muttered. 'She doesn't even reveal her identity.'

'Good tactic for a food critic,' Léo said. 'She wants to have the same experience as any other diner, not the red-carpet treatment.' He hurried off into the kitchen.

Carys let her gaze sweep around the café, eyeing each customer with suspicion. Could it be the woman by the window? Or the young girl in the pretty dress outside? It couldn't be one of the regulars, she was certain. Carys couldn't remember any customer who'd been really angry or upset recently. Yet this Madame Incognito was scathing – even critical of the furniture. Carys glanced around at the modern décor that made this café so cosy and inviting. How had the reviewer seen it in such a poor light?

Carys sighed. It was only one review, and one person's subjective opinion. Probably best to forget about it. Maybe the sauerkraut had given Madame Incognito wind. Or maybe she was really old-fashioned and clung to tradition, suspicious of anything new (then again, would someone like that use social media?). Maybe she'd been feeling down about something else in her life when she'd visited and her dark mood had coloured her review.

Still. Weren't critics supposed to rise above that? Especially when reviewing for a newspaper.

Maybe the best thing was to ignore it and rise above it. The café was busy, after all, and they had lots to do.

But every other customer was talking about it, and Carys could hear Léo and Aurélie being asked questions too. They shrugged helplessly, and came away frowning.

‘Have you seen this review?’ the mother with three children asked Carys. ‘It’s not nice.’

Carys nodded politely, but as she went to prepare the woman’s coffee a thought struck. What if Ingrid and Mark saw it? They’d be horrified. They’d know Carys wasn’t up to the job. Because she wasn’t, was she? She’d bluffed her way through the interview but she didn’t have the right experience, and now, faced with this horrible review, she didn’t know what to do. The fear and the impotence made her feel as helpless as she had been in hospital.

The thought brought her up short. She had to deal with it. She had to think of her staff. Drawing her shoulders back, she told Aurélie, Léo and Emile, ‘We’ll have a meeting after work tonight to talk about this review.’

At the end of the day she closed the café and gathered everyone in the back room. They stared at her with such anxious faces that she tried to lay aside how gutted she felt and focused on saying the words they needed to hear. ‘That review was a one-off,’ she told them. ‘It doesn’t reflect how our customers feel. They’ve been reassuring me of this all day. They appreciate your hard work and the delicious food we serve.’

Emile blew out his cheeks. ‘I’m surprised we didn’t get anything worse. Last Saturday was a shambles. Some of us need to pull our weight.’

He glared at Aurélie, and suddenly Carys understood why they’d fallen out.

Aurélie went on the defensive: ‘I didn’t know we were going to be reviewed by this Incognito person, did I?’

‘It shouldn’t matter,’ he snapped. ‘You have to treat *every* customer as if they are a critic. Anyone can leave a review online nowadays.’

Aurélie folded her arms. ‘And every bad review is my fault, is it?’

‘Stop it, you two!’ said Léo. ‘Arguing isn’t going to help. Can’t you see how upset Carys is?’

Carys had thought she’d hidden her disappointment. She stepped in

quickly. ‘It’s not your fault,’ she told Aurélie, ‘but Léo’s right. We need to work together, not let this come between us. We’re a great café and we can do this. I don’t want you to let this Madame Incognito get to you, okay?’

‘We *are* a great café,’ Léo said, ‘and you don’t need to worry, Carys.’ He glanced at his colleagues for support.

‘It’s true,’ Emile agreed. ‘We’re excellent – most of the time.’

Aurélie nodded sheepishly. ‘Don’t worry, Carys. We’ll try extra hard.’ She patted her shoulder in a friendly way, and Carys tried to hide her astonishment. Was this the same Aurélie she’d been working with for the last two months?

‘We’ll serve customers super-fast,’ Léo added, ‘make sure their food is perfect, and bend over backwards to be friendly and helpful.’

Aurélie turned to Carys. ‘We’re a good team.’

‘We are,’ Emile murmured.

Amazed, Carys looked at each of them in turn. Aurélie’s chin was set in a pose of stubborn determination, Emile calmly held her gaze, and Léo’s eyes sparkled as he winked at her. She felt a rush of joy. Her earlier misgivings dissolved and confidence rushed back again. Aurélie was right: they *could* do this. One review was nothing. And by working together they’d come back stronger than ever.

‘Have you ever done something wrong because you were desperate?’ Carys asked Mat.

They were in the park. She couldn’t sit still today so they were ambling around, following this path and that, passing beneath statues, palm trees, and circling the empty bandstand. Sundays were usually so peaceful, just her and Mat. She looked forward to them all week. But today she couldn’t find peace.

Her hands were pushed deep into her coat pockets and her boots stamped along the gravel path. It had been three days since Madame Incognito’s review, but it was still playing on her mind. It had touched a nerve. Like the branches of the trees blowing around in the autumn wind today, her thoughts were skittering. She’d believed she could fake it till she made it in her job at the café, but the review had proved her wrong. It had exposed her for what

she was – a fraud.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘Have you ever done a bad thing?’ Her fingers fidgeted with the end of her scarf, tugging at the scarlet fabric, winding it in circles.

‘Many times.’ He laughed. Then paused and looked at her more closely. ‘Why? What’s happened? I’m sure it’s not as bad as—’

‘I can’t tell you. But is it a bad thing if you do it for a good reason? Or if you had no choice but to do it?’

‘Like a starving person stealing food, you mean?’

‘Exactly! Actually, maybe not that extreme.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ Mat asked. He reached out and touched her.

Carys looked at his hand on hers. It felt good. Her skin tingled and she wondered, not for the first time, when they’d progress beyond hand-holding and kisses. Their relationship was different from any she’d had before. It was so innocent. When she’d invited him up to her studio on Wednesday he’d made an excuse about needing to work and left – and she’d been hurt. She’d lain awake that night wondering what his reasons might have been. Mat was more thoughtful, more sensitive, more caring than the boyfriends she’d had before. And if he wasn’t ready, she respected that. It was refreshing in a way, not to rush into a physical relationship. In fact, part of her liked the slow-burning sizzle, the drawn-out sense of anticipation, like the slowest and sexiest seduction. And their friendship was special. Perhaps it was best not to spoil what they had by going too fast.

She shook her head in answer to his question. She couldn’t admit to him what she’d done. She was ashamed of the way she’d embellished her CV to Ingrid and Mark. She’d simply been desperate to leave Willowbrook and the café job had seemed perfect.

But it wasn’t. Or, rather, she wasn’t perfect for the job. She wasn’t qualified to manage a city café, and all the trouble she’d had with Aurélie – and now this review – was proof of that. Her skin prickled with heat. She took off her coat and pulled at the knot in her scarf to loosen it.

Mat stopped. He tilted her face up so she looked into his eyes. They were

such an arresting blue. ‘You look so sad,’ he said. ‘What can I do to cheer you up?’

Tiny explosions of desire fired off inside her. Her gaze dipped to his lips. She leaned forward and kissed him, savouring the heat and the slowness. His arms came around her, and the kiss deepened. She felt his hand cradle the back of her head as their bodies pressed closer.

They drew apart and she looked around her, but no one batted an eyelid. This was Paris, she remembered, with a smile. ‘That worked,’ she told him.

‘Is that all I can do?’ He slanted her a lopsided smile as they set off walking again, their fingers interlaced.

‘Music cheers me up. My friend Lib used to sing to me when I was down.’

‘Trust me, you don’t want to hear me sing.’ A beat passed. ‘But I could play guitar for you. I’ll bring it next time.’

‘I’d love that. Have you written any songs since we talked about it?’ she asked.

He shook his head.

‘You should.’

Her scarf suddenly slipped away, fluttering in a slow, swaying dance, like an autumn leaf falling, and landed on the sandy path. Mat went to pick it up but she reached it first.

‘How did you get this?’ he asked.

‘It’s just an old—’ She straightened, and realised he’d noticed her scar. She stiffened. Her hand moved self-consciously to the back of her neck and the smooth ridge. ‘Oh, that. In an accident.’ Her words were clipped and she didn’t meet his eye.

He peered at her while she hurriedly tied the scarf, covering the scar. ‘What happened?’ he asked softly.

‘It was nothing.’

He waited expectantly. When she didn’t say anything, he began, ‘You can tell me. I—’

‘I don’t want to talk about it, okay?’ She heard how sharp she sounded and wanted to bite back her words. But she’d also meant what she’d said: she didn’t want to talk about it. She refused to revisit the accident. It was behind

her now and she didn't want to go backwards. Not at all.

Mat

Mat stood in the queue for the sandwich shop thinking about yesterday in the park with Carys. She'd been so out of sorts, so unlike her usual cheerful self. He pictured the crease at the top of her nose as she'd asked, *Have you ever done a bad thing?* She'd been preoccupied, secretive. And then, when he'd asked about her scar, she'd cut him dead. *I don't want to talk about it, okay?*

He'd never seen her like that before. For a moment he'd been lost for words, taking in the rigid line of her spine, the stony set of her jaw.

'Okay,' he'd said eventually, in what he'd hoped was a reassuring tone.

And they'd continued walking. Eventually she'd slipped her hand into his and the conversation moved on.

But he was hurt. Hurt that she couldn't or didn't want to tell him. Didn't she trust him? He'd confided in her about his dad, his job, his music – everything. Well, almost. Didn't their relationship mean as much to her as it did to him? And his mind kept returning to the sight of the scar. It had been so big, so bold, yet so neat. What had caused it?

Have you ever done a bad thing?

What was she hiding?

When he got back to the office everyone was clustered around Pietro's desk. Even Christian was with them, relaxed and smiling. Mat put his sandwich on his desk and peered across.

'Look at this one,' Pietro said, pointing to his phone.

Now he looked closer, Mat realised they were all holding their phones.

Pietro read out, "'The chocolate mousse is like music. Slow, subtle and

sexy. It has a visceral effect, and the biscuit crumb, which looks like insignificant decoration, is a spine-tingling accompaniment . . .”

Mat stilled. He knew those words.

Pietro read on, but Mat didn't listen. He was seeing the admiration in his colleagues' faces, the way everyone was riveted.

He went over. 'What are you looking at?' he asked casually.

Jean-Baptiste shrugged. 'Some new food reviewer. Apparently everyone's talking about her.' He flashed his phone screen at him and Mat saw Madame Incognito's avatar. She'd had a huge upsurge in followers since the review in the broadsheet: almost a hundred thousand new readers the last time he'd looked.

Pietro had launched into reciting another. Mat's gaze searched out Alice. What did she think? Had she recognised his style? Made the connection between the Red Cat Café review and him? He hadn't told her about his visit there, and he still felt a bit guilty about the single star. Fear plucked at him that he might be outed. Madame Incognito's success felt too newborn, too fragile. And the promise of a column at the broadsheet was too important. He couldn't do anything to jeopardise it.

Christian, who'd been checking it out on his own phone, swiped again and again. 'She has a clever style, a sharp tone,' he said approvingly. 'The irony, the sarcasm. Who'd have thought reading about bistros and *steak-frites* could be entertaining?'

Mat felt a swell of pride. He hadn't seen Christian look impressed in a long time. Certainly not about anything Mat had written. He tried to rearrange his features into the blank, vaguely interested expression of someone completely detached.

'Listen to this,' his boss went on. "The lardons are as big as pebbles, the cheese is dull, the pastry flaccid and ghostly grey. Even my neighbour's quiche is better than this."

He chuckled and his belly quivered beneath the tight stretch of his shirt.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mat saw Alice frown and turn to look at him. He kept his gaze trained on Christian.

'Where's that review for?' she asked.

Christian checked. ‘A bistro in Le Marais. And there’s more.’ He finished, “‘I should have stayed at home and taken up knitting. It would have been more exciting than the food I was served.’” He put down his phone, still chuckling.

Alice was still watching Mat, and now he had no choice but to meet her eye and smile as if he was hearing this for the first time. He shrugged conspiratorially, as they often did around Christian. Mat was relieved when her puzzlement relaxed into a smile.

‘Tell you what,’ Christian said. ‘I could do with someone like this on my team here.’

Mat’s ears pricked up. Really?

‘She won’t be interested now she’s writing for a broadsheet,’ Jean-Baptiste said. ‘Look how many followers she has.’

‘Do we really not know who she is?’ Christian asked.

‘No clue,’ said Pietro. ‘I’ve asked around and nobody knows anything.’

The boss clapped his hands. ‘Right, come on everyone. Back to work.’

‘Have you read Incognito’s reviews?’ Alice asked, as they returned to their desks.

Mat shuffled some papers around while he considered how best to answer. Whether to feign ignorance or not. ‘Once or twice,’ he said, deciding to fall somewhere in the middle. ‘Haven’t paid too much attention to them. Do you follow her?’

‘Yeah. She’s funny. And I like that she reviews places I can afford – not Michelin-star restaurants, like the big food critics. She did the Red Cat Café.’

Mat felt his face flood with colour and he pretended to root around in his jacket for his phone, hoping she wouldn’t see. Deceiving people didn’t come naturally to him. ‘I’ll – er – have to check her out properly,’ he said.

‘You and a hundred thousand others,’ Alice replied. ‘It’s good, isn’t it, how anyone can get noticed nowadays? Social media is a true meritocracy. If people like what you write, they read it. There are no gatekeepers, no editors.’

He looked at his boss’s office. Why did Christian rate Madame Incognito so highly, yet Mat’s work was never good enough? How could his writing be

too poetic and too waffly yet Christian admired Madame Incognito's? Maybe reviews came more naturally to Mat than journalism. Maybe he did have something in common with his dad after all. He hadn't heard from the broadsheet editor since the piece had been published, but Mat had taken on board his advice. From now on he was planning to post more reviews and more regularly. With any luck, Madame Incognito might be his ticket out of here.

Mat hummed to himself as he walked home. He paused a moment to chat to the homeless guy, Michel, then climbed the stairs to his apartment two by two.

Sunlight was streaming into the lounge, flooding the room with rich gold warmth. He checked Madame Incognito's account. Her followers had doubled again since he'd last looked, and his latest review had thousands of likes. He scrolled through the comments, thrilled. His chest swelled with pride at what his colleagues had said today too.

His fingers began to experiment with the riff he'd been humming on the way home. It had come to him out of nowhere and it was catchy. He liked it. He let the notes lead him, and a melody emerged. Lyrics began to assemble. Tiny snatches of poetry, like flowers blossoming. Carys had been so down yesterday. Perhaps this would cheer her up. His spirits lifted as the words and music knitted together to make something beautiful. And, with it, his confidence grew.

Mat

Mat was reading when Carys arrived, hurrying and a little red-faced from the exertion and the crisp air. He got up to greet her with kisses on each cheek, and, as he sat down again, she saw his guitar case beside him.

‘You brought it!’ She clapped her hands in delight.

He tried to play it down with a shrug.

‘Come on, then!’ she said impatiently. ‘I want to hear you play.’

‘Here?’ He’d thought they might find a quiet spot tucked away behind a tree or something.

‘Why not? This is Paris. Everyone’s doing their own thing.’ She waved an arm to indicate the people around them. A couple hunched over a phone, a group of youths listening to music with a heavy drum beat, a family with young children kicking up leaves and throwing them into the air.

She was right. No one would notice. He played her a mixture of songs, old and new, classic and pop, which reflected his eclectic musical tastes. Then he offered the instrument to her. ‘Do you want a go?’

She took it and began to strum and sing. The autumn sun made her face glow. She was beautifully unselfconscious, and the odd person passing smiled. Mat reached for the phone in his pocket and weighed it in his hands, wondering if this was a good moment to tell her what he’d done. It felt risky. It *was* risky, but if there was one person in the world he could tell, it was her.

She finished the song she’d been singing and beamed. ‘What shall I play next?’ she asked, and began to pluck out a tune.

‘I wrote something,’ Mat said cautiously.

‘I thought we weren’t going to talk about work.’

‘I don’t mean that. I wrote a song.’ He cradled his phone in his cupped hands, still unsure if he should share this with her.

‘Really?’ She stopped playing. ‘Can I hear it?’

Her eyes lit up and he felt tiny sparks, a buzz of excitement. ‘It’s not a very good recording.’

She beckoned for him to hand over the phone. Reluctantly, he did. And as she held it to her ear he braced himself for the inevitable. For the light in her eyes to go out, for her beaming smile to turn dull and forced. For the tactful words as she handed it back. Unable to watch, he turned to watch a small girl toddle towards a pigeon. The bird hopped away. She chased it, and it moved on again. Eventually it flew off with a slow, exasperated flapping of wings.

Meanwhile Carys listened attentively, then hummed with the second chorus. She listened again. He’d been really pleased with the lyrics of the second and third verses, but that didn’t mean they were any good.

‘Well, you’re right about one thing,’ she said, when the song finished.

Her expression was serious and regretful. He’d known it would be. His heart sank and in that moment he regretted even entertaining the thought that he might be able to do this.

‘It’s a terrible recording.’ She patted his knee sympathetically – then beamed. ‘But that song is amazing! It’s awesome. The chorus is so catchy and the lyrics are like poetry. I can’t believe it, Mat. How could you say you weren’t any good?’

He gazed at her warily. ‘Thanks.’

Her eyes sparkled. ‘I love that song. Have you got any more?’

He shook his head. Truth was, he’d thought about it. He’d even scribbled down a few bars, snatches of lyrics too, but then he’d given up.

‘Play it for me,’ she said.

‘What – now?’

‘You play, I’ll sing.’ Her excitement was infectious and he had to bite back his own.

He looked around at the families enjoying themselves, business people scrolling, tourists taking selfies and eating pastries. ‘Let’s go somewhere quieter,’ he suggested.

‘Where?’

‘Over there, behind that kiosk.’

She looked to where he was pointing. ‘Why?’

He waved at the path in front of them. It was the main route through the park. ‘This is a bit . . . public.’

‘So? Your song is amazing. The world needs to hear it, Mat.’

He laughed and his heart rapped nervously. But he supposed the park was noisy enough that most people probably wouldn’t notice. When buskers played he paid them little attention.

‘Come on, let’s have the intro.’ She flapped her hand impatiently.

He began to strum. What was the worst that could happen? Someone might yell at them to shut up. It wouldn’t be the end of the world.

But as Carys began to sing, he forgot his misgivings. Her voice was strong, clear and soulful. His music, his lyrics sounded different from her lips. As the chorus finished, she winked at him and launched into the second verse, standing up, raising the volume. He concentrated on the strings, impressed by her sense of rhythm, loving how happy she seemed. Glowing. Radiant. She didn’t miss a beat. She held the long notes and instinctively knew where to ease off the volume and where to crescendo.

He looked up, puzzled, as she climbed up onto the bench, then saw they had an audience. Passers-by had stopped to listen, and the children playing nearby had clustered in front of her. And Carys was encouraging them, beckoning them closer, ratcheting up the volume, clapping her hands. The children began to clap along too.

Mat felt his cheeks heat and had to make himself focus on the chords. They don’t know it’s your music. They’re just seeing a beautiful woman singing. And so was he. Carys sang with such feeling it was difficult to keep his eyes off her. From her lips, his song sounded like someone else’s music. Her energy and vitality were captivating. He joined in the chorus, the children sang along too, and she beamed at them, gesturing for them to up the volume. Mat watched, amazed, as she danced and clapped and sang. More and more people stopped, drawn by the music or the crowd – who was to know? – but by the time the song was over, there were so many of them he couldn’t see how deep the crowd was.

‘*Encore!*’ a little girl said.

Carys lit up. 'You want to hear it one more time?'

'Yes! Again, again!' the others chanted.

The adults smiled and nodded.

Carys glanced down at Mat, laughing, and he began the intro again. She turned back to the crowd. 'But this time I want you to sing with me, okay? You all know the words now. Ready?'

The children squealed with delight, and she launched into the song again.

When she'd finished, the crowd applauded and whistled, and she took a bow. Then she pointed to him, telling them, 'Mat wrote the music and the lyrics. Isn't he talented?'

They clapped, and Mat cringed, face burning. But he felt proud, too, as people approached with words of encouragement. Soon the small crowd began to drift away, some people throwing coins at his feet as they went.

'Are you students?' a woman asked, adding a note to the scattering of coins. 'Busking to earn some pocket money?'

'No,' Carys said proudly, getting in before he could speak. 'My friend here is a songwriter.'

'You're good,' the woman said. 'You're both good. You make a good pair.'

Carys jumped down from the bench. 'You see, Mat?' she said. 'You have a following now.'

He shook his head. 'You have the following. I didn't know you were such a talented singer.' He corrected himself: 'Not just a singer – a performer. Here.' He held out the guitar. 'You wanted to borrow it.'

She shook her head. 'You need it. I want to hear more of your songs.'

'I haven't written any more.'

'So write some!'

He laughed, as if she'd asked the impossible, but inside he was buzzing. Her enthusiasm was like sunshine: it dazzled and warmed and made him want to grow. *Reach for the stars.*

She was right: even if no one else ever heard or liked his songs, it was still worth writing them. Just to feel this joyous sensation, like laughter bubbling up inside.

As they got up and walked out of the park, their feet in step, he slid a surreptitious glance her way and smiled. He'd never met anyone like her. She saw the world in shades of hope, joy and promise. He was so grateful she'd come into his life. The last few weeks had been magical. Transformative.

'What?' she asked, catching him staring at her.

'Nothing.'

She pressed her lips together in mock outrage and stopped in front of him, barring his path. 'Don't you "nothing" me! Tell me. Why were you smiling like that and looking all pleased with yourself?'

'I'm not pleased with myself.' Quite the opposite. He drew in a breath, feeling as if he was about to lay himself bare. 'It's just . . . you.'

She said uncertainly, 'Me – what?'

His smile faded as he realised there was no jokey way of saying this, no diversion from the truth. He had to tell her how he felt. He loved her. This sweeping, bowled-over feeling was love. He'd never felt it for anyone else, and was quite certain he'd never feel this way again.

Yet when he opened his mouth to say the words, they wouldn't come.

He looked at his feet. The toes of his trainers were grey with dust from the path. It wasn't time – not yet. When he was successful. She wouldn't want him now while he was only a reporter for a local rag, living in his dad's shadow.

'You're a really special person, Carys. You have this ability to make everything around you brighter . . .' he found it ironic that he, the wordsmith, was having such difficulty putting into words what he was feeling '. . . more hopeful.'

Her smile was radiant. 'Thanks.'

He finished quietly, 'I'm so glad I met you.'

Their eyes connected. A bullet of joy hit him square in the chest even before she took his hand loosely in hers. 'Me too.'

Carys

Carys hummed as she tidied the display, removing the empty trays and pushing the remaining cakes forward so they were front and centre. It was mid-afternoon and, despite the grey November weather, she was feeling sunny. Her mind kept darting back to the weekend and her day in the park with Mat, excitement fizzing through her as she played it over and over in her mind.

Mat was seriously talented, yet he couldn't see it at all. His song was gorgeous. A catchy melody and beautiful lyrics: simple, yet loaded with meaning. They had subtle poetry, and the more Carys looked at them, the more layers she found.

Like Mat.

The more time they spent together, the more she learned about him, and she was fascinated by the complex person he was turning out to be. Why was he so convinced his songs weren't good enough? Why had he given up writing when he was so gifted? One minute he seemed like a jaded journalist; the next he was an enigmatic poet with hidden depths. She was glad she'd persuaded him to bring his guitar to the park. His face had been a picture when the little crowd had formed to watch them perform. Did he really believe they'd only been interested in her singing, or would he realise that his music had drawn them? She carried the empty trays to the kitchen, casting friendly smiles at her customers as she passed.

But singing had been bittersweet for her. Back in Willowbrook, it used to be Carys who played the guitar and Liberty who sang. She nodded at Emile, who was engrossed in his work, and piled up the trays in the sink. As she washed them, she remembered her evenings with Liberty, and her best friend's beautiful voice. She'd sung to Carys in hospital too. The whole time

she'd been in a coma Liberty had never missed a Sunday visit – not even when it had snowed heavily and the roads were shut.

She missed Liberty, and she'd ring her later, but a phone call wasn't the same as cooking a meal together or cosying up in front of the fire with hot chocolate and having a good heart-to-heart. Carys remembered all the times she'd done her friend's hair before a night out, running curling tongs through Liberty's glorious red locks while they chatted excitedly, the two of them making eye contact in the mirror. She remembered when Liberty had broken up with a boyfriend who'd told her she was 'too dull'. They'd stayed up until the early hours sobbing and laughing over large glasses of white wine.

She propped the last tray on the draining board and wiped her hands. But those days were gone, and she was enjoying her new life here. She went out and looked around the busy café, the street outside buzzing with people and traffic. Since the one-star review she and her team had really pulled together and given it a hundred per cent. It seemed to be working. Their customers were happy, Thursday evenings were popular, and the place felt more and more like a community, with Madame Jalibert, Gérard and all the regulars. In the streets around the café, Christmas lights had started appearing, and she was looking forward to the build-up to the festivities. Paris was turning out to be just the experience Carys had hoped for: an exciting adventure, a new challenge, a chance to get to know a new place and meet new people. People like Mat, she thought, and her heart skipped a beat.

And she'd finally put the accident behind her. Started a new chapter, embracing life to the full.

Her fingers reached for the scarf around her neck and tugged it up over her scar, frowning. It was all going so well. So why did she sometimes feel as if she had to look over her shoulder? As if the past was going to catch up with her.

Mat

Mat looked at his watch. It was getting late. ‘We’d better get back,’ he said.

He and Carys had spent a long afternoon walking along the river. Then they’d bought *pâtisseries* and mulled wine and found a bench in the Jardin des Tuileries by the Louvre. The city was becoming more festive each day, with street stalls selling roasted chestnuts and impressive Christmas trees in the main squares. In the darkness of early evening, Christmas lights sparkled and danced like jewels.

‘Yeah,’ Carys said reluctantly. She got up and brushed pastry crumbs off her coat.

Mat didn’t want the day to end. Perhaps he should invite her back to his place. But then she’d see his apartment. Would she judge him for it? People assumed he was wealthy, but that wasn’t true. The apartment was expensive to keep, but he couldn’t sell it – his mother had loved it. Perhaps Carys would invite him back to hers. He hoped so.

He tossed the empty *pâtisserie* box into a bin and they set off towards the Métro station. They were halfway there when he noticed a clutch of electric scooters lined up by the roadside. An idea struck him and he stopped. ‘How about we ride home on one of these?’

Carys followed his gaze. ‘On a scooter?’

‘Yeah. It’ll be fun.’ He was keen to stretch out their time together as much as possible. He pictured them whizzing along the side streets, weaving in and out of cars and tourists, Carys’s hair streaming behind her, her face lit up in a broad smile.

But a sharp frown creased her brow. ‘No,’ she said, eyeing the line of scooters as if they were cockroaches, with a mixture of fear and disgust.

‘Why not?’ he said, walking over to them and pulling out his phone. ‘It’s dead easy. Look. You just—’

‘No,’ she said firmly.

He stopped, confused. Her feet were planted, as if she refused to step any closer. ‘Why not? I don’t understand.’ Why was she so appalled? Usually she was enthusiastic about everything.

She began to walk away from him with tiny quick steps, her boots tapping on the cobbled road. He hurried to catch her up. ‘Carys?’ he said breathlessly. ‘What’s wrong? Why are you upset?’

‘I’m not. I just don’t want to ride a scooter.’

He fell into step with her. ‘Why? I mean, it’s okay that you don’t want to, but I’m curious to understand why not.’

‘I just don’t, okay? I’ll get the Métro.’ Then, softening a little, ‘You take a scooter if you want. I don’t mind.’

‘I’m not going to leave you. The scooters aren’t important. But I don’t understand why it’s upset you.’

Her frown deepened and she opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it again.

Disappointed, he let the silence stretch on as they neared the Métro. And as they descended the steps into the warm, dusty tunnels he wondered what she wasn’t telling him. Why didn’t she trust him? If he was honest, he was hurt.

They got onto the train and sat in silence. A middle-aged woman with a tiny dog in her handbag fed it a treat. A young guy stepped onto the train. He was wearing headphones, and the hollow beat of his music thumped out of sync with the rhythm of the train as it began to move. They accelerated away, and Mat let the day’s events unfurl in his head, like a film in rewind: the mulled wine, the *pâtisseries*, the Louvre, walking by the river. And through it all Carys smiling and laughing. She’d looked so happy. They’d been so happy.

So why the sudden change of mood? What had he done wrong?

They changed to head north and got on the second Métro in silence. He’d walk her home. Whatever had happened, he wouldn’t allow this to fracture

their friendship.

They reached her stop and emerged into the evening air. The temperature had dropped and he zipped up his coat. In silence they followed the main road to the square and turned left.

As her apartment block came into view, she suddenly spoke. 'Sorry about earlier.'

He glanced at her. She kept her eyes down, but he saw contrition etched into her features and he heard it in her voice. 'It's okay,' he said gently. 'I just – don't understand what I said to upset you.'

They passed the florist's, all shuttered up, and the café, where a big group of people was milling outside. They were kissing each other, waving goodbye, then scattering in different directions, calling, '*Bonsoir!*' over their shoulders.

'I'm scared of the traffic in Paris,' Carys said. 'It's on the wrong side of the road for me, remember? And I just – I was scared. I'm sorry.'

He stopped, lightly touching her arm for her to stop too. She reluctantly met his gaze and tears wobbled in her beautiful brown eyes. Horrified that he'd caused them, he reached out and stroked her cheek. 'Don't be sorry. It's fine. It doesn't matter.'

He pulled her to him, relieved, and glad she'd confided in him, yet still confused.

But one thing he was certain about: he didn't want her to be upset. He didn't want her to feel sad or afraid. He'd do anything to protect her from those things.

After a while they stepped apart, then walked the short distance to her apartment block. In front of the tall wooden doors they stopped.

'Feeling better?' he checked.

She nodded, her smile almost restored. 'I had a lovely day. Thank you.'

'So did I. The best.'

'Are you free on Wednesday?' she asked tentatively. 'We could go to that music place again.'

'Sorry. I can't do Wednesday.' He'd booked a restaurant he was planning to review, but of course he couldn't say that. 'Thursday, maybe?'

Her face fell. 'I have to work. We open late on Thursdays.' There was a short pause. 'Next Sunday, then?'

He grinned. 'Definitely.'

She didn't invite him up. The ache of disappointment dug into him. They kissed. She punched in the security code to open the doors and went inside. She waved, then vanished.

Mat walked slowly home, glad they'd cleared the air. But something didn't stack up. *I'm scared of the traffic in Paris . . . And I just – I was scared.* He was certain there was more to this than she'd told him. She *had* looked scared. He saw that now. But not like someone who didn't want to do something.

She'd looked terrified.

Carys

Carys closed the door of her studio, took off her boots and sank onto the bed. Staring up at the ceiling, she cursed herself. Well done, Car.

She pictured Mat's bewildered expression when she'd practically run away. She saw his relief when she'd apologised, and all the unspoken questions he'd been too afraid to ask. She cursed again, well aware that she hadn't behaved rationally. She'd lashed out angrily, when underneath she'd been petrified. Neither was a 'normal' reaction to the suggestion of a scooter ride.

The sound of a saxophone warming up drifted in from along the corridor. She was not going to become the girl she'd been today. She refused to. Timid, tense, turning around and fleeing rather than facing her fears. Or, at least, admitting them. She didn't want to spoil their relationship over this.

So what was she going to do? Tell Mat, and risk him going into super-concerned mode, like everyone in Willowbrook? They'd treated her like a porcelain doll and it had been infuriating.

The saxophone warbled, fell silent a moment, then launched into one of the songs that had become so familiar to her now. Whoever played it had a handful of favourite pieces they always returned to. This one was mournful yet achingly beautiful and it reminded her of Liberty's singing.

No, thought Carys, fingering the knot in her scarf. She wasn't ready to tell Mat about the accident. Not yet. But she had to find a way to overcome her fear.

She replayed the afternoon's events. *How about we ride home on one of these?*

She could have swallowed her fear and forced a smile. *Okay, she could have said. How does it work? I'm nervous about Paris traffic.*

It's Sunday, he would have said. *There won't be much traffic, and we can take the back roads or ride on the pavements.* He would have been understanding, ridden next to her, not too fast. And she would have been tense at first, but then she would have relaxed, and it would have been one small hurdle overcome.

They would have arrived here, breathless and smiling, the perfect ending to their happy day. Instead of the disaster it had been.

She sighed. Next time, she vowed, she'd do it differently. She would not allow her fear to spoil things again. She couldn't let it come between her and Mat.

Mat

Mat had spent the day out on the streets interviewing people and getting their opinions on the forthcoming local elections. It had been cold and damp, and he was relieved to get back to the office. But when he came in Alice was glowering.

‘What’s up?’ he asked.

‘Jean-Baptiste was in with Christian just now. He came out extremely pleased with himself and wouldn’t look me in the eye. Now he’s vanished outside with his phone.’

‘You think he got the promotion?’

She reached into her desk drawer for her lip balm, then closed it with a bang that made Mat jump. ‘What else could it be?’

He sat down heavily. He’d pinned so much hope on this but now he saw it wither and wilt to nothing. ‘Where’s Christian now?’ he asked.

‘You need me?’

They whirled around.

Their boss was behind them, and the papers in his hand indicated he’d just come back from the photocopier.

‘Oh – ah – we were wondering if you’d made a decision about the promotion,’ Mat said.

‘I have. I was just going to call you all in. Is Pietro here? Good.’

Ten minutes later, they emerged from his office. Jean-Baptiste had reappeared, and Mat and Pietro clapped him on the back. Alice politely congratulated him. And Christian had put their minds at rest that there would be no redundancy. ‘For now, at least,’ he’d said gravely, ‘we can stretch to

one pay rise.'

Mat was relieved, and happy for Jean-Baptiste, but as he went back to his desk he felt as if his forced smile might turn to stone. He fought down his disappointment that the promotion hadn't been his. What had he done wrong? What did Jean-Baptiste have that he didn't? Mat hadn't heard anything more from the broadsheet editor. Now this door had closed, what else was there?

He trudged home, his thoughts like sludge.

'*Bonsoir*, Mat,' the homeless guy said, and chuckled when Mat started. 'Got stuff on your mind?'

Mat mustered a smile. 'Yeah, something like that. How are you, Michel?' He dug around in his pocket for change.

'Never been better,' he said.

Mat continued on, conscious that his problems were insignificant in comparison to Michel's, but it was cold comfort. When he got back to his apartment, he shut the door heavily. He wished he could call Carys and talk to her about it. Then again, she imagined he was talented and intelligent, and that being a journalist was a great job. He didn't want to dispel that image of him. When he was with her he could almost imagine he was that man, and it felt good. No, he wouldn't spoil what they had with the toxicity of his work.

His phone rang and his hopes lifted, wondering if it was her. But it was his dad. Mat hadn't spoken to him for a while. 'How's it going, Dad?'

'All good, son. Having a great time.'

'Where are you now?'

'Vietnam.'

'They're not working you too hard?'

His dad's deep-throated chuckle travelled down the line, along with a lot of hooting, shouting and traffic noise. 'Not at all. The television company have brought a whole team of people who do everything for me. You know, minions. I just turn up and read the words they give me.'

Mat didn't know what to say. He was exhausted. He realised he'd been feeling this way for years now.

'Mat, can you hear me? Are you still there?'

'Yes, I can hear you.'

‘Something wrong?’

‘No, nothing.’ He frowned. Why not tell the truth? ‘Actually, there is something. I was hoping for a promotion at work, but it didn’t happen.’

‘A promotion to what? Aren’t you hacks all the same? All equals?’

Mat closed his eyes. How did his father manage to dismiss a whole profession in so few words? ‘There are different grades of responsibility,’ he said wearily.

There was a pause. ‘Were you very keen to get this promotion?’

He considered this a moment. ‘Yes. Yes, I was.’

‘Ah.’ Another silence.

Perhaps this was the best he could hope for in terms of support from his dad – silence. A ceasefire in the condescending ridicule. But then he heard jabbering at the other end, and his dad’s muffled reply of ‘Yes, yes, just a minute,’ and realised his dad wasn’t listening to him.

A moment later his dad was back. ‘Well, I’m sure there’ll be other opportunities.’

Mat frowned. ‘I don’t know. We’re a very small set-up.’

He heard more urgent talking. Then his dad sighed. ‘Sorry, Mat. I have to go. Apparently we need to get moving. We’ll talk again another time, okay? Bye.’

The line went dead. Mat stared at his phone, then hurled it against the sofa.

Mat

‘**H**as something happened, Mat? You seem down.’

They’d only been at the park for ten minutes and Mat thought he’d done a pretty good impression of acting upbeat – but apparently not. Either his worries were written all over his face, or Carys was really perceptive. ‘I can’t talk about it.’

‘Can’t’ wasn’t the right word. He didn’t want her to see this side of him. The one Christian saw and sneered at, the one his dad had always derided.

‘Why? Is it work?’ He felt her brown eyes studying him closely. ‘I think I can guess – you didn’t get the promotion?’

He nodded.

‘I’m sorry. You know, we could ditch the rule about not discussing work. It might help to get things off your chest.’

‘It won’t help. But thanks.’

She stretched her legs in front of her and rubbed the toes of her chunky red boots together. ‘If you hate your job so much, why don’t you do something else? You could retrain. Teaching is very rewarding.’ Her tone was careful. Gentle.

‘What did you teach?’

‘Primary. Little ones.’ She gazed unseeingly into the distance. ‘It was so satisfying to see their personalities develop. It made me proud each time they pushed themselves to do something they found difficult.’

‘Do you miss it?’ Whenever she talked about home, she had this nostalgic look in her eyes and he wondered why she’d left if she’d been so happy there. What had happened? Memories of the scooters last week and her unexpected reaction sprang into his mind but he kept his questions to himself. He didn’t want to upset her again, and hoped she’d tell him sooner or later.

‘I was ready for a change. Coming here has been just the challenge I needed. What makes you really happy? What sets your heart on fire because you really care about it?’

He thought about the songs he’d been writing, the lyrics he pored over, his reviews, which were garnering so much attention, the feature article he and Alice had worked so hard on. ‘Words,’ he said finally. ‘Getting the words right, reaching people.’

‘So don’t let your boss put you down. Do what you need to do to get past him, to reach those readers.’

She was right. He’d stopped applying for jobs because he’d got so despondent, his confidence crushed by the daily doses of criticism and ridicule.

‘And if words are what’s important, find new opportunities to write. Write your songs, write what excites you, what makes you happy.’ She took his hands in hers. His body smoked at her touch. Her skin was smooth as silk and he longed to run his fingers over it. ‘You can do this, Mat. You are important. Your words are important. You need to do whatever it takes to make the world see that.’

Coming from anyone else, her words would have sounded phoney and fake. Hollow, even. But the look in her eyes was anything but hollow. She was a burst of sunshine on this grey November day.

‘Keep trying,’ she said, ‘and your dream will become a reality.’

‘You think so?’ he said sceptically.

‘I know so. Perseverance is everything. You must believe in yourself.’

She was right. Madame Incognito was gathering momentum. Since his piece for the broadsheet, he’d been publishing reviews more regularly and he’d followed the editor’s advice to make them punchier and more controversial. And his following had grown. Perhaps he should tell Carys about Madame Incognito. But what would he say? *There’s this project I’ve started, this small thing that gives me hope . . .* No. She’d want to know more and, although he trusted her to keep it a secret, if she looked even a tiny bit dubious when he told her, his dream would be crushed and that would be the end of it.

But he clung to her words. *You must believe in yourself*. He believed in Madame Incognito, the one area of his life in which he was doing something right. She was the glimmer of hope on his horizon.

He was walking home when his phone buzzed with a new message and he glanced at it. Then stopped and did a double-take.

There must have been magic in the air, or perhaps the universe had been listening to his conversation with Carys, because it was the broadsheet editor. He wanted to meet Madame Incognito in person to discuss a column with the paper.

Mat fought the urge to jump and punch the air. This – *this* was the news he'd been waiting for.

Carys

Carys nipped into the office to take a call from Liberty. It wasn't like her friend to ring during café hours and for a moment she felt a hiccup of worry.

But she needn't have. Liberty could barely contain her excitement.

'Car, you won't believe what happened yesterday!' her friend squealed.

'You had a good birthday?'

'The. Best,' Liberty said. 'Alex asked me to marry him.'

She gasped. 'Really? What did you say?'

'I said yes!'

'Lib, that's wonderful. Congratulations. I want to hear all the details.'

'Oh, Car, it was so romantic. He prepared this special meal, just the two of us at the cottage, and there were candles everywhere, and he'd bought the most beautiful ring . . .'

Mat

Mat had taken the day off work to meet the broadsheet editor. He was beside himself with excitement – and nerves. This morning he'd spent half an hour deciding what to wear. He'd admitted to the editor that he was a man, so he wasn't going to have to do a Mrs Doubtfire and go in drag, but still. Did he go for the usual jeans and polo shirt? Chinos and a shirt? Or show how important this was to him and go all the way with a suit? If only he could have asked someone. Alice would have told him bluntly if he was trying too hard, or not making enough effort. But because this concerned Madame Incognito he couldn't tell anyone.

In the end he decided on a suit, but it felt stiff and uncomfortable, and he didn't have a coat that fitted over it, so decided to do without. He had a couple of hours to spare before the meeting and needed to get lunch, so he went to the Red Cat Café. His review about the place had been popular, but ever since he'd written it he'd felt a niggle of guilt about the one star. Maybe he'd review it again. It would be nice to rebalance things with a more positive follow-up review.

The display of cakes made him pause. Parsnip and maple-syrup cake, pumpkin *macarons*, choux-pastry buns piled high with flamboyant cream and toffee apple, *pâtisseries* shaped like pine cones and pears. He found himself smiling. But he couldn't see a free table inside, so he sat outside.

Traffic streamed past, but it wasn't a main street, and he sat back, one foot propped on his knee, trying to calm his nerves and focus. At the next table an elderly woman was wearing a coat of orange feathers and square black-framed glasses. She was petite and white-haired, and made him think of a tiny orange bird. She winked at him. He smiled politely, and reached into his bag for the notes he'd made in preparation for the meeting. His heart pounded

frenetically. Everything hinged on this. It was his one and only chance. If he messed it up—

He stopped himself. Deep breath, Devine. It wasn't going to help his case to turn up to the meeting beside himself with nerves. He needed to stay calm. Madame Incognito had done the hard work: they admired her reviews. And she had half a million followers now, which he found quite incredible.

He stuffed the notes back into his bag and looked around for a waiter. Inside, the girl with red hair was leaning against the counter examining her nails. He recognised her.

The old lady told him, 'The service is slow with that one. You'll have to catch her eye. The other staff are wonderful, but . . .' She tutted.

Mat took another deep breath, trying to rehearse in his mind what to say to the editor.

The girl at the counter looked up, yawning, and he raised his hand to get her attention. He couldn't risk being late for this meeting. She ambled outside, pen and pad in hand. '*Bonjour,*' she said, without smiling.

He ordered the beetroot soup and a Cajun pork and banana sandwich, and warned her he was in a hurry. He shivered, feeling the cold now he was sitting still. He reached into his bag for a book. Reading might take his mind off the nerves. A ginger cat emerged from the café and sauntered towards him. It sniffed around his legs, and seemed disappointed he had no food. As it wandered off again, he wondered if it was the cat the café was named after.

'So you're the bookish sort, are you?' the orange-feathered woman observed.

He smiled and nodded, not wanting to get into a conversation when his mind was on the interview.

'Do you like poetry?'

His nerves grated. 'Not really. Novels are more my thing.'

'Shame. They do a great social evening here on a Thursday evening. Some people read poetry, others perform—'

His phone rang. 'Excuse me,' he said, relieved to get away. It was only a restaurant confirming a booking he'd made online, and he paced up and down the pavement to keep warm while he talked. When he came back he sat with

his back to the lady. It felt mean, but he needed to keep a clear head. Today was so important.

The soup arrived. ‘Careful, the bowl’s hot,’ the waitress said, as she put it down clumsily.

Mat put out his hand to steady the bowl and soup splashed him.

‘I told you it was hot,’ she snapped.

He’d been trying to help, but bit his lip and said instead, ‘It’s nothing.’ He wiped his fingers, but they were stained purple.

Still, the soup was delicious and he fell on it ravenously, relieved that today there’d been no hitches. The sandwich was good too. Unusual, complex flavours, and beautifully presented. He could see the chef through the kitchen hatch, concentrating hard, getting impatient when the waitress didn’t collect the food promptly. He noted how happy the customers looked, everyone laughing, chatting, enjoying their food. Words for the review began to collect in his mind: quirky but welcoming, a striking array of bold cakes, refreshingly different combinations that stimulate and delight the palate . . .

A blob of Cajun sauce escaped and landed on his suit jacket. He dabbed at it with a napkin, but it stained red. He cursed, and felt the tension in him wind tighter. He had purple fingers and a stain on his jacket. What kind of impression would he make when he met the editor? Dark clouds pushed in overhead and he shivered. He’d finish his meal quickly and go, retreat to the warmth of the Métro and make sure he arrived in good time for the interview.

The orange cat returned and rubbed against his leg, then peered up at the table longingly.

‘Raoul! Leave him alone.’ The lady behind him shooed it away. ‘Beware that cat,’ she said, as it scooted off. ‘He’s evil.’

He thanked her, then ordered coffee and a pear cake – literally, a cake that looked like a pale green pear. It was incredibly realistic, and when he sliced it open it revealed a delicate sponge and a fruit centre that made his taste buds tingle. The coffee was good too. In fact, he felt a needle of guilt for what he’d said about it in the last review.

The cat returned and his heart sank as it sniffed his leg. He’d never been harassed by an animal before, but it seemed today was not going his way. ‘I

don't have anything to give you,' he told it firmly, and hoped it would get the message.

The cat eyed him haughtily, then turned around. Horrified, Mat watched as its tail lifted, quivered, then a jet of clear liquid sprayed forth, directed squarely at his trouser leg.

Mat gasped and jumped up. 'Did you see that?' he said to the old lady. The cat glared at him, then sauntered off. 'He just peed on me!'

'I told you he's evil.' She turned and called the waitress. 'Aurélie!'

Mat cursed. He grabbed a napkin and dabbed at his trouser leg, but it was futile. No! Not today, not now.

The waitress appeared. 'Something wrong?'

'Your damn cat. Look what he did.'

The waitress bent to peer at his ankle – then straightened sharply, grimacing. 'Woah! Judging by the smell he didn't pee. He marked his territory on you.'

'And that's supposed to make me feel better?' Panic gripped him. 'I've got an interview in half an hour. What am I going to do? I can't go smelling of cat piss. I stained my jacket too.'

The waitress eyed the red mark. 'Wow,' she said coolly. 'You are having a bad day.'

The corners of her mouth twitched, which made his hackles rise even further. She found this funny? Damn it, he'd been trying to do them a favour reviewing their bloody café. He shouldn't have bothered – he should have stayed at home. While she went to fetch the bill, he dabbed his jacket ineffectually. He was practically wearing his lunch, and now he smelt of cat pee. Things couldn't get any worse.

His phone rang, and when he saw the editor's name flash up, he snatched it to his ear. 'Yes?' He sounded breathless.

'Mat? Really sorry, but I'm going to have to cancel our meeting. Something urgent has come up in the newsroom. You know how it is.'

Disappointment plunged through him. Relief, too, given the state of him, but the disappointment was overpowering. Mat murmured something about how he totally understood, but he felt the opportunity slipping out of his

grasp. He'd pinned his hopes on this.

'I'll be in touch. In the meantime, keep up the reviews.' He heard the smile in the other man's voice. 'I noticed you're posting more often – keep that up. And I really loved the one about the Vietnamese place. So sharp, so incisive.'

Carys

‘It was just perfect,’ Liberty repeated for the hundredth time.

Carys smiled. ‘I’m so happy for you. Both of you.’ She really meant it. It confirmed in her mind that she’d done the right thing in leaving Damselfly Cottage. It had given Liberty and Alex space, and their relationship had clearly blossomed as a result.

‘Thanks, honey. How’s it going with you? Are you happy with Mat?’

‘Yes.’ She remembered how despondent he’d been about his job at the weekend, and wished she could do more to help him.

‘Maybe you could come home for the weekend,’ Liberty suggested. ‘Bring him with you, so we can meet him.’

‘There’s not much chance of me getting a weekend off now, Lib. I’m expecting the café to get really busy over the next few weeks in the run-up to Christmas.’ And bringing Mat home would mean explaining about her past, which she wasn’t ready for yet.

‘Have you told him about your accident?’ Liberty asked, as if reading her mind.

‘It’s still early days.’ Carys fiddled with the teaspoon next to her empty espresso cup from earlier, rotating it so it caught the light. She didn’t know where she stood with Mat. On the one hand they felt so close it was as if they’d known each other all their lives. On the other, they’d kissed and nothing more. He hadn’t asked her back to his, and she hadn’t felt brave enough to invite him again since the time he’d refused. She was frustrated and confused. Had she misjudged it? Was their connection simply friendship to him, not the meaningful relationship she’d thought they had?

‘Perhaps you should be honest with him. Don’t you think he’ll be hurt to know you’ve kept this secret from him?’

She pressed her lips together. 'When the time is right, I'll tell him. Listen, I'm sure you mean well, Lib, but I know what I'm doing.'

'Sorry. I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life, I just care about you, honey.'

'I know.' She smiled.

'Will you be home for Christmas?'

'I don't think so. My contract ends on New Year's Eve, so I'll stay until Mark and Ingrid are back.' Although she missed her friends and family, she didn't feel ready to go home yet. Maybe she'd look for another job in Paris in the new year. 'Listen, I'd better get back to work, but congratulations again, I'm thrilled for you both, and send me a picture of the ring, okay? I can't wait to see it.'

Carys put the phone down and went into the café. She noticed, as she peered through the window, that Aurélie and Madame Jalibert were talking excitedly outside. When the waitress came back in, Carys asked her, 'Is everything okay?'

'Raoul just peed on a customer's leg, that's all.'

'What? Is the customer still here?'

'He was in a hurry to leave.' She smirked.

'Aurélie, I hope you were sympathetic.'

She shrugged.

Carys wished she'd been there to deal with it. But she brushed aside the thought and, as she went back to work, her mind kept replaying Liberty's words. *Don't you think he'll be hurt to know you've kept this secret from him?*



Review: Red Cat Café

Red Cat Café – again. I survived another visit. Unfortunately, the outcome was as dismal, if not worse. Think staff as disinterested as mannequins. Think crazy food combinations – and not in a good way. Think crazy customers as intent on chatting as the staff are reluctant to serve you. The whole experience left a sour taste.

The beetroot soup left its mark on me, but for the wrong reasons. The pork and banana sandwich had the most delicious Cajun seasoning – though I would have preferred not to have to throw away my suit as a result of the stain it left. The pear cake, it has to be said, was good. Impressive, even. But I couldn't enjoy it because I was hounded (see what I did there?) by the resident cat. Don't they feed the animal? Or does he, like the other customers, have no respect for personal boundaries? The café must attract a certain kind of character because their Thursday evening open-mic nights (*poetry readings, music – you get the gist) are, apparently, very popular. Who, for goodness' sake, would want to perform poetry in a café?*

*The verdict: * (one star)*

Be warned: the eponymous cat is evil.

Carys

Carys's eyes widened as she read the review. *Another* by Madame Incognito? One star again? What was her problem? If she hated the place so much, why had she come back?

Her gaze ran over the words: *Staff as disinterested as mannequins . . . Crazy food combinations – and not in a good way . . . The eponymous cat is evil.* She'd even dissed the Thursday open-mic evenings: *Who would want to perform poetry in a café?*

'It could be anyone,' Carys said to Léo, and glanced around the café, eyeing every customer with suspicion. 'She might not even be a woman.'

He followed her gaze. 'This is true. At least it's not in a national newspaper this time, just on her social-media account.'

Some of her followers had tagged the café, though, and Carys wished they hadn't. She was relieved to have to leave her phone and go to serve Madame Jalibert. But the white-haired lady asked, 'What are you going to do about the review?'

Carys blinked. 'You've heard about it?'

Madame Jalibert adjusted her bracelet, which was shaped like a Rubik's Cube. 'Of course. I've read it myself online.'

'I didn't know you were even on social media.'

'All my friends are on it. And I love your pictures, by the way. They always make me hungry.'

'Thank you.' She was stunned by all this information.

'Well? What will you do?'

'Erm, truthfully, I don't know what I can do. Aren't we supposed to ignore bad reviews and rise above them?'

Madame Jalibert shook her head vehemently and raised a fist in the air.

‘You must defend yourselves. This is a call to arms.’

For some reason Carys pictured Tom Hanks saying, ‘Go to the mattresses,’ in *You’ve Got Mail*. She chewed her lip. But, like Meg Ryan’s character, fighting wasn’t her style. ‘Well, maybe I’ll start by talking to the staff.’

‘Emile, are you okay?’ she asked, when the three of them were in the office for an emergency meeting.

‘Yes. Why?’

‘You’re not upset by this review?’

‘Not at all. Why would I be?’

Relief washed through her. ‘Because I encouraged you to be more creative with the food and she’s quite unkind in her criticism of it. I feel bad.’

‘She’s unkind about the whole place. It tells you more about her than about us.’

‘I don’t know what to do. I want to show her that her nasty reviews are petty and horrible, but I don’t know how to—’

A loud rap at the back door signalled the delivery from the wholesaler. Emile and Léo volunteered to unload it, leaving Carys and Aurélie alone.

The waitress gave her a probing look. ‘Why are these reviews getting to you so much?’

‘What do you mean? They’d get to anyone. They’re nasty.’

Aurélie shook her head. ‘You’ve been worried all day. You’re taking it very badly. Almost like it’s personal.’

‘It *is* personal,’ Carys said. Aurélie raised a brow. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘They’re reviewing the café. Not you.’

‘But I’m the manager. Can’t you see? I’m responsible for everything.’

Aurélie looked thoughtful. ‘It’s curious. You don’t take life too seriously normally. You’re upbeat, fun. But with these reviews, it’s as if they’re hitting a nerve.’

Carys frowned. Were they? Wouldn’t anyone feel attacked by those words? Especially the person the owners had trusted to run the place in their absence.

She eyed the waitress. Maybe Aurélie wouldn't. But, then, she was so hard-nosed about everything. Maybe this was the difference between being a city girl and a country mouse. Carys had led a sheltered life in Willowbrook and perhaps it hadn't prepared her for situations like this.

'I promised Ingrid and Mark I'd look after the place for them. I can't let them down. They'll be gutted if they see these reviews.' It was only a matter of time before they did.

Aurélie picked up the cushion Léo had been sitting on, plumped it back into shape. 'If they cared that much they wouldn't have gone away.'

'They had no choice. They had to leave.'

Aurélie sighed. 'Don't listen to this Madame Incognito. Ignore it.'

'How can we ignore it when she has . . .'

Carys checked her phone ' . . . half a million followers and they've seen this?'

There was a pause before Aurélie asked, 'Why are you so upset about one person's review? What are you scared of, Carys?'

Of being exposed as a fraud. She'd bluffed her way into this position and she was doing a poor job, if you listened to Madame Incognito. Maybe everyone back home had been right to worry about her since the accident. Maybe she wasn't as strong or capable as she thought. 'Isn't it obvious? She could destroy the business. She could drive all our customers away.'

'Has she, though?'

'Not yet, but . . .'

Her words trailed off. Was she overreacting? Or was Aurélie simply not as invested as her? ' . . . What if everyone reads this review and boycotts the café?'

Aurélie wrinkled her nose. 'People are curious. If anything, we might get extra customers.'

'You don't know that.'

'Anyway, think of all the positive reviews we've had. There are hundreds of them. Why are you so upset about a single bad one? People like the café. The food is good, there's a friendly atmosphere, and everyone feels welcome. That's what you wanted, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Carys. Then, with more conviction, 'Yes.'

The café was fabulous. It was colourful, bright and popular. In a city of

elegance and tradition it stood out as a beacon of fun and individuality. It was

The idea came to her then, and she must have looked as if she'd been struck by a lightning bolt because Aurélie asked, 'What? What is it?'

The door opened and Léo and Emile came back in.

Carys felt a slow smile spread, warming her. 'I've had an idea.'

'What kind of idea?'

'For how to get back at this evil woman.'

'You're going to hire an assassin?' Aurélie said.

Léo laughed. 'I've always thought Emile would make a good hitman.'

The chef playfully pulled him into a headlock.

'No.' Carys beamed. 'That would be answering hate with hate. What we're going to do is much better.'

Aurélie grimaced. 'We're going to get him to seduce Madame Incognito?' Carys shook her head, but Aurélie seemed to have latched on to the idea. 'He could lure her here like a Black Widow spider, then eat her.'

'What's your idea?' Emile asked Carys. 'Tell us.'

'We're going to show her she has no power over us.'

'She has power over five hundred thousand followers.' Aurélie's tone was dry.

'Maybe, but we still have customers, don't we?' Carys said. 'She hasn't driven them away.' She jumped to her feet, excited by her plan. 'We're going to show her that . . .' she stretched her arms into the air, like a circus ringmaster opening the show '. . . WE ARE NOT AFRAID! The Red Cat Café is fun and quirky and loud. We are not going to hide under a rock because she – one person –'

'One miserable person,' Léo interjected.

'– didn't like the beetroot soup. We're going to bounce back even brighter and louder and more ourselves than ever.'

'I'm not sure I follow this,' Aurélie said. 'What are you going to make us do?'

Carys grinned. 'Be here on Sunday morning at eight and you'll see.'

'Sunday?' The three were clearly appalled.

‘I’ll pay you double time,’ Carys added hastily. ‘And I’ll make sure you have time off to make up for it. Please. This is important. I can’t do it without you.’

When they didn’t answer, she felt disappointment roll in and backpedalled. ‘It’s too much to ask, isn’t it? Forget it.’

‘I’ll be there,’ Léo said quickly.

His words hung in the air and Carys felt a rush of gratitude to him. But she knew Aurélie and Emile had young families, and couldn’t spare—

‘So will I,’ Aurélie said.

Carys blinked. ‘Thank you! You can bring the boys, if you like. We’ll take it in turns to keep them entertained. And maybe they can help.’

‘I’ll come too,’ said Emile, his voice low and grave.

Carys felt tears threaten again, only this time they were of joy and a whole jumble of other emotions she couldn’t identify. ‘You’re all wonderful, you know that?’

‘Yeah,’ Aurélie said. ‘But I’d like to know what this plan of yours involves.’

Carys tapped her nose. ‘Leave it to me. Just bring yourselves and wear old clothes.’

‘Old clothes?’ Aurélie looked horrified.

Carys nodded. ‘And your brightest smiles.’

Mat

‘Have you ever left a review?’ Carys asked.

Mat stilled. The park was busy on this frosty Friday evening, but they’d found a bench near a waffle stall and the smell of sugar and cinnamon drifted on the air. A group of musicians were laying out chairs and instruments nearby. Christmas was only four weeks away, and there were reminders everywhere in the city.

‘What kind of review?’ he asked. When he thought of Madame Incognito he felt a rush of excitement. And nerves. Since their aborted meeting, he hadn’t heard from the editor. The guy had promised to rearrange but what if he didn’t? Mat was worried he might have raised his hopes for nothing. Madame Incognito was now considered an ‘influencer’ and companies had been approaching her offering products in return for her endorsement, but a hamper of food or a crate of wine wasn’t the same as a salary with sick pay and a pension.

Carys plucked at a loose thread from her sleeve and rolled it between her fingers. ‘For books, clothes, holidays. Anything.’

‘Many times. Why?’

She stared into the middle distance, uncharacteristically pensive. ‘I just wondered what kind of person does that.’

‘Everyone, I should think. They’re part of the world we live in. Reviews can really help a business.’

Her head shot up. Her brown eyes burned. ‘Bad ones, I mean. One star. Don’t you think it takes a really mean, miserable, angry, sad person to slag off a place or a thing?’

The hard set of her jaw made his brows lift and he bristled, thinking of Madame Incognito’s one-star reviews. They were popular. Madame

Incognito was flying. She'd had another swell in followers during the last week. The editor's advice had been spot on: cutting reviews were what everyone wanted to read. 'No. I don't. I've been to some awful places and bought terrible products that made me feel cheated, had tradesmen rip me off with bodge jobs. I'd hate for someone else to make the same mistake when I could have warned them about it.'

She didn't reply.

He peered closer as she fiddled with the ring on her finger. It was chunky orange resin, like a glittering ball of bubblegum. 'Carys, are you okay?' It wasn't like her to be so quiet. Where were her usual sparkle, energy and positivity? 'Has something happened?'

She looked up, straight ahead, and sighed.

'Is it work? I know we said we wouldn't discuss it, but—'

'I don't want to talk about it,' she cut in sharply.

He stiffened, hurt. There was so much he didn't know about her life, and yet she wasn't a secretive person normally. She was so open in every other respect. Didn't she trust him?

'Sorry,' she added. 'It's just a touchy subject right now.'

'I understand.' Though he didn't – not really. He wondered what kind of shop she worked in and why she was so coy about discussing it with him. He tried a different tack. 'My dad reviews cars.' Her head swivelled in surprise. 'He's made a career out of doing it.'

'A career?' She laughed. Then stopped. 'Wait. Your surname's Devine – Charles Devine is your dad?'

He nodded.

She gasped. 'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'I didn't want you to hold it against me.'

'Oh, my goodness! I see why you don't get on with him. He can be mean.'

He tilted his head. 'His reviews are popular.'

'So? He'll write anything for the sake of a witty line. I always think people who are nasty like that must be deeply unhappy.'

He pictured his dad the last time they'd talked online. He'd been wearing a Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned to reveal his sunburned chest and grinning like a

boy as he'd shown Mat his ridiculously expensive hotel room. Poppy had waved a glass of champagne from the hot tub on the balcony. 'He seems happy.'

Carys shook her head. 'You are so unlike him.'

His skin prickled uncomfortably. 'You don't know that.'

'I do.'

The hum of violins made him turn. The musicians, a quartet, were tuning their instruments. Then they launched into Pachelbel's Canon.

When they finished, Carys was staring glumly at her hands.

'So, Sunday,' he said, as the quartet began another piece. 'What are you up to? Anything nice?'

'What?'

'You said you can't meet at our usual time,' he prompted.

'Oh. Yeah. It's work.' She stared into the distance.

Another silence followed. Then he asked gently, 'What's happened, Carys? You seem really upset.'

She sighed. 'Oh, nothing. It's irritating and it made me cross. But I'm going to put it out of my mind and move on.'

'Are you sure? If you need to—'

'Honestly, nothing you say can change anything. Tell you what, though.' She brightened as if a thought had just occurred. 'Why don't we go for dinner one night to make up for missing Sunday? Monday night, maybe?'

He had a dinner reservation on Monday. Wednesday and Friday, too. He rubbed his temple, feeling a flicker of pressure. He'd had to cancel a reservation tonight to meet her, and he was finding it really stressful keeping up with work and Madame Incognito. Dining out wasn't a chore by any means (although he fretted about the cost), but the reviews were taking longer to write because he felt compelled to make them as witty and entertaining as possible. And they were busy at work so he was simply running out of hours in the week. Tuesday he'd said he'd meet Madame Parot for an apéritif. 'Sorry. I can't do Monday. How about Thursday?'

'I told you – I can't do Thursdays.'

'Oh, yeah.'

‘Another night?’

His face twisted in apology. ‘I’m sorry. I have something on every night.’

‘It’s okay. It can wait till next week.’ She shrugged it off, but he could tell she was hurt.

Carys

Sunday came and Carys was at the café at 6.30 a.m. By the time the others arrived, she had stacked pots of paint by the front door, moved all the furniture into the centre of the room and draped dustsheets over the stack of tables and chairs. Paintbrushes and rollers were laid out ready to use.

‘Sorry we’re late,’ Léo said. ‘You know the Métro station is closed for repairs? We had to go to the next one and walk back.’

‘It’s going to be closed until the new year,’ Aurélie said.

‘Aha. We’re redecorating, then?’ Emile said, and picked up a roller. ‘I like painting. Where do you want me to start?’

Carys saw Aurélie turn up her nose at the prospect, but was grateful she kept her thoughts to herself. The waitress had found a babysitter so she’d come alone. Carys handed Emile the biggest pot of paint. ‘You can start with the outside walls. I thought we’d freshen things up.’

He lifted the lid to look inside. ‘Wait,’ he said, his brow creasing. ‘You must have got the wrong colour, Carys.’

She peered at it. ‘No.’

‘But it’s orange!’

Léo laughed. ‘You mean peach, right?’

Emile shook his head. ‘I mean *orange*-orange. Look.’

The three of them leaned in and Carys heard gasps. She handed another tin to Léo. ‘And red for the shutters. It’s going to look zesty and cheerful and scream “Red Cat Café”.’

‘It’s going to scream something,’ Aurélie muttered.

‘Aurélie, you and I are going to paint the interior.’

‘What colour? Pea green?’

She laughed. ‘No. We’re going to have a nice calming cream . . .’

‘Phew.’

‘. . . to set off the soft furnishings.’ She showed her a piece of velvet. ‘Have you ever done any upholstery?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll teach you. It’ll be amazing.’

Léo laughed. ‘Amazing – or amazingly awful. But one thing’s for sure, it won’t be beige and boring.’

As she worked, Carys’s mind flitted back to Friday evening with Mat. It was beginning to grate that he was never available. What did he do during the week? She knew his work involved erratic hours and occasional late nights, but those couldn’t be planned for in advance, could they?

She should have asked, should have pinned him down, but that would make her look like the suspicious type and she wasn’t. Not normally. She blamed Madame Incognito. The mystery reviewer had shaken up Carys’s world and woken insecurities she hadn’t known she had.

To be fair, Mat had been very apologetic. And she’d thought about inviting him here for Thursday’s open-mic evening but decided against it: she liked keeping him separate from her work life, so she couldn’t blame him completely for being unavailable. Maybe he had other people in his life, other female ‘friends’. That would explain why their relationship didn’t seem to be moving forward. Frustration built up in her, like smoke pushing to escape.

No, she thought, putting down her paintbrush. She refused to consider that he might have another woman in his life. He simply wasn’t the kind.

But now the seed had been planted in her mind it wasn’t so easy to dismiss. As she went to wash her hands, it fluttered at the edges of her thoughts, like a small but persistent insect. She scrubbed off the red paint and came to a decision: she was simply going to have to ask him just what – or who – was occupying so much of his time.

It was a long day, but when they’d finished they went out into the street and stood back to assess the results. The tangerine and tomato-red exterior

mirrored the colours of the setting sun. Passers-by pointed, stared and smiled. One man gave a low whistle and said, ‘*C’est audacieux.*’

‘*C’est “fun”*,’ Aurélie corrected him.

‘And bold,’ Léo said admiringly. He hugged Carys. ‘Like our boss.’

She grinned.

‘It’s sticking a finger up at Madame Incognito,’ Emile added proudly.

And the interior was just as eye-catching. Carys had covered the chairs with the new pink and scarlet fabrics she’d bought cheaply online (‘Cheap because no one else wanted them?’ Aurélie had suggested) with wacky designs of bulldogs wearing crowns, pink flamingos, purple elephants, and kitsch depictions of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty. They’d scattered sequined and sheepskin cushions across the sofas, and hung plastic chandeliers and feather lampshades. They’d also repainted the bookshelves red, and hung zany prints on the walls. All that was left was for Carys to unpack the vintage mismatched crockery, candlesticks and scarlet tablecloths.

Emile was full of admiration. ‘We need a new menu,’ he said.

Carys peered at him. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘It needs to be brighter. Bolder. To match the décor.’

She loved his initiative and his bravery. ‘Have you got any ideas?’

He winked. ‘Leave it with me, boss.’

Mat

Ever since their aborted meeting Mat had been waiting to hear from the editor at the broadsheet. He'd given him a little nudge with a message or two, but he couldn't do any more than sit and wait. He was finally rewarded for his patience when his phone rang one Tuesday afternoon. Grabbing it, he dashed out of the office to take the call. Alice raised an eyebrow as he rushed past her, knocking a pen off her desk.

'Mat?' said the editor. He sounded breathless, as if he was on the move. Judging by the background noise of car horns he was outside.

Mat reached the ground floor of his office block and slipped out into the courtyard.

'Sorry I had to cancel our meeting the other day. I haven't forgotten. I'm fighting my way through a barrage of bureaucracy here so bear with me, but in the meantime I love what you're doing with Madame Incognito. Keep the reviews bold and I'd like to see more of them.'

'More? I've been posting twice a week.'

The man chuckled. 'And your following has increased, hasn't it?'

'Yes, but—'

'Step it up to three times a week. Also, your critical reviews are your strength. We need lots more of the one-stars.'

Mat had a sinking feeling. He'd hoped he'd done enough to prove himself. Plus the one-stars made him uncomfortable. They were always rooted in truth but, even so, he preferred to focus on the positive. 'What about the five-stars? They're popular too.'

'The one-stars are what's getting people talking,' the editor said firmly. 'Don't hold back with them. Your language is fabulous – they're so imaginative. Don't be afraid to stick your neck out. Make them leaner,

sharper.’ His comments made Mat think of a butcher with a glinting knife. ‘We’re looking for audacity, not “safe” writing. We want pieces that provoke debate and divide opinion. And once you hit a million followers we’ll talk again.’

‘Right,’ Mat said, disappointed. It wasn’t that a million seemed unachievable – he was amazed by how much his following grew each day – only that whenever he thought he’d done enough, the goal posts moved again. Or was that his imagination?

‘It won’t take long, I’m sure.’ The editor chuckled. ‘Who else knows about you? Your true identity, I mean.’

‘No one.’

‘Good. You need to keep it that way, okay? Here at the paper everyone’s speculating about who Incognito might be. As I said before, the sense of mystery is important.’

‘That’s fine. What I—’

‘Sorry, Mat. I’m about to go underground at the Métro station so I’m going to lose signal. Have you got all that? We’ll speak again soon, okay?’

Mat stared at the blank screen of his phone. Had he been naïve to hope a few reviews might lead him somewhere better? Was he foolish to chase his dream of success? How could he post more often? The reviews took time to write, and he was already overloaded with work that stretched into the evenings and everywhere else. And then there were the financials – how would he pay for even more meals out?

He traipsed back to his desk, disappointed yet buoyed up by the flattering feedback. *Once you hit a million followers we’ll talk again.* The guy had faith in him: he believed Mat could do this.

Carys

Everyone was talking about the new décor at the Red Cat Café – though not necessarily in a good way.

Carys could tell not everyone liked it – it wasn't elegant or classic in line with Parisian style – but it definitely stood out and, in her opinion, it made the place feel even more fun and friendly than before. Granted, some of their more sophisticated customers sniffed at the zebra-skin cushions and fuchsia-pink chairs, but once they came through the door they seemed to settle in happily, and they all remarked on the quality of the food. Emile's new menu was zany, and the chef was thriving. He was getting more and more creative with his dishes and flavours, and his *pâtisseries* were works of art. Each day Carys arrived to find more extravagant displays: meringue Christmas trees with pecan-caramel centres, pastry boxes with removable lids that revealed chocolate truffles inside, glistening ginger tarts decorated to look like gold baubles.

Today he was trialling a new soup, and Carys was being treated to a serving for her lunch. 'Tomato and carrot,' he said proudly, and set the steaming bowl on her desk, where she was working. Her eyes widened at the two half-moons of orange and red. 'Tomato *and* carrot! How did you do that?'

'I poured them both at the same time.'

She giggled. 'Yin and yang. It's genius. What gave you the idea?'

'The colours reflect the café's new exterior.'

She picked up a spoon, and he watched gravely, waiting for her verdict. She tried the tomato. It made her taste buds dance. 'This is delicious.'

'And the carrot? It's not too sweet?'

She tasted it. 'It's lovely. What else is in there? Orange?'

‘Just a hint.’

She pushed her chair back and got up. ‘Emile, this is fantastic.’ She threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

‘Okay, okay,’ he said. ‘No need to go overboard.’ He smiled as he batted her away, and hurried back to the kitchen.

But when he’d left, Carys turned back to the spreadsheet on her screen and frowned. Although everyone was excited about the café’s new look, takings had begun to fall. November had tripped into December and she knew the Métro-station closure was keeping tourists away, but there’d been a noticeable drop in customers. Why could that be? She really hoped things picked up again soon.

She decided not to say anything to the others. She didn’t want to worry them. Hopefully it was just a blip and within a couple of weeks everything would be back to normal.

Mat

‘Do you fancy going back to the Palais de la Musique on Wednesday?’ Carys asked, as they walked around the park. It was icy today and her breath left a tiny cloud suspended in the air. Their feet kept time as they crunched on the sandy gravel, passing the café that twinkled with fairy lights.

Mat’s gut twisted. ‘Sorry, I have something on.’

Every night was busy, and he was frenetically juggling work and the reviews. He was banging them out left, right and centre, and his life had become a merry-go-round of dining, scribbling, editing and posting. It felt like a treadmill he could barely keep up with. But he was following the editor’s advice and Madame Incognito was soaring. Any guilt he felt about the one-stars was assuaged when he read the many success stories of eateries fully booked as a result of public interest. It was true: people were curious above all else, and even a negative review generated interest.

‘You always have something on.’ Her tone was light and she was smiling but, apart from Sundays, it was becoming more and more difficult for them to find time to meet. ‘What’s happening on Wednesday?’

‘I told my neighbour I’d go round.’ It was the truth. He bit his lip, thinking perhaps he should cancel and see Carys instead. But for Madame Parot it was her only evening with a visitor – he knew how disappointed she’d be if he didn’t drop in.

He was torn. Perhaps the broadsheet editor would soon be satisfied. Then Mat could ease off the reviews and have a little space to breathe.

‘Your elderly neighbour?’ She glanced up at him.

‘Yes. The one who always wants help in the morning when—’

‘You spend your evenings with her too? You’re friends?’

‘I suppose we are, yes.’ It had started as helping her with odd jobs, then

Mat had felt sorry for her, but somewhere along the way their friendship had become important to him too.

She giggled. ‘I was worried you were seeing someone else and that was why you didn’t have time for me.’

Appalled, he shook his head. ‘Oh, Carys, no.’

‘So what do you do together? Sit and chat?’

‘No.’ He blushed and shuffled his feet, not wanting to admit the truth, but the silence stretched and she was watching him, waiting. Finally he sighed. ‘We play board games.’

‘Board games?’ She was grinning now.

‘You know. Like Monopoly, that kind of thing.’ He groaned. ‘Please don’t look at me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like “Now I know what a freak you are, hanging out with pensioners.”’

‘I wasn’t thinking that at all.’ She smiled mischievously and stopped beneath a stone statue. This park was filled with them. ‘Actually, I was thinking how hot that makes you.’

‘There’s no need for sarcasm.’

‘I’m serious! I don’t know many guys your age who’d spend the evening with a ninety-three-year-old woman. It’s . . . endearing.’

He blinked. Really? Heat stole into his cheeks.

She wrapped her arms around him, and brushed a strand of hair back from his face affectionately. ‘I think you’re brilliant, Mat Devine,’ she said, and her deep brown eyes locked with his. ‘And I like you even more because you’re friends with your elderly neighbour. What’s her name and when can I meet her?’

Since his promotion Jean-Baptiste had moved desk to sit by Julianne at the other end of the office. He was a kind of go-between, reporting to Christian, which actually turned out to be a blessing for Mat, Alice and Pietro. Their boss’s rants were less frequent now, and when they came they were usually directed at Jean-Baptiste rather than at them. Mat was relieved.

Another change: Jean-Baptiste encouraged them to meet for a quick drink

after work at the café by the office. ‘Debriefing,’ he called it, with a cheeky grin. Mat didn’t really have time, but how could he say no? It would look like sour grapes over Jean-Baptiste’s promotion. It was only half an hour, he told himself, and he’d catch up with his reviews by staying up a little later tonight.

‘I wasn’t rude,’ said Pietro. ‘I just didn’t agree with him. He supports Paris Saint-Germain. I don’t. It’s not a reason to one-star me.’

Pietro had been given a one-star rating by an Uber driver. He was furious. Mat took a swig of his beer, amused.

‘Did you tip him?’ Alice asked.

‘No.’

‘Then that’s the reason.’

They all laughed.

‘It can’t be. I never tip.’ Pietro made an exasperated sound. ‘Next time I’ll get the Métro. At least I won’t have to listen to someone else’s ill-informed opinions.’

‘Even so, he sounds like an arsehole,’ Alice said. ‘Anyone who leaves a one-star is an arsehole.’

Mat flinched.

Jean-Baptiste blew out a breath. ‘You can’t generalise like that.’

‘Can’t I? One-star reviews are, by definition, unnecessarily vicious. They’re just someone venting.’

Jean-Baptiste shook his head. ‘That’s not true. I’ve left one-star reviews. When the product or the service is bad, they deserve it.’

Guilt pressed at Mat. Madame Incognito’s one-stars weren’t all justified. In order to bang out enough reviews, he was having to use places he’d visited in the past and be inventive – and that was keeping him awake at night. Even with the ones he had time to visit, he was exaggerating and embellishing. Madame Incognito, the reviews, her experiences: none of it was real. Yet the fiction he created was devoured by Incognito’s followers, and the editor at the broadsheet reckoned he was doing a favour to the restaurants and cafés. Good, bad or indifferent, his reviews were getting people talking: the restaurants in question were in the spotlight.

‘But when you’ve ranted,’ Alice went on, ‘don’t you regret it afterwards?’

Don't you wish you'd sounded off privately to a friend instead?'

'Not at all. I stand by every word I've written.'

She picked up her drink. 'I wouldn't like to be held to account for every word I've written.'

'Then you're fickle. I know my opinion.'

Her eyes sharpened. 'Reviews aren't about you, though, are they? They're about the person or the company you're reviewing.'

'I know how they work.' Jean-Baptiste laughed, Pietro too. Mat could see Alice getting more frustrated and she opened her mouth to speak, but Jean-Baptiste continued, 'Everyone has the right to tell others if they've had bad service or poor-quality goods. One-star reviews are a warning to others.'

Alice put her glass down. 'If they're written in anger or disappointment, yes. But what about the person on the receiving end? My brother gets distraught when people criticise his restaurant. He works so hard to please his customers. It's a kick in the teeth to get one star. Whether you're reviewing a film or a pair of shoes, someone has given blood, sweat and tears to produce it. You can't trample on their dreams like that.'

Mat cringed. But then he thought of all the times when the food and service had been poor or he'd been made to feel small.

'Nonsense,' said Pietro. 'It's usually because they haven't sweated *enough* that it deserves one star. They've done a shoddy job.'

Alice's face coloured. 'You don't know that! Anyway, who's to say your standard is the same as everyone else's? Maybe you're asking the impossible. Maybe if you'd walked a mile in their shoes you'd appreciate how hard they *have* tried. Who are you to judge someone else's efforts?'

'A paying customer,' Jean-Baptiste said drily.

'Anyway, a bad review can draw people in,' Pietro said. 'It makes you curious. You want to know if they just had a bone to pick or if there's truth in what they say.'

Alice sighed. 'Mat, you're very quiet. What do you think?'

He shrugged, and the sudden heat in his cheeks was ferocious. 'I – ah – can see both sides. It's not black and white.'

Carys

Mat's apartment wasn't anything like Carys had expected.

It was huge, for starters, and grand, with parquet flooring and balconies of intricate black metalwork. In the entrance hall downstairs, they'd passed a concierge polishing the brass doorknobs ('*What?*' Carys had mouthed, laughing, to Mat) and, on the staircase, a lady with a Chihuahua. Although the apartment had clearly been furnished by his mother, with quality antiques and traditional artwork, there was evidence of its younger occupant too: the guitar and a clutter of sheet music, a portable speaker for his phone, books and trainers.

'I'm so excited to meet Madame Parot,' Carys said. Actually, she was buzzing just to be here. He'd never invited her back to his apartment before. In fact, until tonight she'd only known that he lived in the *neuvième*. That was all.

He looked up from putting on his trainers. He'd met her on his way home from work and had quickly changed into jeans and a T-shirt. 'Are you being sarcastic?'

'No. I'm serious. I want to know what she's like. She must be special for her to have become such an important person in your life.'

He pressed his lips flat, as if weighing up whether to say something or not. 'She reminds me of my *grandmère*. She used to convey her love through the food she cooked, always baking my favourite cakes and dishes.'

Carys saw the love in his eyes before he glanced away, and her heart bucked. 'That's such a lovely memory to keep of her,' she said, and touched his arm.

He cleared his throat. 'Ready?'

Madame Parot was tiny. Her skin was heavily wrinkled, and her smile was wide. She welcomed them in with a wave of her hand, and ushered them towards the living room. Carys gazed at her surroundings. The layout was exactly the same as Mat's apartment above, but this place looked a few decades older. The furniture was freshly polished, rugs were scattered about the floor, and everything was neat and in its place. A small Christmas tree stood elegantly in the corner, strung with glass and china decorations.

'So this is the woman who's swept you off your feet,' Madame Parot said. She was addressing Mat, but when she glanced at Carys her eyes twinkled.

Carys blinked. Had he said that about her? She glowed inside.

But the glow soon vanished when she saw his expression.

'This is Carys,' he corrected.

'You must be a very special young woman,' Madame Parot said, taking Carys's hands and enclosing them in hers. 'He had never been in love until he met you.'

Carys glanced at him. His face was the same colour as the cranberry tarts she'd served in the café today. 'Erm, I'm not sure he—'

'I bet he hasn't talked to you about his feelings, has he?' the old lady interrupted. 'He's too reserved, but his feelings are clear to anyone who knows him.' She winked, and Carys's smile widened. This lady was making mischief and relishing Mat's discomfort. But was there any truth in what she'd said? Because he'd never shown any sign that he loved her. She wished he had. She still had no idea how deep his feelings for her ran. But being here and meeting Madame Parot felt like an important step.

'Sit down, Carys,' the old lady said, and motioned to the elegant sofa. 'Mat will pour you a drink, and then we'll get started.'

Carys took a seat, noting the tray of drinks and the board game already set out, ready to play.

'You do like Monopoly, don't you, Carys?' Madame Parot added.

'Ah,' she said regretfully. 'Actually, it's not really my thing. Do you mind if I just watch?'

'Oh.' Madame Parot's mouth made a perfect circle. She and Mat exchanged a look of consternation.

He turned to Carys and stuttered, ‘Y-you never said . . .’

‘Only kidding!’ She laughed. ‘I love Monopoly. My brothers would never sit still long enough to play when we were small.’ She rubbed her hands. ‘Can I be the hat? Please let me be the hat.’

Mat

‘**M**adame Parot is the best,’ Carys said afterwards.

They were back in his apartment eating pizza. She had tucked her feet underneath her and looked completely at home on his sofa.

‘Thanks for introducing me,’ she added. ‘I’m glad we cleared things up because I was worried. I thought you had another woman in your life.’

Mat laughed, but the sound died quickly. There were still things they didn’t know about each other and it worried him. Tonight he’d let her into his life, into his home. He’d never brought anyone back to the apartment before, but he’d opened himself up for her because it had felt important. His feelings for her were important. Because Madame Parot had been right: he was in love. He couldn’t hide from it any more. It ran so deep, so strong and immovable. He loved Carys. But he didn’t know how she felt about him. And you couldn’t have a relationship based on secrets.

So tonight he knew what he had to do.

‘Has anyone ever told you you’re brilliant?’

She looked up, startled, then grinned. ‘Not enough. You can say it again if you like.’

‘I don’t mean brilliant ten out of ten . . .’

‘Oh.’ Her shoulders slumped.

‘I mean brilliant as in radiant. Like the sun, like a star. You light up a room, Carys. You make everyone glow. You’re so . . .’ he searched for the word ‘. . . vivacious.’

‘Why thank you.’ She jumped up to drop a curtsy in jest, eyes sparkling.

He waited until she’d sat down again, then asked quietly, ‘Did something bad happen?’

Her whole body became rigid. She spluttered a nervous laugh. ‘What?’

‘I can’t work you out. On the one hand you’re bold and brave. On the other . . .’

‘What?’

He chose his words carefully. ‘You have a vulnerability about you. A haunted look in your eyes.’

She was staring at her knees. ‘We all have our ghosts. Things in our past that we’d rather forget.’

‘Why did you leave England?’

He saw a train of emotions flit through her eyes – fear, unease, guilt – before she blinked it away and tried to hide it with nervous laughter. ‘Woah! Where did that come from? One minute you’re telling me I’m a star, then . . . You’ve totally lost me now.’

In the silence that followed, he willed her to tell him. He’d seen the panic. Her hand was still trembling as she wrapped her arms around herself. He knew he’d hit the nail on the head – she’d come to Paris because she was running away. But from what? A man? A broken heart? Why wouldn’t she talk about it? Was she still in love with someone else?

Mat tried to bury his hurt. He said gently, ‘I just see it in your eyes sometimes. The shadows.’ Pain. Sadness.

Silence wedged itself into the gap between them. He let it stretch and gave her time to speak if she wanted to. Why couldn’t she tell him? Didn’t she trust him? Didn’t their relationship mean more to her than that? Her question drifted back into his consciousness, *Have you ever done a bad thing?* Maybe she’d done something she was ashamed of. What could it have been? Lost her job, stolen something, committed a different crime?

His chest thumped heavily as the possibilities solidified. Could he still love her if she was guilty of a crime? His heart was so swollen with feelings for her that he couldn’t imagine *not* loving her.

But at the end of what felt like endless minutes she said, ‘I told you why I came to Paris. I needed a change of scene. An adventure. Willowbrook had begun to feel a bit small.’ She smiled, but it was forced. ‘I like what you said about being brilliant, though. You should definitely hold on to that thought.’

Carys

Paris sparkled in the snow. Carys gazed out of her window. A white diamanté cloak had settled on the rooftops overnight. It was stunning – but her heart sank a little.

Another day of snow wouldn't help trade. The café was quieter than she'd ever known it. Madame Jalibert hadn't been in for two weeks, nor Gérard. Other regulars were deserting them. And Carys missed them. But they'd vanished without explanation. At least Léo had taken a week's leave. Carys was relieved because there was no point in three of them standing around waiting for customers who weren't coming.

After lunch, she left Aurélie manning the front while she went into the office to update the accounts. As she worked, she thought about Mat. He'd been so busy recently, and, although their evening with Madame Parot had gone well, his questions afterwards had tilted her world on its axis. *Did something bad happen?* A shiver had run down her spine. Was it so obvious? *I just see it in your eyes sometimes. The shadows.*

She'd denied it, but she knew she hadn't been convincing. She blew out a breath, cursing the accident. She kept trying to shake it off but, like one of those shadows, it had followed her here, doggedly churning things up just when she'd been so happy.

Sighing, she pushed away the uncomfortable thoughts and finished the accounts. Then frowned at the total. She double-checked it, but the answer was the same. A tight knot formed in her stomach. The café's takings were down – by a lot. She rubbed the bridge of her nose. She'd been hoping things would pick up, but the downward spiral was accelerating. The café's bank account was creeping into the red. The margins in this business were tight. You had to order enough food to feed the masses, but if the masses didn't

come you literally threw it all away. Money down the drain. What should she do? Mark and Ingrid would be back in less than a month, but if she waited until then their debts could be enormous.

This was getting serious.

Carys bit her lip. This wouldn't reflect well on her, but she couldn't keep it from her boss any longer: she had to speak to her.

Shoulders sagging, she picked up the phone and called Ingrid's number. It rang out. Of course it did: it was probably the middle of the night in Australia. She typed a quick email asking her boss to call. She didn't know what else she could do.

Mat

Everyone was talking about the Red Cat Café. Apparently they'd had a makeover since Mat's last visit and the new décor was even more flamboyant and bold. It was inviting lots of comments and praise, and Madame Incognito's fans had been messaging, asking for her verdict.

So, of course, Mat had to go back.

It wasn't easy – Jean-Baptiste and Pietro were both on leave this week so he and Alice were overstretched, trying to keep up with the volume of work – but one Monday he got the Métro straight from work. It was afternoon – he remembered they closed at five – and he'd deliberately missed lunch so he could eat three courses. His stomach was a fierce animal demanding to be fed.

The train grumbled across the city letting in crowds of people loaded with bags of Christmas shopping. The Métro station near the café was closed, so Mat got off at the next stop and walked. It was really cold and wintry. Overnight the last of the leaves had fallen, leaving the trees bare. Their branches looked brittle and dark against the pearly sky, but Christmas lights were strung everywhere and their twinkling compensated for Nature's withdrawal.

As he walked, he thought about his forthcoming reviews. He hadn't posted for a few days so this one needed to go out tonight. He'd booked a Japanese place in a couple of days' time, and a new bistro, but he was worried because he had nothing planned for next week and, so close to Christmas, everywhere would be full. He racked his brain for ideas.

Producing three reviews a week on top of work and everything else was still a stressful juggling act. Worse, paying for all these meals was draining his bank account. He felt bad about being unavailable when Carys had invited

him out, too. At least he had time off booked next week so he'd have more time to devote to her and the reviews, and then it would be Christmas. Fingers crossed that the pressure he was feeling was only temporary: he really hoped the broadsheet editor would offer him a job. In the meantime, he'd have to cut corners somewhere. But where? How?

He arrived at the Red Cat Café – but it was closed. Damn.

It would be open the next day, but he'd promised he'd take Madame Parot to the hospital for some tests she was worried about, and that would take most of the day. He peered through the window and took in the new décor, with its clash of wild colours and prints. It was totally bonkers.

He needed a review to go out tonight. The hot prickle of panic touched his neck. He had to find somewhere else. But where? He began to walk, his feet kicking up melted snow. He reached a restaurant, but it hadn't opened yet. He walked on until he reached a bistro, but it looked so safe and traditional it was totally uninspiring. How many times could he review *steak-frites* or *croque-monsieur*? People wanted to read about something different, out of the ordinary. And he had to post tonight.

He went back to the Red Cat Café, and its vivid orange and red exterior made his lips curve. He leaned against a lamppost and got out his phone. They had a new menu, and it was even wackier than before. Online they posted daily pictures of their *pâtisseries*. Dazzling, extravagant bakes designed with humour. The whole thing was like the Mad Hatter's tea party. He remembered how busy the café had been last time he'd visited, and the eccentric old woman dressed in orange feathers who'd tried to engage him in conversation. He thought of the editor and felt a tightness in his chest. He had to prove himself. He had to deliver. He scrolled through the café's most recent reviews, and his mind began to tick.

Damn it. He was going to write the review anyway.

Back at home Mat finished reading through his words and sat back. He felt a little queasy, but couldn't tell if it was from lack of food or guilt. Had he gone too far this time?

He couldn't even say his criticisms were well-founded because he hadn't

been there – but what kind of café didn't open in the evening? And how was he supposed to produce three reviews a week while working full-time? Impossible. So, he'd fictionalised this one.

He stared out of his apartment window at the night sky. He'd drawn on real reviews by other people for inspiration, telling himself that if one disgruntled customer had had a bad experience, why couldn't another? It wasn't completely fictional if he took their comments and patched together a bad dish here, a rude waitress there, and garnished the whole with a sprinkling of poor service. He was doing what he could, and reviewing the Red Cat Café was just too tempting when it was so quirky and popular. In fact, its popularity made it an easy target, and also lessened his guilt. Nothing he wrote would affect its strong reputation.

The editor's words haunted him: *Step it up to three times a week. Also, your critical reviews are your strength . . . Don't be afraid to stick your neck out . . . We're looking for audacity, not 'safe' writing. We want pieces that provoke debate and divide opinion.*

Audacity didn't come naturally to him, but that didn't mean he couldn't learn. He'd spent the last ten years working hard and getting nowhere. This was his one and only opportunity to launch his career and bag the broadsheet job he'd been dreaming of. He couldn't blow it.

He ran a finger round the neck of his sweatshirt, willing away the uncomfortable heat. It wasn't just the restaurant owners' reactions he was afraid of: Madame Incognito's controversial reviews raised her profile, but they also attracted dissent and even abuse online.

But the promise of the broadsheet job was what he had to stay fixed on. He drew a deep breath, and pictured how proud Carys would be if he got it. That was why he was doing this.



Review: Red Cat Café

Nobody who goes to the Red Cat Café does so to sit quietly and drink coffee. They come to be seen. Like the cakes and the wacky food combinations, they desperately crave attention. The décor of the café is wild. That's the polite way of describing it. Truthfully, it looks as if someone seriously pissed off their interior designer, who then stole in during the night and wreaked revenge. The clash of animal prints and psychedelic colours is enough to induce a migraine. The place is a car crash of kitsch. But it isn't only the décor that's had a makeover since my last visit, the menu has too. And it's distinctive for all the wrong reasons. Lamb with cucumber. Really? Or banana skin burgers? Who wakes up in the morning and thinks, What I really really want is cherry and mustard cake?

No one. Certainly no one who's eaten those dishes.

The fact that this restaurant is still popular is testament only to the vast numbers of tourists who visit Paris and unwittingly fall into the trap of believing that because a place is busy it must be good. We who know better should stand outside with placards and warn those naïve souls. Frankly, we'd be doing them a favour. Rather than spend their hard-earned money on eccentric concoctions, we could direct the unsuspecting victims to the nearest primary school where a class of five-year-olds would come up with pairings equally ridiculous. Horseradish meringues, raspberry ripple soup, sweet

potato ice cream.

*The verdict: * (one star)*

If you're after some light-hearted entertainment, perhaps the Red Cat Café will be worth your visit. Otherwise, I suggest you open your fridge, pick a shelf, eat the contents in whatever bizarre combination they present themselves, and save yourself thirty euros.

Carys

Carys put down her phone and blinked hard. She felt as if someone had taken a pickaxe, dug into her heart, and excavated it with their vicious words. Madame Incognito had come back again, and this review was even harsher than the last because it criticised the changes she'd made, the décor and the chef. It positively laid into Emile. Nausea twisted in her stomach.

Maybe her friends and family had been right to worry about her and fuss. She'd tried to prove she could manage fine by herself, but all she'd succeeded in doing was ruining a perfectly healthy business and steering a profitable café into debt. She'd failed.

She let her hands drop and stared around her. Who was Madame Incognito? Who hated the place – hated her and her team – so much they kept coming back, relentlessly piling on the criticism? Her eyes flitted over the customers. There weren't many. At one time the café had been bustling from eleven onwards, but now it was so peaceful that Emile was in the kitchen twiddling his thumbs. She couldn't even blame the snow because it had all melted a few days ago. Narrowing her eyes, she picked out the customers. A business woman, smartly dressed and frowning in concentration as she typed, an American tourist in the corner who was most likely in Paris for just a few days, and a couple of teenage girls . . . Carys's eyes narrowed. It could be a silly schoolgirl antic.

No. These reviews were written in English, and the language used was too sophisticated, too poetic for schoolchildren. Who else, then? Suddenly she saw hostility in every face, a possible motive for each customer. This reviewer was an anonymous coward. They didn't *want* to be identified.

She tapped her screen and read the review once more, searching for a possible truth she'd been too sensitive to see, for any positivity amid the

criticism. But she found neither. It remained what it had always been: a cruel, cutting piece.

‘Carys, where did you—?’ Aurélie asked.

Carys jumped.

‘What is it?’ Aurélie peered at her. ‘Are you okay?’

‘It’s—’ Her words were strangled. Hot tears rushed at her unexpectedly, choking her.

Aurélie glanced at Carys’s phone. ‘What is it? Your family? Have you had bad news?’

Behind them, Emile came to the hatch so see what was going on.

‘Another one-star review,’ Carys managed. She hated how wobbly her voice sounded. ‘The third.’

‘Not Madame Incognito again?’

She nodded, but couldn’t stop the tears now. Emile and Aurélie exchanged a look of concern.

‘Come with me,’ Aurélie said. She took Carys by the arm and steered her into the back room. ‘Wait there. I know what you need.’

Carys sat down. Beside her, on the sofa, Raoul was curled up, a ball of orange streaked with white. He opened one eye and surveyed her coolly. ‘You wouldn’t understand.’ She pointed a finger at him accusingly. ‘You don’t care what others think of you.’

But she did. She cared too much. And the irony wasn’t lost on her that she’d come here hoping to escape pity, but this ruthless criticism had felled her. She dropped back against the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. Anyone in her situation would care, she told herself. She had poured her heart and soul into this café. She’d given it her all. She couldn’t have tried harder to turn it around. But these awful reviews just kept coming, and the customers kept leaving.

Mark and Ingrid would be so worried when they read this. And rightly so. They hadn’t replied to her messages but they’d be back soon and she’d have to confess that the café wasn’t profitable any more. And Carys didn’t know what to do.

She closed her eyes against the burn of tears. This was her fault. She’d

gone too far and made too many changes. She'd believed they were improvements, but what did she know about running a café in Paris? Exactly nothing, and that was why Madame Incognito kept writing these evil words. She was on to her.

A few minutes later Aurélie reappeared with a mug of hot chocolate loaded with marshmallows. 'Here. Drink this.'

Carys stared at the tiny white marshmallows and felt even more choked. This was exactly what Liberty would have made when she was upset. The tears flowed faster.

Meanwhile, Aurélie read the review. When she'd finished reading she gave a low whistle. 'This is bad. It's evil.'

Carys laughed bitterly.

The cat opened his eyes, shot them a haughty look, making clear they'd disturbed him, then jumped down from the sofa and stalked out.

Aurélie sat in the dip where he'd been. 'When will she stop?'

'She won't. She's got it in for us.'

'We have to ignore her. Carry on regardless,' Aurélie said.

'We can't,' Carys said quietly. 'We're getting quieter every day.'

Aurélie agreed. 'It used to be so busy.'

Carys winced. What would happen when Ingrid and Mark came home? They'd be furious. And disappointed. They'd invested years of time and money into making the Red Cat Café a success. She was ashamed to think how profitable it had been when she'd first arrived. She'd failed them. 'We can't go on like this, Aurélie. It's costing us to stay open.'

'What do you mean?'

'Every day we're making a loss. I thought December would be the busiest month of the year, but we've been losing money.'

The girl's eyes widened, and Carys had to look away, guilt and shame raining down on her that she had brought the café to this point. She was supposed to stay until Mark and Ingrid came back in the new year, but she couldn't let their business get further into debt.

There was only one solution. Instead of closing on Christmas Eve, the café would have to close now.

Mat

Mat was early today. Unhurried, he left his apartment and plodded down the stairs, eyeing Madame Parot's door, preparing a smile for when it opened and she called his name.

But when he reached the bend in the staircase, there was no creak of the door, and no one called his name. He stopped and waited. He checked his watch: he still had plenty of time to spare before he needed to set off for work.

But the teal-blue door remained shut.

Unnerved and with one foot on each step, he hesitated. Should he go back? Check she was all right?

Downstairs, the lady with the dog came in from outside, her Chihuahua barking at the concierge, who was sweeping the stairs.

Mat carried on.

He was worrying about nothing. Perhaps Madame Parot had finally begun to appreciate that mornings were not a good time for him.

Carys

That night, Carys locked the doors. Raoul clawed at his cat box, and it was clear from the noise he was making that he was unhappy.

He wasn't the only one. She could still hear Aurélie and Emile's protests ringing in her ears: *You can't do this! You're upset because of the review. Think about it before you make a decision. Call Ingrid and Mark!*

She had tried repeatedly, but they hadn't responded to her calls or emails, so Carys had stuck with her decision. She'd paid her staff, cancelled all deliveries, and stuck a sign on the door telling people the café had closed early for Christmas. She was sure it was the right thing to do. Ingrid and Mark would be back soon, and in the meantime she couldn't drive up their debts any further.

Madame Incognito would be pleased. She had won. She'd broken Carys.

Carys trudged home, still swiping away tears, and in her studio she released Raoul. He sprang out of his cage and shot to the window. Finding it closed, he tried the door. Then he zigzagged around the room, desperately seeking a way out. 'I'm sorry, Raoul, but I couldn't leave you there alone.'

She put out his litter tray, but he shot it a pointed look, then stalked over to her shoe and peed in it.

She sank onto the bed. She was meeting Mat tonight, but first she had to update the café's social-media account and explain why it had closed:

It's with a heavy heart that I'm closing the café. My team has worked so hard the last few weeks, but this reviewer seems intent on singling us out and undermining whatever we do. The business has suffered and I can't take any more. I'll be honest: I'm heartbroken.

We're hard enough on ourselves without criticism from others, so don't use words as weapons. Keep your thoughts to yourself and spread kindness as if it was good food. Feed and nurture those around you.

When she'd finished, she tossed aside her phone and lay down. What now? Go back to Willowbrook for Christmas, or even for good?

She couldn't. Living in Paris had been an amazing experience – and she didn't want to leave Mat. She had no idea what to do next, and her heart felt heavy.

However, she was seeing Mat soon, and the prospect lifted her spirits a little. She'd tell him everything: how she'd blagged the job, about the mean reviews, how the business had gone down the pan. She'd be honest with him, and if it meant he started treating her with kid gloves, perhaps that wouldn't be so bad.

Of course he wouldn't see her in the same light. He'd know the truth about her. But when you'd reached rock bottom, you couldn't fall any further, could you?

Mat

Mat was in a hurry to get home. Work had been crazy busy and he hadn't had a minute to himself. Well, he'd had a quick glance at his phone in the queue for the sandwich shop at lunch, and been pleased to see his review was attracting lots of interest. Later he'd sit down and read the comments more carefully, but for now he needed to get home, jump into the shower and meet Carys at seven thirty.

'Monsieur Devine!'

His shoulders sank as the concierge spotted him. She hurried out. 'Can you take this parcel up for Madame Parot?' She thrust it at him.

'No problem,' he said, and dived through the door to the stairs, relieved she hadn't held him up longer. Delivering it would also give him the chance to check on his friend. He was sure there'd be an explanation as to why she hadn't stopped him that morning. Perhaps she'd had to nip out early for shopping or an appointment.

But when he rang her bell there was no answer.

He knocked and listened for the sound of her television – but heard nothing. Clearly she wasn't in. Never mind, he thought, dashing up the last flight of stairs. He'd try again on his way out.

Just before seven he returned. His hair was freshly washed and he was wearing his smartest shirt. No matter what happened, he wouldn't let her keep him. There was no way he'd be late for Carys.

But again there was no reply. He was chewing his lip when he heard something.

'Madame Parot?' he called, and pressed his ear to the door.

A muffled voice.

Ice slipped down the back of his neck. Something *was* wrong. He should

have known it. He raced down the stairs and banged on the concierge's door.

'What's going on?' she began angrily, then saw his face. 'Oh. Monsieur —'

'Have you got a key for Madame Parot's apartment?' he said, in a rush. 'She's not answering the door. Something's wrong.'

'The key? Yes, I have.' She turned to a row of hooks and selected one. 'But I can't just—'

Mat snatched it from her hand and ran, calling over his shoulder, 'It's an emergency.'

In the apartment he glanced left and right. 'Madame Parot? Where are you? Are you okay?'

'Mathieu . . .' The faint sound came from the next room.

He dashed through. Madame Parot's tiny figure was curled on the floor. It didn't move at all. He ran to her. His pulse drummed in his ears as he reached her.

'Mathieu,' she whispered, on a sigh.

'I'm here. Don't worry,' he said, relieved she was alive, but appalled by how motionless she remained and how pale her skin was, tinged lavender in places. He gripped her hand. It was icy.

The concierge arrived, panting. 'What's happened? Is she hurt?'

'We need an ambulance – quick.' He pointed to the landline.

The concierge snatched up the receiver.

Mat turned back to Madame Parot. Her eyes were closed, and her hand was limp in his. His heart beat raggedly. 'Help is coming, Rosette,' he said, as he grabbed a shawl off the sofa and tucked it around her like a blanket.

She whispered something he didn't catch. Behind him, the concierge was talking loudly to the emergency services.

'Say that again?' He bent his head to hear.

'*J'ai peur, Mathieu.*' I'm scared.

He swallowed. 'You're going to be fine,' he told her, and squeezed her hand.

'I don't want to die. Not yet.' Her voice was small and frayed around the edges.

‘You’re not going to die.’ He glanced at the Monopoly board. ‘You can’t. You’ve got all that money to collect when you next pass Go, remember?’ Her lips curved ever so slightly, and his heart thumped hard.

Carys

Carys paced the entrance to the park. It was well lit and the street was busy with traffic, but she felt a shiver of unease.

She checked her watch – again. Mat was nearly an hour late. She'd left two voice messages, but she tried his mobile again.

No reply.

She paced the pavement. The Christmas lights in the shop windows were a kaleidoscopic rainbow, flashing and flickering, but for once she didn't feel their festive cheer. What had happened? Where was Mat? Was he okay?

What if he'd stood her up? What if this was the end? She'd thought today couldn't get any worse – but she'd been wrong. She looked up at the enormous buildings across the road. They loomed over her and she wrapped her arms around herself.

She couldn't wait there all night. Checking her phone one last time, she decided to go. Mat had her number, he knew where she lived. If he wanted to see her he'd find her. As she walked back to the Métro station, her shoulders slumped. She'd never felt so alone, so small and insignificant, in the huge city.

Carys

When Carys woke after a restless night (not helped by Raoul's loud protests) she had lots of missed calls and a message from Mat: *Carys, I'm SO sorry I missed our date. Had an emergency. Please let me explain.*

An emergency? She'd known it. Mat would never have stood her up without good reason. Was he okay? She called him and he picked up immediately.

'Carys, I'm so sorry,' he said. She heard the breathless urgency in his voice, the remorse.

She sat up and faintly registered that Raoul had gouged long deep claw marks into the door – how was she going to repair that? – but it wasn't her main concern right now. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine. But Madame Parot had a fall. I had to go with her to the hospital. I couldn't leave her – she was scared, Carys – and my phone's battery died before I could message you . . .'

When he'd finished recounting the night's events, Carys smiled. How many guys did she know who'd stay with an elderly neighbour like that, holding her hand in the ambulance and comforting her? She wanted to hug him.

'What?' he asked. 'Why have you gone quiet? You're angry, aren't you?'

'No,' she said quickly. 'I'm not angry at all. I'm impressed. You're one of a kind. It was good of you to do what you did.'

'Call an ambulance? Not really. Anyone would have done the same.'

'You stayed with her. You didn't have to. It's wonderful that you did.' Her chest tightened. 'I like to think that if something happened to me you'd be there for me, too.' She thought of being in hospital and shivered. No one should be alone at a time like that.

Then a dark cloud came over her as she remembered her own crisis yesterday. ‘Mat, can I see you?’

‘Yes. When?’

‘Now.’

They met in a tiny gated park that was halfway between their homes. Carys got there first, and Mat arrived, running, minutes later.

‘You’re upset,’ Mat said, as soon as he saw her. ‘What’s wrong?’

She hugged him, so glad to feel his solid body against hers.

He drew back and held her shoulders in his hands, peered closely at her face. There hadn’t been much she could do about puffy, bloodshot eyes, even with make-up. ‘What’s happened? Tell me.’

She bit her lip. Last night she’d intended to tell him everything, from the first review, but now she was there, face to face with him, she couldn’t bring herself to confess. Frowning, she stared at her toes. Mixed up with the hurt were feelings of shame that she’d let down her staff, and contrition for the arrogance with which she’d bluffed her way into the job. She didn’t want Mat to see that side of her. He was a good person. She didn’t want him to know how badly she’d messed up.

‘Tell me, Carys. Perhaps I can help.’

She twisted her fingers in her lap and said sadly, ‘You can’t. No one can.’

He couldn’t hide his disappointment, and she remembered how she’d deflected his questions about her past. Yet another secret, he’d probably be thinking.

‘It’s work,’ she said, on a sigh. ‘I messed up, and now I’ve had to close the place. I’ll have to find a new job.’

‘They sacked you?’ He was clearly shocked, and angry.

‘No,’ she said quickly.

‘What happened, then?’

She closed her eyes a moment and tried to think, but her brain was befuddled from lack of sleep. She opened them again. ‘Mat, I’m not ready to talk about it yet. I just – I needed to see you and forget about everything else.’

‘But you’re upset. I want to help.’ He touched a gentle finger to her face, and she leaned in, grateful for the concern that rolled off him. She had run away from Willowbrook because everyone’s constant fussing had made her feel suffocated, yet now she was so grateful that someone cared.

For a long moment he cradled her head against his shoulder and she let his warmth seep through her. Her heart was still in pieces about the café, but she clung to this closeness. Whatever happened, at least she had Mat.

‘I hate to see you like this. If I could find the person who did this to you I’d—’ He floundered.

She giggled. ‘What? Challenge them to a duel?’

‘Yes!’ He laughed, and they touched foreheads. He drew back. ‘Seriously, I would. For you.’

Their gazes locked and her heart folded.

‘What can I do to help?’ he asked. ‘There must be something.’

Make the mystery reviewer stop writing? Poison her damned lukewarm coffee? ‘Just be you. Talk to me about other things, help me forget.’

‘That’s all I can do? Distract you?’

‘You’re the one good thing in my life. Seeing you makes me so happy and – and I want it to stay that way. I want to just enjoy being with you and forget everything else.’

For the first time she began to take notice of what was going on around them. A couple of tiny children chasing a blow-up ball, an elderly couple pausing from their stroll to watch a bird in the tree.

Mat turned back to her, his eyes suddenly bright. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘Let’s go away.’

‘Go away?’

‘On holiday. I have next week off. We could go south. To Provence.’

It was tempting, but she sighed. ‘I can’t. I have no money.’ She’d used the last of her wages to pay the café staff a Christmas bonus. It wasn’t fair that they should miss out on that when the closure was her fault.

Mat thought for a minute. ‘Then we’ll holiday in my flat. We’ll hide away, tell our friends and family we’re going off-grid, and switch off our phones for a week. We could explore Paris, live like tourists. Skint tourists,’ he added,

and she laughed. 'Just you and me.'

She bit her lip, considering this. The thought of switching off her phone and all trace of Madame Incognito was tempting. Why not? The café was closed now anyway. There was nothing more she could do until Ingrid and Mark got back after Christmas.

'What do you think?' Mat prompted. 'It'll be just you and me. Quality time together in the most beautiful city in the world.'

She hesitated only a moment longer, and a smile spread across her face. 'That's exactly what I need. Let's do it.'

Mat

Mat hurried home from work. After they'd met this morning he'd gone into the office and Carys had gone home to pack, but from this evening their time together began. He couldn't wait.

His phone pinged and Mat checked it immediately. Carys?

No, it was the broadsheet editor. Mat had messaged him to explain that something had come up and he wouldn't be able to post reviews next week. Now the reply came back: *Don't stop the reviews! You need to keep up the momentum.*

No. Carys needed him. Although the dream of working for a broadsheet meant the world to him, it didn't mean as much as Carys.

He typed a polite but firm reply about needing a break and switched off his phone. This time was going to be about Carys. Just the two of them. He couldn't forget yesterday when he'd looked into her eyes and seen a world of hurt. He was worried about her. But thrilled he was the one she'd turned to.

Help me forget.

She was fiercely independent. He got the feeling she didn't often ask for help, so he was privileged she'd reached out to him. But he still wished she'd open up about what had upset her. What would it take for her to trust him with her secrets?

Carys

Carys arrived at Mat's wheeling a small suitcase of clothes. He buzzed her into the apartment building and she got the lift to the fifth floor. She'd left Raoul with Emile and, when Léo had texted to check she was okay, she'd told him she was looking forward to having a break and was planning to switch off her phone until she was back. She still couldn't stop thinking about the reviews and the café. Her mind kept poking at it, like a sore tooth, then immediately retreating.

But this week was about forgetting and, hopefully, Mat would help her do that. She wanted to simply enjoy being Carys, the happy, confident, outgoing woman who loved life. She hated how the mystery reviewer had made her shrivel and curl up, cutting down every attempt Carys had made to improve the café with her vicious words. For this week she wouldn't let Madame Incognito impinge on her life.

Mat was waiting for her at his door. She stepped out of the lift, beaming. 'Ah, the bliss of not having to climb the stairs. Why is it that in my building there's no lift for the sixth floor? It kills me to climb those stairs every day.'

'That's because you live in the old staff quarters. They used a separate staircase to move around the building, while the residents used the main stairs, which are wider. They often have lifts now too.'

'Really?'

'The top floor of Parisian apartment blocks are all the same – *chambres de bonnes*. Ironically, they're extremely sought after now, by students and young people especially or for holiday rentals. The only downside is that they're not very accessible.'

'So I'm going up in the world staying here.'

He laughed and closed the door behind her. She put her case down and

gazed around her, suddenly feeling a little nervous. They'd never spent so much time together. They'd never even stayed over. 'How do you have such a lovely apartment? Is it your dad's?'

'No,' he said. 'It's mine. It was my mum's, and I inherited it when she died.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' She touched his hand. 'I've put my foot in it.'

'Not at all,' he said. 'To tell the truth, it's a bit big just for me. It's going to be nice to have company.' He kissed her, then brushed the hair back from her face. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine. Thank you.' Although she was grateful for his concern, she hoped he wasn't going to fuss over her. To change the subject, she gestured to the hallway and asked mischievously, 'So, what are the sleeping arrangements?' Behind her smile there was an edge of shyness. She'd never been shy about sleeping with a man before, but with Mat everything was different.

'I have two bedrooms, so it's totally up to you.'

His cheeks bloomed pink, and Carys grinned. Did that mean he wanted to sleep with her? She hoped so. 'It's totally up to *us*,' she corrected. She wanted to sleep with him, and not because she was upset. She'd wanted him for a long time now. Her body hummed whenever he was near, and she ached to be closer to him. She was so excited at the prospect of spending a whole week together and getting to know him better – in every sense.

He grinned too, then cleared his throat. 'What do you want to do now? I thought you might like to visit the Village de Noël at the Eiffel Tower, but if you're tired we could have a quiet evening instead.'

'I'm not tired,' she said quickly. 'Let's go.'

They took the Métro to the river, then walked from there. 'There are lots of Christmas markets in Paris, but this is one of my favourites,' he explained.

She could see why. The Eiffel Tower flowed gold, like a beacon, against the night sky, and rows of wooden chalets hummed with music and chatter. The smell of grilled meat and fried doughnuts filled the air. Carys and Mat began by exploring the stalls selling crafts and decorations. She loved the colourful candles and jewellery, and Mat lingered over a stand selling small

clay figurines of people in traditional costume. ‘These are *santons* from Provence,’ he explained, ‘where I grew up.’

‘Are they decorations?’ The small figurines, about eight inches high, held guitars, wood axes or baskets of fruit.

‘Yes. People display them in their homes and they represent traditional Provençal life. Grandmère used to have them when I was small,’ he said fondly. Then his eyes widened. He peered closely at the figure of a moustached man holding a lamb. ‘In fact, she had one just like that.’

They weaved their way through the rows of stalls, pausing for mulled wine, which the French called *vin chaud*. Mat bought them each a sausage in a bread roll. ‘Mm, this is good,’ he said, with the first bite.

‘You sound surprised.’

‘I am. I never have high expectations with street stalls, but I should know better here in France. There can be excellent food in the unlikeliest of places.’

Carys nodded, but her mind spun back to Emile’s delicious cooking and the one-star reviews. She wondered where Madame Incognito was now, which eaterie would be her next victim – and what she looked like. Carys could have served her a hundred times in the café and had no clue.

Mat put his roll down. He stepped closer and cupped her face in his hands. It was unexpected, and his touch was electric. He smiled, then leaned in to kiss her softly. Her body shimmered in response. She closed her eyes and deepened the kiss.

When they drew back, she asked, ‘What was that for?’

‘You looked sad.’

‘Did I?’

‘And you asked me to help you forget. So I was just following orders. Although . . .’ he winked ‘. . . I quite enjoyed it too.’

She laughed. He was right. For a moment there she hadn’t been thinking about Madame Incognito at all, and that was exactly what she’d hoped this week would achieve. Her heart picked up at the sight of him and his gorgeous expressive eyes. The stuff with Madame Incognito would pass, she told herself. She’d apologise to Mark and Ingrid, then look for another job. She wanted to stay in Paris, wasn’t ready to go home. She loved living there, and

working in the café had taught her so much, even if it had ended badly.

She'd pull through, and when she did she'd come out stronger, she was certain of it.

Mat

As they walked home, Mat surreptitiously watched Carys. He wanted to ask if she was feeling better, but he sensed she didn't like fuss, so he kept quiet. She was smiling and, although more subdued than normal, she seemed relaxed.

So was he. He loved Christmas in France. It was a time for family, for children, for going home. And although he didn't have any family in Paris, he had his memories.

'I feel really Christmassy now,' Carys said. 'What do you want to do tomorrow?'

He had a few ideas for their week together. 'How about I keep it a surprise? We could do a magical mystery tour of Paris. Unless there are places on your list that you'd like to visit.'

'A mystery tour sounds far more exciting.' She took his hand. Her fingers were warm in his, and his body hummed with need. He wanted her. But he didn't know how to ask if that was what she wanted too. She'd asked about the sleeping arrangements, but she was upset, at her most vulnerable. And yet it had been simmering beneath the surface for weeks now, the irresistible attraction between them.

Back at his apartment, they took off their coats and boots. 'Are you hungry?' he asked. 'I could make a quick supper if you like?'

'Sounds good.'

He cooked a simple meal of steak and salad, served with red wine, and they ate by candlelight. Mat wondered yet again what had happened at her work. But her plea, *Help me forget*, was etched into his mind. He didn't want to add to her pain. Seeing her hurt had been worse than being hurt himself.

'This is just bliss,' she said, pushing away her empty plate and leaning

back in her chair. 'It's exactly what I needed. To get away from it all. Just the two of us.' Her eyes gleamed as she met his gaze and smiled.

His heart leaped. But was he just a crutch she needed to lean on to get her through this crisis? He put his wine down. 'Come onto the balcony,' he said. 'Let's watch the stars.' He opened the tall windows and led her outside. 'It's not as dark as it was in the park, but the view isn't bad from up here.' He wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm. The stars winked and blinked and, as their eyes slowly adjusted, more and more seemed to appear.

'Can you remember any of the constellations?' she asked.

'Not really,' he confessed.

'It doesn't matter. They're just beautiful to watch. I don't need to know their names.'

'Yeah.' He let his gaze wander over the pinpricks and buttonholes of glitter above him. How far away it all was, how small the earth in all this space amid the galaxies, how small he was, yet his sense of connection and truly living had never been stronger. She turned to face him. The whites of her eyes and her smile were beacons in the night.

'This is intimate.' He smiled.

'It is.' Her tone was audacious. Pure Carys.

His muscles tightened. He stroked the hair back from her eyes. 'Carys, I . . .' He swallowed.

'What?'

He sensed her shrink back. He remembered when she'd invited him back to hers and he'd refused because he had to work. She'd looked so hurt. She hadn't asked him again and he'd held back because he wasn't sure where he stood with her. But in asking for his help, she'd broken something down, opened things up between them.

What he wanted to say was risky, but it strained at him. It couldn't be put off any longer. 'I've wanted this for a long time,' he confessed quietly.

'This?'

'You.'

A moped sped along the main road and cars slid past more quietly. Doubt nudged him. He hoped he hadn't misinterpreted her feelings for him. Carys

was forward. She was fun. Perhaps she was like that with everyone. He held his breath, waiting for her to speak.

‘So have I,’ she said finally. Her tone was uncharacteristically serious. ‘But . . . I’m afraid.’

He stepped back. He didn’t understand. She was fearless. ‘Afraid?’

She giggled softly and reached out to draw him back to her. ‘It’s hard to explain, but what we have feels so special that I’m scared to spoil it.’

His chest tightened. ‘You think sleeping with me will spoil it?’

‘It’s not rational, I know.’

Disappointment plunged deep. What had he expected? Carys was way out of his league. She was bold, brave, smart. She must have seen the hurt in his eyes because she added quickly, ‘I only feel this way because what we have is so perfect now. Mat, you should know that I’ve . . .’ she ran her tongue over her lips before she seemed to muster the courage to finish ‘. . . never felt like this about anyone else.’

Mat’s heart turned over. Delight surged through him. ‘Me neither. What we have feels precious.’ As he gazed into her eyes, seeing the stars reflected in them, like tiny sequins, he realised how deep his feelings ran. Deeper than anything he’d ever felt for anyone. And perhaps until tonight he hadn’t dared let them bloom fully. Perhaps it had become habit, over the years, to keep his heart under wraps, protecting it as best he could.

But he trusted Carys, and, now he knew she felt the same, hope soared in him that they could make something of this.

‘So what should we do?’ she asked.

‘What do you want to do?’ He didn’t want this unless she wanted it too.

Her smile was slow, and her eyes sparkled with promise. She brushed her lips against his. Tiny electric sparks fired through him. The kiss was long, and slow, and sensuous, and when she drew back he didn’t want it to end.

‘Life’s too short to live fearfully,’ she said. Her voice was low and husky. She touched his cheek and he closed his eyes against the velvet of her fingers. He held his breath, caught in the silken web of desire. ‘I want you, Mathieu Devine.’

Joy exploded in him like fireworks. This was a big step. It felt risky. But

as she kissed him again, more hungrily this time, digging her fingers into his hair, pressing her body against his so their hips connected and heat flowed through him, powerful and unstoppable, his worries melted away, and need took over. Back inside the apartment, they snatched breaths between kisses. He sucked in air as she fumbled with his belt. She gasped as he brushed his thumb over her breast and bent his head to kiss the lace edge of her bra. He led her to the bedroom and kissed her again. How long had his body been crying out for this? How was it possible to need someone so much? And yet, as he unfastened her dress and let it puddle at her feet, the sight of her smooth skin made need coil even tighter.

‘Carys,’ he whispered against her neck, and reached to untie her scarf.

Her hand shot up to stop him and he froze.

He drew back so he could look in her eyes, and he saw fear, he saw ghosts. The temptation was to retreat, but he couldn’t do that. He gathered his courage. ‘If we do this,’ he said gently, ‘we should do it completely.’

She blinked.

He went on, ‘Your scar is beautiful. It’s part of you. Carys, I want to make love to you – all of you.’

Hesitation clouded her expression and he waited, hoping he hadn’t pushed her too far. But he didn’t want unspoken secrets to come between them any more. She still didn’t say anything.

‘I’m not asking that you tell me anything you’re not prepared to say, but you don’t need to hide your scar from me any more.’ He held his breath.

Fear flickered through her eyes, then she slowly unfastened the scarf.

The red satin fluttered down, brushing his feet, and he leaned in to kiss her again. He gently spun her round and ran his finger over the scar, noting how glossy and smooth it felt, how neat and straight. Then he kissed it. She sighed and dropped her head. He kissed it carefully, reverently, hoping one day she might trust him enough to be able to talk about it, but accepting that until she was ready he would simply love it as he loved her.

The thought settled like snowflakes on the ground. He loved her, and tonight he felt fortunate to have the chance to show her.

Carys

Carys woke next morning from the deepest sleep in which she had been cocooned in the warmest, safest place. Mat was already awake, and he must have felt her stir because he turned to her.

Disoriented, she blinked. ‘What time is it? It feels like I slept for ever, but it’s still dark.’

He nodded towards the window. ‘Because of the shutters. It’s light outside. You slept a long time.’

‘Ah.’ Smiling, she relaxed back, and let the memories of last night wash over her, like warm waves.

Mat’s lips curved too, and his smile reached his eyes. It made her heart fold. It was tender. Reverential. Last night she’d seen another side to him. He’d been as considerate and generous as she’d expected, but firm, too. *If we do this, we should do it completely.*

She was glad he’d nudged her to be brave and bare her scar. She’d kept it hidden so long it was almost a relief to expose it. But she hoped he wouldn’t ask about it. She hoped the accident wouldn’t come back to haunt her again – not now, when she was so happy.

Mat brushed the hair back from her face and bent to kiss her. It was a slow, lingering kiss, a whisper of lips, a reminder and a promise. Eventually he drew back. ‘No regrets?’

‘You know something?’ She grinned. ‘I’m feeling a bit stupid.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it was so good that I’m wondering why we waited so long.’

‘Ready for your first adventure?’ Mat asked.

It was early afternoon. They'd had a leisurely morning and taken their time over a breakfast of croissants and pastries from the *boulangerie*. Mat had called the hospital to find out how his elderly neighbour was doing, and seemed relieved to learn she was stable, though they didn't yet know if there would be lasting damage.

'Absolutely,' said Carys, buttoning up her coat.

'Come on, then.'

'Where in Paris are we going?' she asked, as they set off down his street.

'You'll see.'

'Are we going on public transport?'

'No, we can walk. It's not too far.'

'Are we going shopping?'

'It's a surprise, remember?' He threw her a look of mock disapproval.

'I know, I know, but I want to try to guess.'

'If you guess, it won't be a surprise. Stop asking questions and just enjoy the walk.'

She grinned. 'Fine.'

A short while later they arrived outside an unassuming apartment block. 'Here we are,' he said. Something about him told her he was excited about the place, yet when she glanced around her it seemed like any other Parisian street, cluttered with traffic and billboards.

He gestured towards a door. 'Have you heard of the secret apartment?'

She shook her head.

'It was discovered a few years ago. An apartment that had been locked up, untouched, for seventy years. The owner left in 1940 just before the Nazis invaded the city, and she never went back. It stayed frozen in time until she died recently.'

Excitement surged through her. 'That's amazing. And now it's open to the public?' She couldn't see a plaque or anything to indicate a museum.

'Not until next spring. I pulled a few strings. I'm writing a piece about its opening, you see, for the paper.'

'So it's a secret apartment and we're going to be among the first visitors?'

He nodded.

She squealed. 'What are you waiting for? I have to see this!'

‘That was awe-inspiring!’ Carys said, when they stepped out onto the street.

It was strange to see modern traffic and technology all around them when they’d just been immersed in a time capsule from the previous century. A snapshot of a person’s life hastily abandoned. Hairbrushes and scent bottles on the dressing-table, piles of books scattered, a stuffed toy, a toothbrush, a cup in the sink. Every small detail a clue about their life. It had been incredible.

‘I thought so too,’ he agreed, as they headed home.

‘It was so cluttered,’ Carys said. ‘Looks like they were in a hurry to leave.’

‘I guess they were, knowing the German Army was approaching.’

‘Imagine how rich they must have been to keep an unused apartment all that time and not sell.’

‘Yeah. The décor was authentic, but it hasn’t stood the test of time very well.’ He thought of the wallpaper, peeling in places, and the moth-eaten curtains, greyed with age.

‘It’s a real gem, though. There’s nothing more revealing about someone than seeing where they live.’

They arrived back at his apartment and Mat paused in the hall, looking around him. ‘That’s how I feel about this place. It holds so many reminders of my mum. The paintings she chose for the walls, the tables and chairs she inherited from her family, the books she read . . .’

Carys reached out to touch his arm. ‘Happy memories,’ she said, with understanding.

He nodded. They were all he had left of his mother.

They settled down on the sofa. ‘Tell me about your life with her. Did you often come to Paris?’ Carys asked.

‘We did when she was married to Dad, but after they split up, when I was three, we moved to Provence, and came to Paris in the holidays. That was where we’d meet Dad and he’d sometimes take me to England to spend time with him.’

‘What was your life in Provence like?’

He hadn’t thought about it for so long, but affectionate memories rushed back. He remembered a swing used to hang from the plane tree, and he pictured his grandmother pegging out the washing at the side of the house. He heard Maman singing, smelt Grandmère’s early-morning baking, and heard the grating of cicadas. ‘It was a simple life, I guess. We lived in a small village with a fountain and a village square. It was a world away from this city . . .’ He stared out of the window picturing men playing *boules*, and retired folk sitting on doorsteps watching the world go by. He smelt the butcher’s rotisserie, and heard the church bells. ‘But it was the best childhood. I was lucky. We were very close.’

He frowned, closing his mind to the car accident and the dark times that had followed. Carys rested her head against his shoulder.

‘I’ve never brought anyone home to this place before.’

She lifted her head. ‘What? Why?’

‘Because it means so much to me.’ Their gazes locked. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked quietly.

Her eyes were bright. ‘But you invited me.’

He slanted her a crooked smile. ‘I did.’

Carys

The next few days passed in a happy blur. Mat's mystery tour took her all around the city, to tiny art galleries and obscure museums, through pretty cobbled alleyways and hidden courtyards. They visited historic shopping arcades with glass roofs and mosaic floors; they ate in crêperies and bistros, watched a magic show by the river, visited an ancient cemetery and, of course, lots of parks.

Carys enjoyed herself so much she had lost track of the days. Until one evening they were passing a church on their way home and Mat stopped. Carys followed his gaze and saw, set back from the road, a wooden cabin, with a nativity scene inside it. The figurines were about three feet tall, and candles illuminated the quiet scene with a golden glow.

'Isn't that lovely?' she said, and gazed at the straw-lined crib, the sheep and the star, feeling an unexpected rush of homesickness. 'I can't believe there are only five days left until Christmas.'

Mat nodded thoughtfully. 'What are you doing for Christmas?' he asked.

'I don't know.' She chewed her lip. She missed Willowbrook, her friends and family, but she had to face the music and stay until Mark and Ingrid got back. 'I guess I'll be on my own. What about you? I expect you're going to England to see your dad.'

'No. I'll be here.' He squeezed her hand. 'Spend it with me?'

Her heart jumped. 'Stay at yours a little longer, you mean?'

A cold breeze whistled down the street, blowing empty paper bags and wrappers against the wooden cabin, but inside the candles burned and the star shone.

'I've really enjoyed our week together. I don't want it to end.'

Joy bubbled inside her as he waited expectantly for her answer. 'Why not?'

I'd love to.'

She used his landline to call her mum and Liberty and told them her plans. Then they went out again and bought a tree from one of the street sellers. They manoeuvred it into the tiny lift, which it filled, then ran up the stairs, to retrieve it. Once they'd hauled it into the apartment, Carys clapped her hands. 'I love decorating the tree. That's when Christmas really starts.'

'Ah.' His brow creased in apology. 'I'm afraid I don't have any decorations.'

Her mouth fell open. 'What?'

'I've never bothered with a tree before – not for myself.'

She thought for a moment. Liberty would have produced some in no time on her sewing machine, but Carys didn't share her skills. 'How about we make paper snowflakes?' she suggested. 'And we could buy foil-wrapped chocolates to hang with string.'

'Good idea.' He crossed the room and pulled a book off the shelf. 'I'm sure there's a recipe for gingerbread cookies in here. We could ice them and hang them with ribbon.'

It was the morning of 24 December. Mat was still asleep when Carys got up and padded out quietly to make coffee. Back home in England everyone would be rushing around preparing for Christmas, but in France this was the day when the main celebrations took place. Tonight she and Mat were planning to cook a special meal. The tree with their homemade decorations looked beautiful by the window in the lounge, and she paused to spin one of the paper snowflakes as she went past. She glanced outside, then did a double-take and gasped.

'What is it?' Mat asked, sleepy-eyed in the doorway.

She felt a burst of joy. 'It's snowed!'

He joined her, wrapping his arms around her. The city was white and still. She thought back to when it had snowed earlier that month: she'd been stressed and upset about the café. Now she was in the arms of a man who'd

made her happier than she could remember. The rooftops glistened in the shy light, and the low clouds carried the promise of more snow to come. In fact, as she watched, thick flakes were parachuting past the window.

‘Perfect,’ said Mat, his voice low. ‘This is going to be the best Christmas.’

Mat

Together Mat and Carys had cooked the meal: a feast of smoked salmon with wafer-thin toast, followed by roast duck with *gratin dauphinois* and vegetables, and finally *Buche de Noël*, a chocolate log, from the *pâtisserie*.

He'd found recipes for the duck and the *gratin* in his mum's recipe book and they'd been delicious. He wished Madame Parot was here to see his culinary achievements. She'd been moved to a nursing home near her son to convalesce, and when he'd spoken to her she seemed well. Neither her speech nor her memory was affected, but she sounded tired and keen to return home.

Mat poured more wine into Carys's glass.

'Thanks,' she said, and rested a hand on her stomach. She looked beautiful tonight in a red dress that shimmered in the candlelight. 'That was delicious.'

'We didn't do too badly, though I overcooked the duck.'

Her brow puckered. 'You're too critical. It was our first time!'

He nodded in acknowledgement and thought of Madame Incognito. He wondered how the last review had been received. He hadn't looked at his phone all week, and didn't want to start now. They'd left the real world behind, with all its pressures, and he was happy.

'So, what do the French do after Christmas dinner?' Carys asked.

He checked his watch. It was almost eleven. 'Some go to midnight mass. And when they get back it's time for presents.'

'Sounds lovely, but can we jump to the presents?' She glanced at the tree where they'd each placed a small gift.

He smiled. 'Good idea.'

They sat by the tree to unwrap them. He'd bought her a small white ceramic candle-holder in the shape of a star and lit the tealight to show her.

‘It’s not much,’ he said, ‘but stars always make me think of you.’ He tried not to think about their previous conversation when he’d asked about her past and she’d shut him down. It didn’t matter. They were good together despite their secrets.

‘I love it.’ Her eyes sparkled. ‘Now open yours.’

He carefully removed the tissue paper to reveal the *santon* shepherd from the Christmas market, the same one Grandmère used to have. He felt choked.

‘Now you have another reminder of your childhood,’ she said, and touched his hand.

His chest tightened, and emotion rushed at him. ‘Thank you,’ he said. This Christmas was turning out to be the best in a long time. And there was only one reason: the woman in front of him. He cleared his throat. This had to be said. He’d shied away from it too long. ‘Carys, there’s something you should know.’

She smiled. ‘Yes?’

‘I love you. I think I’ve loved you since the first time we met.’

Carys

Carys stared at him, emotions brimming up and spilling over. ‘I – I feel the same,’ she breathed. ‘From the beginning it just felt so right. Like you understood. I love you too, Mat.’

Saying it felt natural. As if they were meant for each other and this moment had been inevitable. Nothing she’d felt with anyone else had been as vivid or dazzling as what she felt for Mat. She and Liberty used to analyse their relationships at length, debating if what they felt was love or not, but now there was no doubt whatsoever that this punch-to-the-gut emotion could be anything less.

Mat dipped his head and kissed her. His lips were soft and he tasted of chocolate. ‘I want to press pause on this moment,’ he said.

She smiled. ‘Screenshot it. Then we can look at it when we’re grey and old and show our grandchildren.’

They smiled. Their gazes held.

Later, they lay in each other’s arms, naked, the duvet wrapped around them. The wind was getting up, but they were warm and snug. The shutters were ajar and the city lights illuminated Mat’s face, highlighting the straight lines of his cheekbones and the softness of his skin. His eyes were dark as he stared at the tall window, lost in thought.

Carys rested her head on his chest and felt the beat of his heart against her cheek. The shutters rattled in the wind. She couldn’t settle to sleep. Her mind was whirring, still spinning from earlier. He loved her. He *loved* her! And it had felt liberating to tell him she loved him too. But could you really claim to love someone when they didn’t know everything about you? If you weren’t

prepared to share all of yourself?

Her fingers drifted to the back of her neck and the ridged scar. She didn't want anything to change between them; she didn't want to make herself vulnerable. She'd come to France because she didn't want to be treated differently any more, and now she was scared Mat would do exactly that.

But he deserved to know the truth.

'Mat?' She propped herself up on one elbow so she could see his face.

Smiling, he turned to her. 'Mm?'

'There's something we need to talk about.'

His smile faded, replaced with concern. 'What is it?'

'There's something I need to tell you.'

Mat

She had his full attention now. Mat ran his gaze over her face, noting the quick pulse in her throat and the pull at the bridge of her nose. She looked vulnerable. Anxious. The wind whistled outside and his heart thumped heavily with dread. What was she going to tell him?

‘You asked what happened to me,’ she began, ‘why I left England.’

‘Yes?’ His heart picked up. Was she finally going to trust him with her secret?

She absently drew circles on his chest, then looked up at him. ‘I was in a car accident. That’s why I have a scar.’

He pictured the scar she’d always kept covered and his head filled with a thousand questions. ‘When?’

‘Two years ago. I was driving to work one morning when a car came the other way at full speed. He was driving on the wrong side of the road, completely out of control, and he hit me head-on.’

Mat waited for her to go on.

‘I was in a coma for six months.’

He was confused. Why had she kept this from him? It wasn’t the guilty secret he’d speculated she might be hiding. ‘Six months?’ he repeated. ‘And one day you just woke up?’

‘Yeah.’ She sucked in air. ‘Everyone said how lucky I was to have survived, but . . .’

‘But?’

‘It changed me. It scared me. Made me realise life is short. We have to make the most of it. Squeeze every last drop of happiness out of it. I wanted to see the world, have adventures, try new things. I wanted to live one hundred per cent.’

He was silent, recalling how horrified she'd seemed that night when he'd suggested riding scooters, thinking of all the times she'd clammed up about her past.

'But it wasn't just me who had changed. The world had moved on, and I knew nothing about the six months I'd missed. It was weird, disorienting. Everything that had happened in the news: wars, elections, celebrity scandals. There were TV shows I'd never heard of, new restaurant chains had opened, the clothes in my wardrobe had gone out of fashion. New people had moved into the village.' She stopped abruptly, as if a memory had ambushed her.

'You had a lot to catch up with,' he said, and felt a tug. It wasn't difficult to imagine how hard it must have been for her to make such a seismic adjustment. But he still couldn't understand why she'd kept it a secret.

She nodded. 'But what I hated most of all was that everyone treated me like I was made of glass. Always checking I was okay, worrying.'

He could imagine how it might feel to be constantly fussed over. Especially if you were as fiercely independent and energetic as Carys. But he thought of his mum and his grandmother, how they'd suddenly vanished from his life. Their love, their tenderness snuffed out. 'They cared about you,' he said gruffly. 'It's a good sentiment.'

She dipped her head. 'I know.'

A loud crash made them turn to the window. Mat got up to take a look. Snow was being whipped around by the ferocious wind, and he could barely see beyond the balcony. 'Just a broken plant pot on next door's balcony,' he said, and pulled the shutters closed against the blizzard.

When he came back to bed, Carys continued, 'Before the accident I lived with my best friend, Liberty. We'd lived together for ten years, but when I woke up from the coma she'd met someone. Alex. He'd moved in with her.'

'Ah. So you had to leave?'

'I didn't have to. But I felt like a gooseberry there.' He was surprised to see the shine of tears in her eyes. 'I was so lonely I could hardly breathe.'

'Your best friend made you feel lonely?'

'No!' she said quickly. 'I mean, it wasn't her fault. Lib was amazing. When I was in hospital she came to visit every Sunday without fail. She

never gave up on me. But . . .’ she took a deep breath, as if battling contradictory feelings ‘. . . at the same time, her life had moved on. When I came out of hospital our life at Damsely Cottage wasn’t the same. She and Alex were in love – they still are. They’re perfect for each other. But I felt like I didn’t know who I was any more. I should have been happy for her, and I was, but I also felt so sad. As if I’d lost something.’

‘Well, you had. The world and your relationships had changed while you were asleep.’ He understood. He knew how a car accident could change a life irrevocably.

‘I worried that I was selfish . . .’

‘Oh, Carys, you’re so far from selfish.’

He drew her to him and his heart turned over as he tried to process all this information. No wonder he’d sometimes seen a haunted look in her eyes. She’d been through so much.

Carys

‘So you ran away from your past and the accident and came to Paris?’ Mat asked.

‘I didn’t run away,’ Carys said quickly. Then paused. ‘Okay. Maybe I did. A bit. I just wanted to be me again. Not “poor Carys” or “Carys, who was in a coma”, or “Are you sure you’re okay, Carys?” Just me. The me I’d been before.’

‘But the accident and the coma have shaped you, changed you.’

‘No! I’m not weak or fragile. I refuse to be a . . .’ she searched frantically for the word ‘. . . victim.’

‘You could never be a victim. You’re a survivor.’ His words made her glow. Had the accident made her stronger? ‘You don’t want pity, and I understand that, but why erase a year of your life? You should be proud that you came through.’

‘I just want to forget it happened. I want to go back to being the woman I was before the accident.’

‘But it *did* happen. Denying it doesn’t change that. Isn’t it best to confront these things so you can heal?’

The wind shook the building, rattling the shutters and making the window tremble.

‘I have healed. I’m ninety-five per cent fit and healthy now.’ She got the odd headache, the occasional flashback, that was all.

‘Physically, yes. But have you healed emotionally?’

Her voice was small and thin as she said, ‘I’m trying. What more can I do?’

The duvet was warm around them, but Carys shivered, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious. She’d made herself so vulnerable by opening up to him

about the accident and she hoped it wouldn't change how he saw her.

'I can't pretend to be an expert, but I'd imagine that talking about it and acknowledging it happened must be an important first step.'

'I told *you*, didn't I?' she said, with a sheepish smile. She felt as if he could see into her soul. And she realised then that she *had* run away from her accident. Literally and figuratively.

He seemed thoughtful. 'What I can't understand is why you didn't tell me sooner.'

Wasn't it obvious? 'I didn't want it to change anything. I didn't want you to feel sorry for me.'

'I could never feel sorry for you, Carys. You're the strongest, most inspiring woman I've ever met.' She saw the admiration in his eyes and knew his words were genuine. 'Don't you see? Your accident isn't a weakness. It's not something to be ashamed of. Maybe it even made you the person you are today.'

Was he right? The accident had left her feeling lost and lonely and weak. But it had also pushed her to leave Willowbrook and seek new adventures. It had made her see life was fragile and that every moment counted.

She smiled. Mat was right. It had made her the person she was now.

'Thank you for trusting me with your secret,' he said, stroking the hair back from her eyes and rolling over to kiss her deeply and lovingly. The stir of desire made her thighs squeeze. 'I promise it won't change anything. I love you, Carys.'

A loud crash woke her in the night. Mat stirred beside her.

'What was that?' she whispered.

The wind hadn't let up at all. If anything, it sounded worse than before, shrieking past, whipping the building.

'Don't know,' Mat murmured sleepily. 'Probably just a roof tile.'

His eyes drifted closed again, and Carys tried to sleep, too, but couldn't. She wasn't normally afraid in a storm. But this wind sounded like an animal beating the shutters, pounding the walls, and it wasn't relenting or showing any sign of weakening. She made herself breathe. Her heart was racing. But

another bang made her start.

Mat switched on the light. ‘You okay?’ he asked.

Her mouth was dry, but she didn’t want to let on that she was scared. She wasn’t scared. Just unsettled. She couldn’t understand it. She should feel relieved that he’d reacted so well to learning about her accident. *I promise it won’t change anything.*

He must have seen something in her eyes because his expression switched to one of concern. ‘It’s just a storm,’ he said, wrapping an arm around her. ‘Strong winds, a bit of snow.’

‘I know.’

‘It sounds worse because we’re high up on the fifth floor.’

She was unable to explain why she was so unnerved, why she had such an ominous sense of dread. As if her body knew something her mind didn’t, as if it could sense danger coming. ‘It’s worse than any storm I’ve ever heard before.’

She told herself not to be silly. It was just bad weather, not an omen from the gods. Still, her arms were covered in goose bumps and she pulled the duvet up higher. Perhaps she should have told Mat about the reviews from Madame Incognito too. So he knew everything – including how she’d stretched the truth to get the job, and how the café had closed.

The wind howled, and her fingers wrapped around the duvet. She would tell him soon. Just . . . not tonight.

Mat rubbed her shoulder. ‘It’ll pass,’ he soothed. ‘We’re safe here. Don’t worry.’

He kissed her forehead and she closed her eyes, savouring the heat of his lips, reassured by his calm voice. She loved him, she reminded herself, and he loved her. The wind would die down eventually. By morning there’d be calm skies again. There was nothing to worry about.

Mat

The storm two days ago had left a lot of damage. Shattered roof tiles littered the pavements, as well as branches ripped from trees and debris blown around then dumped by the gusts. The snow and the public holiday hampered the clear-up, but Mat was certain that tomorrow the city's street sweepers would be out again, restoring order. Carys, too, needed to get back because her bosses were returning soon, and her suitcase by the door was an unwelcome reminder that their time together had come to an end. Not for long, though, he hoped. The last week had changed everything between them.

'I love Paris in the snow,' she said, gazing out of the window. 'But I miss Willowbrook.'

'You're homesick?'

'A little. The countryside is so pretty under a blanket of white – all the trees and fields.'

Mat hesitated, then asked quietly, 'Are you going back in the new year?'

He hadn't broached the subject until now because he dreaded her answer, but he knew her contract would end any day.

'No.' She stopped and turned to face him, her brow puckered with worry. 'I don't know what I'm going to do yet, but I'll try to find another job in Paris. I want to stay here. With you.'

His heart turned over, and he touched his lips to hers.

A few moments later, Carys said heavily, 'I'd better go.'

'I'll see you home.'

'There's no need.'

'You can't wheel your case through the snow. I'll carry it for you.'

The Métro was quiet. They were the only ones at their end of the carriage and, as the train trundled through stations, Carys gazed out of the window. She looked happy, peaceful, and, although she hadn't told him what had gone wrong at her work, Mat was thrilled she'd opened up about her past and the car accident.

She turned to him. 'I enjoyed our time together so much. Going off-grid was exactly what I needed.'

'Me too. Did I succeed in helping you forget?'

She nodded. 'It helped me get things into perspective, too. I feel much more zen about everything that happened now.'

There was a silent pause as he remembered how upset she'd been ten days ago. Would she tell him about it now? He asked gently, 'What did happen?'

She glanced away and bit her lip. He thought she was going to clam up. But then she turned back. 'There's this online reviewer,' she said. 'She kept writing one-star reviews about us. Like she had it in for me or something.'

His skin prickled. Did people even review shops? He supposed they must. 'I'm sure it's not personal,' he murmured.

'It feels like it. She was so critical.'

'You lost your job because of her?'

'I didn't lose it. I closed the place down. She got to me, you know? I mean, why did she keep coming back if she hated it so much?'

Guilt clamped itself around him. He'd reviewed a few places several times, only because he'd been pressed to post more reviews than he could comfortably manage. Had those restaurants felt persecuted too? 'So you closed the shop?'

She nodded. 'I still don't know if it was the right thing to do, but we were losing money. And the owners, my bosses, have been uncontactable so I couldn't ask them. We were getting into debt . . .'

'Because of the reviewer?'

She tipped her head. 'Partly. But mostly because of me.'

'What do you mean?'

She fiddled with a strand of hair and he sensed she was building up to a reluctant confession. What was her secret? 'I bluffed my way into the job. I

embellished the truth. I didn't have any experience of running a café but I made it sound like I did.'

'A café?' His skin felt taut. His head buzzed. 'You said it was a shop – not a café.'

'Café,' she confirmed.

He felt an edge of tension. Like the tip of a sharp blade against his throat. His muscles tensed.

She continued, 'It felt like this reviewer sussed me. Like she knew I wasn't qualified to run the place.' She shook her head. 'The owners should never have left me in charge. It's my fault. I failed.'

'I'm sure that's not true . . .' He gulped. 'Where is this café?'

'Near Montmartre.'

He remembered the brightly coloured building, the cat, the wild décor inside and the bold, unusual menu. His heart suddenly felt as heavy as a thunderous sky. 'W-what's it called?'

He held his breath, waiting for her answer, feeling as if he was balanced on the edge of a steep cliff, swaying, air and emptiness in front of him. Please no. Don't let it be . . .

But he knew the answer before she'd said it.

'The Red Cat Café.'

Carys

‘Right,’ said Carys, as they stood outside her apartment block. The road was eerily quiet, and the streetlight lit Mat’s face.

‘Right,’ he said distractedly. He’d insisted on seeing her home, but he hadn’t said a word since they’d got off the Métro. She wondered what had caused his sudden change in mood. Perhaps the prospect of going back to work tomorrow. She knew how unhappy he was, working at the paper.

She wrapped her arms around him. ‘Thanks for the last ten days. It was the best.’

‘You’re welcome,’ he said stiffly.

‘When will I see you next?’ she asked, peering at him from beneath her lashes.

‘I don’t know. I’ll have work.’

‘I thought you said the paper’s quiet at this time of year?’

‘What? Er – it is. But I still have to go in, so I’ll be busy tomorrow and the day after . . .’

She stepped back. Was he avoiding her gaze? ‘Mat, are you okay?’

‘Yes – sorry. What are you going to do – about your job, I mean?’

Her smile faded. ‘I expect the owners will have got back to me by now. I’ll just have to sort things out with them, then look for another job.’

‘Let me know if you need anything, if I can help.’

‘I’m sure it’ll be fine.’ She didn’t tell him she’d have to find a new place to live too.

‘Well, I’d better go.’

She reached to kiss him again, but he’d already turned away. Puzzled, she watched him go. Then let herself into her apartment block.

Carys decided she wouldn't switch on her phone until the next morning. She wanted to savour the enjoyment of her time with Mat for one more night before she faced reality.

Tomorrow she'd check her emails and find out exactly when Mark and Ingrid would be back. Her heart was heavy at the prospect of facing them. But all that could wait.

It was late, almost midnight, but she couldn't sleep just yet. She climbed onto the roof and gazed at the sparkling city, replaying in her mind the highlights of the last ten days: when they'd made love, their magical Christmas together, and when Mat had told her he loved her. Their time together had been about helping her forget, but she was pretty sure he'd enjoyed it just as much. She'd never seen him so happy before. She looked up at the night sky, a bowl of stars. And as for her – was she happy?

She was on top of the world.

The next morning she couldn't put it off any longer. With trepidation, she logged onto the café's social-media account.

Her eyes widened as she read the endless comments under her last post. Messages of support. Condemnation of the reviews and Madame Incognito. And now the press had picked up on the story everyone seemed to have waded in with their opinions. She felt vindicated and cheered by the support.

But everyone had turned against Madame Incognito – in a big way. She frowned. They were baying for her blood. Carys shivered. It made her feel quite uncomfortable. The hatred, the venom. It was like watching a lynch mob warm up before taking to the streets.

Next, she checked her emails, but Mark and Ingrid still hadn't replied. Strange. Maybe they were back in Paris already, and had decided to speak to her in person. She decided she'd better drop in at the café, so, after breakfast, she walked down.

But it was still closed, exactly as she'd left it.

An enormous bunch of flowers had been left on the doorstep. Carys picked it up. The card included an apology from Madame Incognito. It was an unexpected and gracious gesture, but did the reviewer really think a

bouquet would make up for what she'd written? Not just one critical review, but three. A journalist was waiting too, shivering in the cold, and when she saw Carys she hurried over. She volleyed a couple of quick questions at her and snapped her picture without any warning, then was gone.

Startled, Carys scurried inside and locked the door. Then she paused and glanced around the empty café. The clashing colours, the riot of fabric patterns – it all looked so empty and forlorn. She remembered their Thursday-evening socials, and how Madame Jalibert, Gérard (who, it turned out, was called André, but she'd always think of him as Gérard) and all the regulars had started to feel like friends, a small community.

Blowing out a breath, she carried the flowers to the bins at the back. She wished Mark and Ingrid would put her out of her misery and reply. She wished this whole sorry story would blow over and everyone move on.

That evening Carys admired her new haircut. She snapped a quick selfie and sent it to Mat.

Look – new hair! What do you think?

It hadn't been easy to find a salon open but in Paris anything was possible, and now she had a sleek short bob. The scar on her neck was visible, but that was intentional. From now on she wouldn't hide it or cover it with scarves. Mat was right: the accident had made her the person she was today. She wasn't going to run away from it any more.

She made pasta for dinner, but when she'd finished he still hadn't replied. In fact, she hadn't heard a peep out of him since they'd said goodbye last night. She called him but there was no reply. He must be overwhelmed with work on his first day back. She hoped he was all right and his awful boss wasn't making his life difficult. It had been only twenty-four hours, but she missed him already. She hoped he'd have time to see her tomorrow or the day after. After their special Christmas together they'd definitely moved on from just Sundays in the park.

The next day she went back to the café. It was Tuesday and normally she'd

be reopening after their Sunday/Monday closure; today she was nipping in to update the accounts. Ingrid needed to know the precise truth of how low their takings had been during the last few weeks.

As she walked down the hill, she hoped there wouldn't be anyone waiting again. The reporter yesterday hadn't been friendly. She was in luck: there weren't any reporters; but there was another bouquet of flowers. She threw them away, then settled down at the computer, placing her phone on the desk beside her. She hoped Mat would message her soon: his silence was niggling her. When her phone rang, she snatched it up.

But it was Léo. 'Carys? You're back?'

'Yes.'

'Can I meet you tomorrow?'

'Yes, of course. What is it—'

'Good. See you at the café at midday.' And he hung up.

At the end of the morning she checked her phone again. Still nothing from Mat. And each time she called him it rang out.

She couldn't understand it. The last ten days had been so perfect, their time together so special, their connection so strong. So why hadn't he returned her calls last night? Why hadn't he replied to any of her messages?

She sent him another: *What's wrong? Has something happened? Please talk to me. I'm worried.*

Mat

After he'd left Carys, Mat had walked home, reeling. The temperature had dropped, turning snow to ice, and he felt icy too. Frozen, and shocked. All he could see was Carys, ten days earlier in the park, red-eyed. Her brave smile as tears had choked her and she'd tried to swipe them away. The sad, distant look in her eyes.

All along it had been *him* she was upset about. His reviews.

His mind kept returning to the words he'd written and each time his shame only intensified. He'd tried to make his reviews as entertaining and sharp as possible – not unlike his dad's, he realised, with a chilling sense of horror. But his dad had been writing about cars, inanimate objects. Mat had been writing about a café. A place peopled by human beings who'd cooked and cleared tables and given their all to serving their customers. How had he ever believed reviews could be a good thing? Or even a neutral thing?

Because he'd been desperate to escape the job he hated, desperate for success. Status. Recognition. Financial security. What did any of those things matter compared to Carys?

He hung his head in despair. What could he do? Oh, God. How must Carys be feeling? Her bold, beautiful star had been extinguished. Crushed by his words.

The knowledge was so stark he couldn't breathe.

At home he'd looked up the café's social media and read her parting message: *with a heavy heart I'm closing the café . . . can't take any more . . . heartbroken.*

Their takings had been down because of his reviews? Usually his reviews,

even bad ones, had the opposite effect. But this was terrible. Guilt corkscrewed through him. What should he do? He cast around for a solution. He couldn't find one, but there was one small thing he could do – *had* to do. He would apologise publicly.

He prepared a message, then went through it over and over again, careful to get the wording just right. His apology must sound heartfelt. He couldn't risk the tone being misconstrued in any way. He ran a hand through his hair. He'd never expected this. It simply hadn't occurred to him that anything he wrote would have such a powerful effect.

He posted his apology, then flicked to Madame Incognito's account. People were saying terrible things about her. She was being assailed with all sorts of abuse, and he cringed at how low some people were willing to go. What if they somehow worked out who he was? What if people turned up outside his flat or the office? The thought made him shiver, but worse than that was his worry for Carys – and all the café's staff.

He wasn't sure he'd ever learn to live with the shame and guilt. He'd done a terrible thing.

Next morning, Mat went to work in a blur. He sat at his desk and tried to focus on his list of articles to research and write. Normally he'd have been high on caffeine, rushing to get the words down. Today, though, his head was foggy and he had half an eye on his phone. Popular opinion had turned against Madame Incognito. People had taken sides and mostly they supported the Red Cat Café. It was secondary in his mind to what Carys felt, but distracting nevertheless.

'So how was it?' Alice asked.

'How was what?' He couldn't think clearly. He hadn't slept. He'd stayed up reading all the messages and comments connected with Madame Incognito.

Alice rolled her eyes. 'Christmas, stupid. Was it good?'

'Oh – yeah. Great.'

She peered at him. 'That's your happy face? I've seen crying babies who looked more cheerful.'

‘We had a late night. I didn’t get much sleep.’ He gazed unseeingly out of the window at the city.

‘We? I thought you were spending Christmas alone?’

‘Carys stayed. It wasn’t planned.’ His heart felt heavy. He’d have to tell Carys what he’d done. But how? He glanced at his phone again.

‘You two are getting serious about each other, then?’

‘Who’s writing the piece about the restaurant reviewer?’ Pietro shouted from across the office.

They all looked up.

Alice twisted in her seat. ‘Incognito? That’s mine.’

Mat froze.

‘I’ll send you this link. There’s a picture of the café manager – just released.’

‘What piece?’ Mat asked. His mouth felt dry.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ said Alice. ‘The Red Cat Café closed because of Madame Incognito. Everyone’s turned against her. They’re baying for her blood.’

Pietro crossed the room and stood beside Alice’s desk, arms folded. ‘She’s apologised, but it’s not enough. She’d gone too far this time.’

‘You’re writing a piece about it?’ Mat asked Alice. His head spun. ‘It’s hardly newsworthy, is it?’

‘Everyone’s talking about it,’ she said. ‘It all kicked off before Christmas when you were off.’

Pietro nodded. ‘Hero to zero in a week.’

‘Madame Incognito is *persona non grata* now,’ said Alice, opening the email Pietro had sent her.

Mat’s body felt robotic. A sour taste filled his mouth.

‘Thanks for the picture, Pietro,’ Alice said, ‘but I’d rather have a picture of Incognito herself.’

Pietro snorted. ‘Don’t reckon she’ll be showing her face any time soon. You want a coffee?’

Mat heard Pietro’s words as if they were far away in a long, echoing tunnel. His gaze was fixed on Alice’s computer screen, and the picture of

Carys. That little pull at the bridge of her nose, her dark eyes clouded with anxiety. Wariness. And her picture was super-imposed on the frontage of the Red Cat Café.

Alice and Pietro went off to get coffee, and he got up. His legs shook as he bent over the screen to skim the text beneath the picture. There were a couple of quotes from her, about how she'd had time off, time to think about it, but she was still angry and upset. She'd seen the reviewer's apology but didn't want to meet her in person . . .

His phone pinged. It was a message from her. *Still up for that drink tonight?*

He held his head. She didn't know. No one knew.

His heart thudded heavily. He pictured her reaction when she learned his identity and what he'd done. How would she feel? She'd be so hurt. She'd never forgive him.

He felt a tearing sensation. He wasn't sure he could ever forgive himself.

Carys

On Wednesday morning Carys arrived at the café to meet Léo, and was surprised to find he wasn't alone standing outside the entrance: Emile and Aurélie were with him.

Her eyes widened. 'You're all here! Why?' Her heart was gripped with worry and guilt. Were they in need of money? Was today the day Ingrid and Mark were returning? If they were, they hadn't told her.

'We'll tell you in a minute,' Aurélie said, holding out the bouquet of flowers. 'First, I want to know who your secret admirer is? These were on the doorstep.'

Carys pressed her mouth flat. She had to give it to the reviewer: she hadn't stopped at one bouquet. She'd sent one every day. 'Madame Incognito.' Carys sighed and unlocked the door.

'She apologised, you know,' said Aurélie. 'It sounded genuine.'

'I know. But it's too little too late. You can put the flowers in the bin, Aurélie.'

'What? No way. Can I have them?'

'Help yourself.'

They settled themselves around one of the tables. Léo had brought takeaway coffees, and Emile had baked a cake but, for once, Carys wasn't hungry. 'Right,' she said. 'Tell me what this meeting is about.'

The three of them looked at each other.

'We want you to reopen the café,' Emile said bluntly.

Carys blinked.

'We know you were hurt,' Léo said, 'but you can't let her win like this.'

'It's not just about how it made me feel. We didn't have any customers,' she said regretfully. 'We were losing money.'

‘They’ll come back,’ Emile said firmly. ‘They’re all on our side now. Haven’t you seen the papers and social media? Everyone’s talking about this place.’

Aurélie nodded. ‘And people are nosy. They’ll come just to check it out.’

Carys looked at each of them in turn. ‘Are you worried about money? Because Mark and Ingrid will be back any day. They’ll reopen in the new year, I’m sure.’ If they could afford to after she’d got them into debt.

‘Not at all,’ said Aurélie. ‘We want to reopen now because it’s the right thing to do.’

Emile nodded. ‘The Red Cat Café is one of the best cafés in Paris.’

‘And we’re a great team, remember?’ said Léo.

Carys shrank back under their collective gaze. They *had* been a great team – until she’d thrown in the towel. Doubt crept through her. Had she let them down by giving up?

‘We did all this work to make the place look great,’ said Léo, gesturing to the café’s flamboyant décor. ‘We did it because we believed in the place.’

Aurélie added, ‘And we believed in you.’

Her guilt mushroomed. It was true: when she’d asked for their help, they’d given it. She owed them. Big-time.

But she thought of the accounts and her shoulders sank. ‘I can’t. I still haven’t heard from Mark and Ingrid, and the café’s bank account is already in the red.’

Emile got his phone out. ‘Ingrid said it’s fine. She’s cleared the overdraft with the bank.’

‘What? You spoke to her?’

‘Yeah. She tried calling you last week, but your phone was switched off.’

‘Why didn’t she leave a message? Or reply to my emails?’

‘I don’t know. Here, speak to her if you don’t believe me. I told her we’d be having this meeting.’

Carys took the phone, cursing herself for not having tried to call since she’d got back, but she’d been so preoccupied with Mat’s radio silence she’d hardly given it any thought. Actually, that wasn’t quite true. She’d also been ashamed and dreading the conversation with Ingrid.

Ingrid picked up on the third ring. ‘Carys, how are you?’ she asked. ‘We’ve been worried about you.’

‘Er . . .’ This wasn’t the greeting she’d expected. Ingrid didn’t sound angry at all. She didn’t sound close, either. Hadn’t they left Australia? ‘I’ve been worried too – about the café.’

‘About the takings being low? It’s always quiet in the run-up to Christmas. People are busy with preparations, visiting the Christmas markets, and Emile said the weather was particularly bad this year. Plus, the Métro station is closed. All these things were out of your control, Carys.’

Her mouth fell open. She’d had sleepless nights over it. ‘I thought I’d ruined your business.’

‘Not at all. We’ve been monitoring the accounts and we’re happy. We expect to have periods when we run at a loss, but they’re usually short-lived. You’re doing fine, Carys. And it sounds like that reviewer might even have done us a favour. Have you seen all the press coverage it’s given us? When can you reopen?’

‘You really want me to?’

The sound of laughter travelled down the line. ‘Definitely. There was no need to close.’

She wished she’d known. With hindsight, she realised she’d let insecurity get the better of her. ‘I’m sorry. I thought it was the right thing to do and it just all got too much.’

‘Don’t worry. A lot of family businesses take a break at this time of year. But if you could reopen as soon as possible, that would be great.’

‘But you’ll be back in a couple of days, won’t you?’

There was a short silence. Emile lowered his gaze sheepishly. Carys frowned.

Ingrid cleared her throat. ‘Actually, there’s been a change of plan. Mark and I don’t feel ready to leave the ranch yet. His mum needs us here. We wondered how you’d feel about staying on, at least until the summer and possibly longer?’

Carys swallowed. Excitement leaped in her, but her brow knotted too. She loved working here – she was flattered they had such faith in her – and the

thought of staying on was exhilarating. But Ingrid didn't know the full story.

She bit her lip, then decided honesty was the best way. 'Ingrid, I haven't been completely truthful with you. I didn't have any experience of running a café before I came here. I . . . exaggerated how much responsibility I'd had when I worked in a pub. And, well, if you hired someone else they'd be better qualified to do this. They'd know things I don't know – like December being quiet, for example.'

Beside her Emile, Léo and Aurélie exchanged a look of consternation.

Ingrid was silent. Then she said, 'Carys, you've learned fast. And what you lack in experience you make up for in drive. You're a fantastic manager. We have every confidence in you. So do the staff.'

'You do?'

'Yes. We don't want to hire anyone else. We're counting on you. Think about it, and let us know your decision.'

Carys felt a mixture of relief and elation.

'So?' Aurélie said, when she hung up a short while later. 'What do you say?'

Carys handed back the phone to Emile. They waited for her to answer. 'Guys, I need time to think about—'

Emile waved a hand. 'You've had ten days already. The papers have been writing about us, public opinion is on our side. We need to capitalise on it now.'

'It's true.' Aurélie picked up her coffee. 'In a week everyone will have forgotten.'

'We should reopen before the new year,' Léo said firmly. 'Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow is too short notice,' Carys said. 'We don't have any supplies.'

'I spoke to the suppliers,' Emile put in calmly. 'If I call them before midday they can deliver this afternoon.'

Carys closed her mouth, defeated – and impressed. An expectant silence filled the café. A car drove past and, as she followed it with her gaze, she remembered her time with Mat and all their late-night conversations. With him she'd remembered who she was, she'd found her way again. She wasn't someone who gave up, she was a survivor. A fighter.

Finally, she turned back to Léo, Aurélie and Emile. ‘Okay, then. Yes. We’ll reopen. Tomorrow.’

They whooped and jumped up to hug her.

‘Thank you,’ said Carys, tears unexpectedly filling her eyes.

‘What for?’ asked Aurélie.

‘For being so wonderful. So supportive.’ She laughed and swiped at a couple of rogue tears that had spilled over. ‘You’re the best. All of you. You really are.’

Later that afternoon Carys was helping Emile unpack the delivery and restock the kitchen. But her brow was furrowed, and her shoulders were tense. Despite the enormous relief at not having lost her job, and the excitement of preparing to reopen the café tomorrow, she was troubled by Mat’s silence. It had been three days now and she hadn’t heard a peep out of him. How could he leave her hanging like this?

Thoughts of her accident flashed up in her mind, like broken glass. Even if something had happened, if he’d been taken ill, he could have typed a quick message. Or asked someone else to.

But perhaps nothing had happened. An icy feeling settled on her spine. Perhaps he simply didn’t want to speak to her.

No. She refused to believe that. Even if his feelings had changed, he’d do the honourable thing and tell her.

Wouldn’t he?

Doubts began to creep in, like mice darting about in the periphery of her vision. They distracted her from her work and she kept returning to her phone, sighing when it remained obstinately silent.

Tonight, she decided, she’d go round to his apartment and check he was all right. Find out what was going on.

Mat

Mat trudged home from work. The wind was bitter tonight, and, as he passed the empty doorway where Michel usually sheltered, he hoped he had found somewhere warm to spend the night. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he checked it. Another missed call from Carys. He winced. How was he going to fix this? The problem seemed too enormous, insurmountable. But he was going to have to do something. She was worried and she deserved an explanation.

He reached his apartment block and pushed the door closed behind him, glad to shut out the weather. The concierge paused in sweeping the floor. ‘Ah, Monsieur Devine. Have you heard from Madame Parot?’

‘We spoke on the phone.’ His heart lifted. It was a glimmer of hope amid the greyness. ‘She’s coming home soon.’

The concierge smiled. ‘That is good news.’

Back in his apartment, Mat scrolled through the messages on Incognito’s account. He hadn’t looked at it for twenty-four hours. Now, as he did so, he felt himself grow paler, and a queasy feeling gripped him.

He’d expected things to settle down after a few days but, if anything, it was still gaining traction, fuelled by the mainstream media’s coverage. The backlash against Madame Incognito was showing no sign of waning. So many cruel words, so much hatred. A lot of it was misogynistic, too, and he wondered what those messages would have looked like if they’d known he was a man. In his mind the fictional persona of Madame Incognito helped create a little distance between himself and the vile messages, and for that he was grateful, but the threats, the malice – they were hard for anyone to read.

His finger hovered over the screen. There was no point in responding. He’d apologised several times, publicly and privately, to the Red Cat Café.

Anyway, people had made up their minds about Madame Incognito. Yet, perversely, the number of followers was increasing every day.

But they were wasting their time. He'd never post again, never review again. He'd hoped Madame Incognito would be his ticket to success, but because of her he'd lost all that mattered: he'd lost Carys.

He flicked through to settings and found what he was searching for. *Delete account.*

He paused. All those followers, all the weeks and months it had taken to build up that following.

He pressed the button. And, just like that, Madame Incognito was gone.

Carys

Carys woke up and checked her phone. Still no reply from Mat.

Her shoulders sank, and the knot of tension she'd been holding these last few days tightened. As she got up and went to work, she knew she should have been excited, but her mind was only half on the café's reopening.

She greeted Emile and went through the motions of admiring his cake display; she wiped all the tables and put out the condiments, but her mind was replaying the previous evening when she'd gone round to Mat's place. There'd been no reply – not when she'd rung the bell or called his phone. Yet from the street she could see a light was on. Her heart was aching to see him. And aching with hurt at his silence. What was going on? Had his dad come to visit? Surely he'd have sent a quick message to tell her.

Or was he avoiding her? It seemed the more likely scenario now, but why? Had she misjudged him? Hadn't he enjoyed their time together? It had been so perfect – to her, at least.

She stilled. Perhaps he'd set out to sleep with her and, having achieved it, lost interest. No. She couldn't believe Mat was capable of that. He was kind and caring and – and he'd said he loved her. No, he must have the best reason for not replying to any of her messages. But what was it?

He'd lost his phone. Dropped it down a drain, or it had been stolen. Panic built and she stared out of the café window. Perhaps he had been mugged – or hurt in a terrible accident and taken to hospital with life-threatening injuries. She'd dismissed all these possibilities as unlikely, but the more time went by the more plausible they became.

Her pulse quickened. She should call his work. At least then she'd know if he was okay. What was the name of his paper? *Le Paris Local*. She searched online and found a phone number. It was too early to call now, but she'd try

later during office hours. For now, she had a café to reopen.

Aurélié and Léo arrived, the latter carrying Raoul's cage. 'Raoul!' Carys said. 'I thought Emile was looking after him?'

'We took it in turns,' Léo said. 'He isn't the easiest house guest. Apartment life doesn't suit him. He needs his freedom.'

In the office Carys released the door of the cage, and Raoul shot out. He flew across the room to the open door, then turned to look back at her. His eyes flashed with reproach before he lifted his chin and disappeared outside.

She looked up at the wall clock: it was almost eight. 'Right, let's have a quick team meeting before we open.' They'd been so enthusiastic to reopen, but she was nervous about the reception they'd get. 'We have to be prepared for the fact that it might be quiet at first,' she warned. 'But, hopefully, word will get round that we're open again, and things will pick up. So don't worry if today is slow, okay?'

She glanced at Emile in particular. He'd filled the counter with his gorgeous carnival of cakes, but Carys felt privately that he'd been a little optimistic in baking such large quantities.

He nodded, and the others murmured their agreement.

Carys smiled. 'Come on, then.' she said, trying to quash her own trepidation and sound bright. 'Let's open.'

As the first handful of customers came in, Carys satisfied herself that everything was under control, then nipped back into the office. She had a hundred and one jobs to do, including printing menus and getting on with the paperwork.

But at ten thirty she was interrupted when Léo knocked on the door and stuck his head in. 'Can you come and help? It's getting busy out there.'

'How busy?' Carys looked up but he'd gone. She finished what she was doing and followed him out.

Then stopped.

The noise hit her first. The happy chatter of families and friends laughing, the high-pitched squeals of young children, the murmur of men's deep voices. She stared at the bustling café. Every table, every seat was filled. Students with laptops, men leaning in to hear each other, babies bursting

from high-chairs, toddlers spinning on the spot and pausing to giggle furiously at themselves. Carys's heart jumped.

Gérard put down his newspaper and smiled at her.

'Carys, there you are! Oh, I've missed you,' said Madame Jalibert, jumping up and rushing over to cup Carys's face in her hands.

Carys blinked rapidly. 'I've missed you too. All of you.' Her throat felt tight.

Madame Jalibert wagged a finger. 'Don't ever close again, understand? This place is like a second home to me.'

Carys's mouth fell open. She closed it. 'I thought you'd all deserted us. The café was empty.'

'I was visiting family,' said Madame Jalibert.

'I was ill with flu,' said Gérard.

The mother with the three young children looked up from helping with their colouring sheets. 'We had rehearsals and concerts at school. We were worried you'd closed for good.'

Relief made Carys's smile spread even wider. 'Well, we're back now, and it's wonderful to see you all.'

Léo nudged her elbow. 'Don't worry if today is slow, eh?' he teased. The tray on his shoulder was piled high with plates and cups.

Carys turned to him, beaming. 'I can't believe it,' she whispered. Her eyes burned unexpectedly.

'They've all told me how much they're looking forward to Thursday's social evening, too,' he said. 'I presume we're not holding it tonight because it's our first day back.'

'That's right. But I've just had an idea. Why don't we get everyone a glass of fizz to celebrate the reopening?'

'Great idea. It feels like a party in here already, and tomorrow will be New Year's Eve. Carys?' He peered at her more closely, then grinned. 'Are you crying?'

'Me?' she said. 'Definitely not. Just allergic to that cat.'

After the lunch rush she finally managed to sneak back into the office. It was

time to call Mat's work. She held her breath as her call went first to a switchboard, then to the newspaper, where a woman called Alice answered.

'Can I speak to Mathieu Devine?' Carys said.

'I'll put you through. Just a moment . . .' she said.

The line went silent and Carys tapped her fingers on the desk as she waited. The silence stretched.

Then a click. Carys straightened. 'Mat?'

'Sorry.' It was the woman again. Carys's heart sank. 'Er – he isn't here at the moment. Can I take a message?'

'Do you know when he'll be back?'

A short pause followed. She thought she heard muffled words. Then, 'I don't know. He's out – er – with work.'

Something about the woman's tone made Carys suspicious. 'He's been into work, though, hasn't he? Since Christmas, I mean.'

'Yes.' Her voice lifted, as if she was puzzled by the question.

'Good. So he's not dead or ill or anything else?'

There was no reply this time. But she didn't need one. The realisation sank through her, like a stone. He was ghosting her, wasn't he?

Disbelief melded with gut-wrenching devastation. Why? Last week had been so perfect.

Clearly not for him.

She'd totally misread the whole situation. She'd believed their time together had meant as much to him as it had to her. Just went to show how little she knew him. She'd thought he was honourable, dependable, loyal. She'd never in a million years had him down as the type to do this.

'Who's calling?' the woman asked.

Carys felt dazed.

When she didn't answer, the woman asked impatiently, 'Is there a message?' She sounded keen to end the call.

Carys considered her options. What would she say? *Please call me? I miss you?* No. She had pride. Anyway, he'd seen her messages. Bewildered, she was registering that he'd *chosen* not to reply to them.

'No,' she said finally. Quietly. 'It doesn't matter.'

She ended the call and closed her eyes. It was over. She wouldn't contact him any more. She would protect her dignity with silence, but nothing could protect her heart from the pain. If there'd been one person she'd believed she could rely on here in Paris, it had been Mat.

How wrong she'd been.

Mat

‘What’s going on?’ Alice asked, as soon as she’d hung up.

Mat flicked his phone to silent, trying to force out of his mind what Carys must be thinking and feeling right now.

‘Who was that?’ Alice insisted, when he didn’t reply. ‘And why wouldn’t you speak to her yourself?’

He did his best to sound casual but his voice was raw. ‘We broke up.’ Although Carys didn’t know it yet. Guilt clawed at his conscience. But he knew that would be the inevitable outcome.

‘Carys?’

He nodded.

‘After you spent Christmas together?’ She frowned. ‘So that’s why you’ve been on edge since you got back. I knew something was wrong.’

He turned back to his screen, hoping to end the conversation.

‘Why can’t you tell her yourself that you don’t want to speak to her?’ Her brow furrowed, her eyes sparking angrily.

His temples throbbed. He couldn’t take Carys’s calls. He couldn’t risk her learning the truth about him. She’d be even more hurt than she already was. And yet, even as he thought this, he knew he couldn’t stay silent for ever.

Alice persisted. ‘You did tell her you’ve broken up, didn’t you? You’re not ghosting her, I hope. That would be low, Devine.’

His toes curled. He couldn’t find the words. There was a pounding in his temples. She was right. Blanking Carys was cowardly – and cruel. Especially after all they’d shared. She deserved better.

‘I don’t understand. You look ill, heartbroken, and yet she knows nothing. She’s worried about you.’

The drumming in his head intensified.

Alice sniffed. ‘Well, I hope she’s not going to call all the time. I’ve got better things to do than be your personal receptionist because you’re too chicken to tell her the truth.’

She knows nothing. She’s worried about you. Mat thought about Carys’s call all afternoon.

She was worried. Her messages had become less frequent and increasingly anxious, and he knew he couldn’t let it go on any longer. He had to do something. But what? She hadn’t accepted Madame Incognito’s apology: why would she accept his?

‘Did you see the Red Cat Café’s reopened?’ Alice said to Pietro.

‘Has it? Under new management?’

‘It doesn’t say. I might go this afternoon, see if they’ll talk to me. There’s still some mileage in this story, I reckon.’

The thought of Carys being ‘a story’ made Mat’s hackles rise. ‘No!’ The word shot out of his mouth before he could stop it.

Pietro and Alice stared at him.

‘I – I’m going that way anyway. Why don’t I do it? You can still have the article, Alice, but I’ll get you a quote or two – if you like.’

In the silence that followed he prayed she’d say yes. He had to protect Carys. He had to talk to her.

Alice peered at him curiously. ‘Fine. But don’t even think about stealing the credit for it. This is my story. I’ve been on it from the start.’

Mat was shaking with nerves and his mouth was dry. He stood outside, watching as a couple of customers left and the red-haired waitress went to lock the door behind them.

Mat stepped forward and put out his hand to stop her.

‘Sorry,’ she said stonily. ‘We’re closed.’

‘I’m here to see Carys.’

‘Oh.’ She peered at him as if she recognised him but couldn’t place him, then frowned. ‘Are you a reporter?’

He hesitated. 'I'm – a friend.'

Her expression softened. Reluctantly, she stepped back to let him in. 'She's in the office. I'll get her.'

'Thanks,' he muttered, and dug his hands deep into his jacket pockets as she locked the door and flipped the sign to '*Fermé*'.

Her fox-like hair swung round as she turned back, eyes wide with recognition. 'You're the guy Raoul peed on, aren't you?'

He stiffened at the memory. 'Yes.'

'And you know Carys?' Her lips twitched, and undisguised curiosity danced in her eyes. 'Who should I say is here?'

'Mat.'

His legs still felt unsteady so he leaned against the counter. Now he was here the words deserted him. What would he even say?

Carys

‘**M**at?’ Carys repeated. ‘Here? In the café?’

Aurélie nodded. ‘Is he the man you spent Christmas with?’

Carys didn’t answer. She was already halfway across the room and throwing open the door.

Mat was waiting by the counter. He looked up, but his expression killed the explosion of hope she’d felt on learning he was there.

‘Mat?’ she said, when he didn’t speak. His eyes were dark smudges. ‘What’s happened?’

She kept her distance, torn. She’d promised herself she would return his silence with stony indifference, but now he’d turned up like this, looking so vulnerable and, well, ill, it was difficult to switch off her feelings. She wanted to throw her arms around him. She cared about him; she loved him. But his stinging silence of the last few days made her hang back, and she asked instead, ‘Why haven’t you replied to any of my messages?’

He shuffled his feet. Was it guilt she saw in his eyes? Or fear? Either way, he looked as if he hadn’t slept in days. She could hear Emile clattering pots and pans as he tidied the kitchen, and Aurélie reappeared with the broom and a wet cloth to mop the floor.

Mat glanced from her to Carys. ‘Is there somewhere we can talk?’ he asked. ‘In private.’

‘Yes. Come into the office.’ She led him in there, shooting Aurélie a look of warning not to disturb them, and closed the door.

She gestured for him to sit, but he shook his head. ‘You reopened, then?’ A weak, watery smile touched his lips.

‘Yes.’

‘Your bosses weren’t angry, as you thought they’d be?’

‘No. They’re really happy, actually. Their reaction was a total surprise.’ She laughed. ‘I think I overreacted, closing the shop.’

‘You didn’t.’

‘I did. I got myself into a real tizz about takings being down, but it turns out December’s always quiet. Everyone’s busy preparing for Christmas, apparently. And now all the press coverage means we’re more popular than ever.’

His mouth flattened, but he didn’t say anything.

She sat down, hoping he’d join her on the sofa. He looked really nervous and it was making her feel on edge too.

‘Good.’ He gave a rough laugh. ‘I’m glad. So glad. I was worried you might have lost your job over it. I don’t know what I would have done if you had . . .’ His Adam’s apple rose and fell as he swallowed.

‘What *you* would have done?’ Carys frowned. He wasn’t making any sense. ‘It’s all fine,’ she reassured him. ‘Mat, why haven’t you picked up? I’ve been worried about you. I thought something had happened.’

He closed his eyes.

She wanted to stand up and reach out to him, but the hurt of the last few days was an invisible force holding them apart, like identical magnets repelling. He opened his eyes again and, to her surprise, they were wet with tears. She didn’t know what to think. Was he sick? Maybe he’d had a diagnosis of some terrible illness – something fatal – and he’d avoided her to spare her the heartache of watching him die. The thought derailed her. ‘Mat —’

‘Carys, there’s something I have to tell you. It’s not easy.’ He muttered a curse under his breath.

She’d never seen him so serious. Her heart drummed.

‘Carys, I . . .’ His voice cracked. His blue gaze connected with hers. ‘. . . I wrote the reviews.’

Her heart became a lead weight in her chest. She blinked.

He began to talk fast, as if the words were running away from him. ‘I didn’t know it was your café. I didn’t know much about the place at all, to be honest, but I was under pressure to publish reviews more frequently and be

more entertaining, more critical – they said it attracted a bigger audience – and I know now what a stupid and cruel thing it was to do, but . . .’ he rubbed a hand over his face ‘. . . I did it. And I’m so, so sorry. I have never in my life regretted anything more. When I think of what it did to you, I want to—’

‘Wait a minute.’ Carys got up and held her hands to her head as she tried to process this. ‘You’re Incognito?’

Her heart thudded. An endless moment stretched before he finally responded with a slow nod.

She stared. The look on his face pulled at her, made her almost pity him. But then her mind spun into gear and fury blew that out of the water. ‘You spent Christmas with me knowing what had happened and how upset I was?’ she asked incredulously.

‘No,’ he said quickly. ‘I didn’t know – I had no idea you worked here. It was only when you told me on your way home that I began to piece it all together. And when I did, I –’ his voice broke. ‘I was so ashamed, and I couldn’t bear to hurt you any more.’

Carys’s pulse thumped in her ears. She stared at him. Her breath came in short, hard snatches, as if she’d just finished sprinting. ‘That was four days ago – and you’re telling me now?’

‘I’m so sorry, Carys.’

‘I don’t believe it. You,’ she spat, ‘wrote those reviews? You?’

He nodded mutely.

She couldn’t marry those cutting, derisive words with the gentle, caring man who’d kissed her, made love to her and held her each night. The man she’d believed was her best friend, her soul-mate. Who’d connected with her at a deeper level than any other man. She wanted to laugh at herself. And cry.

‘Why?’ Her tone was incredulous. ‘Why would you do such a vile thing?’

His gaze slid away from hers, heavy with guilt. ‘They promised me a column – at a broadsheet newspaper. My dream job. I thought it was a way out, I thought it would—’

She held up her hand for him to stop. ‘You know what? I don’t want to hear it.’ Disgust dripped from her voice. This wasn’t some minor misunderstanding, some tiny secret. This was huge. How could the person

who'd done this and the person she'd loved be the same man? Had she known him at all?

She shot to her feet and flung open the door. 'Get out.'

'Carys, please—'

'Get out!'

He held her gaze for a long moment. His shoulders were low as he slunk out of the office. She followed him and faintly registered that Emile had come out of the kitchen and Aurélie stood beside him, broom in hand. Their eyes were wide with concern.

Mat reached the door. She unlocked it and held it open.

'Don't ever come back here, you understand?' she said.

He nodded but didn't move. 'I'm sorry,' he said, his voice raspy, 'for everything.'

'So that's Incognito?' asked Aurélie, when he'd gone.

Carys locked the door. 'You heard our conversation?'

Emile and Aurélie nodded.

Carys sighed. 'He's Incognito.' She gave a bitter laugh. 'And he's the man I thought I loved.'

Her body felt too heavy for her and she dropped into the nearest chair. Emile and Aurélie joined her at the table. The chef patted her shoulder. Aurélie passed her a tissue. She hadn't even realised she was crying.

'Why did he do it?' Aurélie asked.

'I don't know. He's a journalist, though. It's the kind of thing they do, isn't it?'

'A journalist?' Aurélie wrinkled her nose. 'Who does he work for?'

'One of those free papers you get on the Métro . . .'

 She searched for the name.

'*Le Paris Local*?' Emile suggested.

'Yes.'

Aurélie was on her phone. 'He's deleted Incognito's account. She's not there any more.' She typed something. 'It doesn't say she's connected with the newspaper. In fact, it says her identity is still a mystery.'

Carys didn't really care. She was too consumed by hurt. The sense of betrayal cut deep.

'What's his real name?'

'Mat Devine. Wait – why? What are you doing? You can't put that online, Aurélie.'

'No?' It was clear she'd been about to. 'Why not? He deserves it after what he wrote about us.'

Carys remembered how vicious the backlash had been against Madame Incognito already. No wonder he'd deleted the account. 'Don't, Aurélie. That's going too far.'

The girl blew out a breath. 'Okay, but if you change your mind . . .'
Reluctantly she put her phone down.

'Emile, have you any alcohol in the kitchen?'

The chef raised an eyebrow. 'I have some rum left from the *bananes flambées*.'

'Can I have some?'

He went to fetch it, poured her a glass, and he and Aurélie watched as she downed it. She needed something to take the edge off the feeling that her heart had just been scooped out. Wincing, she put down the glass.

'He sounded genuinely remorseful,' Emile said gravely.

Carys flashed him a dark look. 'So he should be,' she said, through gritted teeth. 'Don't you remember all the horrible things he said about your food?'

The chef tipped his head to one side. He was calm as he considered this. 'That's what food critics do. And look where it's got us.' He gestured to the café, which, until thirty minutes ago, had been bustling all day non-stop. 'We're busier than we've ever been.'

Carys stared at him. How could he be so accepting? 'He left us one-star reviews. One star!'

The ghost of a smile pulled at Emile's lips. 'My food is controversial. It attracts attention. So does the café. This décor does too.' He looked around, and Carys did the same, taking in the flamingo-pink chairs and kitsch chandeliers, the zebra-print cushions. 'You didn't set us up to be a quiet, unobtrusive place, did you?'

Carys felt anger simmer like hot tarmac. Whose side was he on? ‘I didn’t set us up to be a target either!’

‘Emile!’ Aurélie thumped his arm. ‘Are you in business with him or something?’

‘Of course not. I’m just trying to see it objectively, that’s all. Ingrid is delighted with the way things have turned out. The business is thriving.’

‘It’s thriving thanks to Carys, not Incognito!’ said Aurélie.

‘I disagree. It can be both. Incognito raised our profile.’

The two of them glared at each other, then turned and gazed expectantly at Carys. She swiped away a tear, her mind stuck on that magical Christmas, and, although she tried to force it away, the memory persisted of Mat whispering, *I love you*. She’d felt so complete in that moment, as if she’d finally found her place in the world. As if she’d come home.

Little had she known.

‘I don’t want to think about it any longer,’ she said, and scraped her chair back. ‘He did what he did, but I need to forget about him and move on.’

Mat

‘What did you get?’ Alice asked, the moment she arrived in the office.

Mat looked up from his computer. He had given up fighting insomnia and come into work early. He’d made a start on a piece about plans for a temporary Ferris wheel in the city. Like a robot, he had been typing words, but his eyes kept skimming over them, unable to focus. He rubbed his face. ‘What?’

She arched an eyebrow. ‘At the Red Cat Café. Did they speak to you about the reopening? What’s the mood? Struggling through? Defiant?’

‘I – I don’t know.’ He looked down at his hands. His fingernails were bitten to the quick. ‘They wouldn’t speak to me.’

‘Really?’

He met her gaze briefly. ‘Sorry. I tried.’

She tucked her handbag under her desk. ‘Maybe I should drop in tonight and try myself.’

‘They don’t want to talk!’ She stared at him. He tried to temper his voice as he continued, ‘You know she’s deleted her account, don’t you – Madame Incognito?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘She apologised and she’s stopped reviewing. She’s gone.’ He swiped a hand through the air. ‘It’s over. Why are you still going on about that story?’

Her eyes flashed with anger. ‘I’m not “going on” about it. I’m just interested. Plenty of readers are. Incognito might have tried to disappear, but everyone’s still talking about her. She’s still Public Enemy Number One.’ She paused. ‘And I suppose I feel sorry for the café manager, too. I can imagine how hard it must have been for her when she’d put so much work into the place. Like my brother and my parents with their restaurant. It’s their

life, you know. Reviews like that are soul-destroying.'

Her words hooked at him. Mat cleared his throat. 'Yeah, well,' he said gruffly, 'I think we should let it go. The story's dead.'

She sniffed but said nothing. He went back to his work. As she took her seat next to him, he sensed her shooting him curious glances, but he didn't look up.

'You okay?' she asked eventually.

'Didn't sleep well,' he said. He hadn't slept at all. His apartment had been deathly silent, his thoughts the only noise.

'Oh, great.' She tutted. 'You have a bad night and I have to put up with your bad mood all day. Fantastic.'

He rolled his eyes. 'If you leave me alone, I'll stay very quiet, and possibly fall asleep later.'

'I hope that's a promise, Devine. I want the picture of your ugly face flat on that keyboard.'

He hoped Alice would forget about the Red Cat Café. Or let it go; but she must have had an alert on her internet search engine because around lunchtime she stopped typing.

She clicked on something and leaned into her screen, then glanced at him.

'What?' he asked.

'It – it says here that the manager of the Red Cat Café is called Carys Bell.'

A chill touched the back of his neck. He tried to sound casual as he asked, 'So?'

'Carys. Like your English girl. The one who rang the other day and you didn't want to speak to her.' Her sharp eyes studied him, watching his reaction.

He squirmed. 'I'm sure she's not the only woman in Paris by that name.' He kept his gaze on the computer screen and forced himself to keep typing but, in the silence that followed, he could feel her close scrutiny.

His cheeks heated. She knew, didn't she? Alice wasn't stupid.

Christian burst out of his office. 'Jean-Baptiste, Alice, where are your

damned pieces? I needed them an hour ago.'

Alice turned away, flustered. 'It's nearly ready. I just need to . . .'

Mat sank back in his chair, relieved.

But he knew it was only a matter of time until she worked it out.

The clues had been mounting up all along, and now it was becoming obvious: the Red Cat Café, the reviews, Madame Incognito. They were all pointing to him.

'Mat?'

Mat looked up. Christian was standing a few metres away, hands shoved deep in his pockets, one of them jangling keys. Frown lines slashed his brow, but Mat didn't think he'd ever seen his boss without them.

'A word in my office?' Christian's nod indicated that he should follow him.

Biting back a sigh, Mat got up. Here goes, he thought. Another rant about the quality of his work. He knew his article on the new signing at Paris Saint-Germain hadn't been his finest, but how was anyone supposed to muster enthusiasm for a footballer?

'Mat!' Christian barked.

His head jerked up. 'What?'

'I said close the door.' His boss swore under his breath and waited until the door clicked shut and the noise of the office became muted. Unusually, though, he didn't sit down.

Mat hesitated, unsure whether to take a seat himself or not. He opted to stand.

'Is it true that you're Incognito?'

The world around him shrank away. 'What?'

'You heard.'

He felt the air leave his body and his shoulders sank. 'How do you know?' he asked, his words a weak whisper.

A self-satisfied gleam filled Christian's eyes. 'That doesn't matter.'

The blood drained from Mat's face. He was about to be fired. His gaze slid back and he looked through the glass wall to where the others were working.

Jean-Baptiste was hunched over his computer, Pietro was leaning back, phone pressed to his ear, laughing. Only Alice was looking at him, but her gaze darted away and she went back to her computer, cheeks flushed at having been caught watching.

Christian picked up a pen and tapped it against his hand thoughtfully. ‘This is fantastic. What it could do for the paper ... I have to say, Devine, I didn’t think you had it in you.’

Mat blinked at his boss, mouth dry. He didn’t know whether to be offended or flattered.

Christian went on, ‘How about you write a weekly review for the paper?’

‘W-what?’ It was the last thing he’d expected.

‘You publish your reviews in the paper.’

He was flattered. Surprised. But panic bit at him. ‘Incognito’s gone. I – I deleted her. She doesn’t exist any more.’

‘Resurrect her, then.’

A million tiny ants were crawling over his skin. ‘I can’t. Look at the damage she’s done already. You’ve seen the backlash against her. And the Red Cat Café *closed* because of her – because of me. The manager was distraught.’

Christian waved this away with an impatient flick of the hand. ‘That was totally irrational. I mean, to close like that – it’s not a normal reaction. Maybe this chef was just over-sensitive.’

‘She’s not a chef, she’s a manager,’ he cut in fiercely, ‘and she’s not over-sensitive – just human. You’d be hurt too if your business had been slated. I’d say her behaviour was perfectly normal. What isn’t normal is people who think that copy is more important than anything else, that other people’s feelings count for nothing.’ All those articles he’d written and rewritten, all the words he’d produced hoping for the faintest praise from his boss. He pushed a hand through his hair, hating himself for having placed so much weight on the man’s approval. The editor at the broadsheet, too – why had Mat listened to them? He’d allowed himself to be led by others rather than sticking with his gut instinct, his own style. All because he’d hoped it would bring him success. ‘No. I’ve done enough damage. I’m not reviewing any

more.'

'You seem to think you have a choice, Devine,' Christian said quietly.

The room fell silent. He held Mat's gaze in challenge.

Mat swallowed. Defeat washed over him. How many times had they been through this dance? How many times had he caved in to Christian's bullying? He turned to go, his heart sinking at the prospect of yet another retreat. He'd slink back to his desk and write yet more words he didn't want to write. His stomach twisted at the thought of the cutting reviews and criticism he'd have to dream up.

But then he thought of Carys – and he stopped.

'I *do* have a choice,' he said unexpectedly.

Christian blinked.

Mat's hands felt clammy but he met his boss's gaze squarely. 'I quit.'

'What?' Christian's face reddened.

'I'm leaving.' He felt lighter saying the words. He glanced at his desk and a weight lifted from his shoulders even as alarm bells sounded. How would he live? How would he pay the bills? He hadn't thought this through. He'd lose the apartment, his only remaining link with his mother. But this was the right thing to do – no matter the cost.

He threw open the door and left Christian's office. He yanked open his drawer and raked through it, clearing out everything that belonged to him.

'What's going on?' Alice asked.

Mat barely glanced at her as he stuffed his keys and phone into his pockets. 'I quit.'

She stood up. 'What?'

'I quit working here. Should have done it years ago.'

'But – but why?'

He paused. Then said, 'Because I'm Incognito. There you are, Alice. There's your big scoop.' He felt a flash of guilt for lashing out, but she'd been like a hunter after this story and this was the intel she'd been after. Perhaps she'd even been the one to whisper in Christian's ear. 'I'm Incognito – and it's cost me everything.'

Carys

‘Don’t you think you should have listened to his explanation?’ asked Liberty.

Carys gripped her phone. ‘Why? What can he possibly say to make it right?’

It was freezing outside, but she didn’t let that stop her climbing out of her studio window. She zipped up her warm coat and tugged a woolly hat down over her ears. The sun was shrinking, and the faint sound of cars beeping filtered up from the street.

‘I don’t know. Maybe he was under real pressure. You said his boss was a bit of a beast.’

‘He didn’t do it for his boss. He did this in his own time. Anyway, would you do something like this, Lib? Ever – in any situation?’

‘Well . . .’

‘You know you wouldn’t. Even if your boss was pressuring you. You’d be better than that.’

‘At least he didn’t mean to hurt you,’ Liberty said carefully. ‘And it does sound as if he’s genuinely remorseful. It must have taken a lot of courage to confess. I mean, he could have kept it secret, couldn’t he?’

Carys pinched the bridge of her nose. It had been days now but the pain was still as intense. A long silence followed, and she pictured Damsfly Cottage in its peaceful woodland clearing. For a moment she felt the strongest ache to be back there. ‘You know what makes it all a hundred times worse, Lib?’

‘What?’

She sucked in air. ‘I loved him. I really loved him.’ It had been the real deal. Heart lifting when she saw him, last thought as she went to sleep, first

when she woke in the morning. Full-on swept-off-her-feet love.

‘I know, honey.’ Lib’s voice was gentle with concern.

Carys was silent. She’d run out of words. The hurt was so enormous, so hot, so deep she felt as if she was being swallowed by it.

‘Maybe you could see him again?’ Liberty suggested again. She added quickly, ‘Not for him – but for you. So you can get – I don’t know – closure.’

Carys shut her eyes. She couldn’t imagine she’d ever feel closure on this. It simply went too deep. ‘I can’t, Lib. I just have to face the fact that he’s not the person I thought he was.’

Mat

Mat waited for things to blow up. He expected his phone to ring relentlessly with abuse and death threats. He wondered if people might track down his address and camp outside holding placards, or slip into the building, clatter up the stairs and hammer on his door. But none of that happened.

He went home, the world carried on turning, and Paris went about its normal humdrum business. Alice didn't publish a scoop, and neither did Christian. Instead, Alice texted Mat to check he was okay. And the following week she called by his apartment after work. 'Can I come up?' she asked, through the intercom.

He glanced around. He hadn't left the place for days. 'You'll regret it.'

'Please, Mat. I need to see you're okay.'

Moments later he heard the lift creak to a halt outside and he let her in.

Her sharp eyes took in the dirty dishes, the clothes strewn about the place. He was unshaven, unwashed, and the place must have reeked. He opened a window and gestured for her to sit down.

'I've been worried about you,' she said. She perched on the edge of the sofa and moved a pair of boxers with two fingers so she could lean back.

'Don't be,' he said, but his voice sounded flat. He didn't have the energy to make it sound convincing.

'Are you eating?' she asked carefully.

'If I say no, what are you going to do – force-feed me?'

She glared at him, which made him smile. 'I was going to offer to go to the nearest café and buy you a meal, but if that's how it is . . .'

'I think it's best if I stay away from eating establishments for the time being, don't you?'

It was her turn to smile now. ‘Oh, yeah. There is that.’

‘Alice, did you tell Christian I was Incognito?’ He didn’t blame her if she had – this was only what he deserved – but he needed to know. He’d done nothing but go over and over it in his mind for the last few days.

‘No! No, I didn’t. I mean, I suspected – but even if I’d been sure I would never have gone behind your back, Mat. You must believe me.’

He nodded. ‘I do.’

‘Pietro and Jean-Baptiste don’t know. Christian hasn’t said a word. I’m surprised, actually. Didn’t think he had any morals, but perhaps he feels a duty to protect your identity.’

‘So how did he find out?’

‘I don’t know. I could ask him?’

‘Unless it was the broadsheet editor. He knew my first name, my phone number, and that I was working for a local paper. He could easily have pieced together the rest.’

‘A broadsheet editor?’

‘Yeah. He was interested in Incognito. He promised me a column, but it had all kinds of conditions attached – more followers, more one-star reviews and so on.’ Mat hadn’t heard from him since before Christmas. He knew he’d scuppered any chance by taking a week off to be with Carys, but he had no regrets about that, at least. She had been his priority.

Alice’s eyes widened. ‘Mat, that’s amazing. You need to tell me everything.’

‘So you didn’t know you were writing about Carys’s café?’ Alice asked, when he’d finished.

Mat shook his head.

‘And now she won’t speak to you?’

‘I can’t blame her.’ He stared at the dragon-tree plant by the window. The leaves had curled up, the parched soil shrunk away from the edges of the pot.

‘You love her, don’t you?’

He felt as if he was being strangled. He cleared his throat but couldn’t speak. It didn’t matter what he felt. Carys had been hurt. *He’d* hurt her.

‘Oh, Mat,’ Alice said, and the pity in her voice made him want to curl up like a dead insect.

He avoided her gaze.

‘So what have you been doing the last few days?’

‘Thinking. A lot of thinking.’

Silence swelled, filling the room. He knew Alice meant well, but he wished she hadn’t come. Nothing she said could change anything.

‘If no one else knows you’re Incognito, do you think Carys told Christian?’

He considered this. ‘I guess she must have.’

A dirty grey cloud filled the sky. It looked big and heavy, yet it glided smoothly past.

Alice’s phone pinged and she checked it, then dropped it back into her bag.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘it was kind of you to drop by but you don’t have to stay.’ Grateful as he was for her unexpected kindness, his pride couldn’t take this. He couldn’t bear for her to see him in this state.

She nodded, and got up. They walked to the door in silence.

When they reached it, she turned to him. ‘You know, it’s not good to be holed up in here by yourself. You need to get out.’

‘And do what?’ He gave a humourless laugh. ‘I lost my job, remember?’

‘Are you looking for another?’

‘Not yet.’ He rubbed his feet together. ‘I need to work out what I can do.’

‘I’m worried about you. I hate to see you like this.’

‘I’m fine. Really.’

‘Okay, but I’ll be back to check on you.’

‘Please don’t,’ he said, with a smile, touched that she cared.

She smiled too. ‘I will. And I hope you’ll have had a wash. You have still got running water, haven’t you?’

He laughed. ‘Yeah. They haven’t cut it off yet.’

Her smile vanished. ‘Seriously, though. Are you okay – in terms of money?’

‘Yeah, well, for the first time in my life I’m actually glad to have a rich,

successful father.’ He added wryly, ‘I haven’t told him yet, though.’ He was dreading having to break the news.

‘Would it be easier if I lent you some?’

‘No,’ he said quickly. She was often strapped for cash. ‘If I ask him for a loan I’m sure he’ll help.’ He had no intention of asking, though.

‘When are you going to see Carys?’

He spluttered a laugh. ‘She doesn’t want to see me. She made that very clear.’

‘She was angry. But she’ll come round.’

He shook his head. ‘It’s over. And it’s everything I deserve.’

‘Oh, come on, Devine. Don’t be so defeatist. You need to speak to her again. Explain. We all make mistakes. You love her, don’t you?’

‘I do.’ He loved her very much. ‘And that’s why I won’t speak to her. She’s better off without me.’

Mat tugged the comb through his freshly washed hair with the strangest sensation that the man in the mirror was a total stranger. He couldn’t remember who he’d been before all this. Where was the fresh-faced, clean-shaven man who used to rush off to work each morning? This recent dark-eyed version had no energy, no confidence. He struggled to drag himself to the corner shop and avoided making eye contact with anyone.

But as he’d stood in the shower lathering and scrubbing, he kept thinking about what Alice had told him. *You need to get out.* It was the last thing he felt like doing, but he couldn’t hide up here indefinitely. He had to find the courage to face the world again.

So he’d had an idea.

Mat looked at the stone steps leading up to the entrance. Michel had given him the address, and the sign confirmed it was the right place, but it was an inconspicuous building. It could easily have been mistaken for just another office building.

The weight of self-doubt pressed down on him and he glanced back

towards the Métro station. What was he doing there? He had nothing to offer. The temptation to turn on his heel was strong. But his gaze settled on a poster by the door that read 'Volunteers needed'.

He didn't have nothing: he could offer his time.

Drawing his shoulders back, he made himself put one foot in front of the other and climb the steps.

'This is much more than a soup kitchen,' said the manager. 'We provide shelter and clothes for the homeless, as well as guidance and counselling for those who want it. Our aim is to help our clients to regain their independence in whatever way we can.'

Mat looked around. Some clients resembled Michel, shabbily dressed with dark, weathered skin from living outside, but others were not so easy to categorise: they could have been volunteers. And until that morning, he hadn't looked so great himself. He felt no judgement. In fact, he felt grateful they'd welcomed him here. Alice was right. He needed to get out and do something – anything. To keep himself busy.

'We need people to help serve food, but if you have other skills, they might be useful too. For example, giving career advice, legal advice, helping our clients fill in forms or just being there to chat. We have counsellors, but sometimes it's enough to sit down with someone and listen.'

'I can do the listening part, and helping fill in forms,' he said. How could he, of all people, give career advice? The thought made him want to laugh.

'Great. Well, leave us your details, we'll do a few checks, and then we'll be in touch.'

'Mat!'

Mat paused from eating his soup. 'Michel. Hello. How are you?'

He'd been working at the shelter for two weeks now and found that the best way to get chatting to the clients was to blend in. He ate with them, took his breaks with them, and they struck up conversation. Sometimes it led to him helping complete an application form or some such. At others it led to

nothing more than passing the time of day, but that was okay. In any case, the soup was surprisingly good. Today's was minestrone.

Michel sat down beside him and unbuttoned his coat. 'Never mind me. I thought you wanted to visit this place for a story. Thought you'd take one look at the place and run. Didn't expect to find you here two weeks later.'

'I'm working here,' he said, gesturing to the white T-shirt that marked him out as a volunteer. 'Just on my lunchbreak.'

'You must be enjoying it?' Michel's brown eyes were bright with curiosity.

'I am. Very much.'

The other man studied him, then said carefully, 'You look different.'

Mat touched his bearded cheeks and grinned sheepishly. 'I need a haircut. This is true.'

'You're not working at the newspaper any more?'

'No.'

Michel let a long silence elapse before he asked quietly, 'What happened?'

Mat stroked his spoon through the soup, as he toyed with the idea of laughing off the question or saying something about wanting to give back to society. But he settled for honesty instead. 'I messed up.'

'Ah.' Michel held his gaze. His expression was warm with understanding and kindness. 'What are you going to do instead?'

'That's the million-dollar question. I don't know.'

'Want a tip from me?' Michel glanced around. 'You're on the right track coming here. Helping others is the key to happiness.'

'You think so?' Mat couldn't help thinking of his dad, swanning around in Asia, expensive cars landing on his drive week in week out, careless about what he spent because his bulging bank account could absorb any cost. He lived selfishly, but he was happy.

'You're sceptical? I don't blame you. I mean, I don't look like a man who's found the secret of the universe. But it's true, you know? Helping others is the secret.'

'Why?' Mat asked.

'You tell me. How do you feel when you go home from here?'

‘Er . . .’ Mat put down his spoon, thrown by that ‘. . . satisfied, I suppose.’
Less small. Less worthless.

Michel nodded encouragingly.

Mat realised he was waiting for him to go on. ‘And a sense that I’ve made a small difference.’ He hadn’t felt that when he’d worked at the paper. He looked around the room, taking in the clients, the friendly staff at the counter and in the kitchen. ‘This place is peaceful, too. There are no impossible expectations. I never feel I’ve let anyone down. I’m . . . enough. And when I can help, when I get a thank-you or a friendly smile, it makes me glow. I carry it home with me. I feel . . . less alone.’ He was surprised by the words that were coming out of his mouth, surprised by their truth.

‘Must have been bad,’ Michel said quietly.

‘What?’

Grave brown eyes held his gaze. ‘What happened to you.’

The understanding in the other man’s words triggered a sudden wash of emotion. He wanted to say it was what he’d done, not what had happened to him, but the words stuck in his throat. ‘Sorry,’ Mat mumbled, and lowered his head. Tears fell into his empty soup bowl. Horrified, he couldn’t do anything to stop them. His shoulders shook.

A large hand patted him on the back. Michel didn’t say anything, and Mat was grateful. Any more kindness and he’d be lost.

Carys

It was a bright January morning and Carys was drying glasses behind the counter while simultaneously checking everything was as it should be: the customers seemed content, Léo was clearing tables, the cake counter was filled with ice-blue *macarons*, cloud-like coconut cake, and lemon sponge roulades frosted with sugar that glittered in the sunshine, like an early-morning frost.

The door opened and a young woman came in. She spotted Carys behind the counter, and marched straight towards her.

‘Take a seat wherever you like. I’ll come and get your order.’ Carys smiled. She guessed the woman was a tourist. They sometimes came to the counter, unsure how the system worked. The locals, on the other hand, seated themselves, then looked around expectantly, like royalty waiting to be served.

But the woman remained there, unsmiling. She fixed Carys with her blue gaze. ‘You’re the manager?’ she asked. ‘Carys?’

Carys put the glass down. The skin on the back of her neck prickled. ‘Are you from the press?’

The woman shook her head. ‘That’s not why I’m here.’

Then what did she want? Carys waited for her to explain. Something about the woman was familiar, but she couldn’t pinpoint what it was. She looked more closely. Shoulder-length dark-blond hair, blue eyes, creamy pale skin. Nothing about her appearance rang any bells. For some reason, Carys thought of Mat – but immediately dismissed the thought, irritated that he’d even entered her head.

The woman pressed her lips together, as if she wasn’t sure quite what to say. Finally, she said, ‘I know Mat.’

Carys’s heart thudded.

The woman went on, 'I worked with him.'

It came back to her then why she recognised the woman – it was her voice. She'd taken Carys's call when she had phoned his office.

'He regrets what he did,' the woman said. 'What he wrote about your café.'

Carys's chin went up. 'I know.'

'And he really misses you.'

'Does he?' Her words sounded abrasive, but inside her heart curled up on itself. She missed him so much.

Léo returned from outside, his notebook in hand with a scribbled order. He was smiling, but when he saw Carys's expression the smile faded. He paused as he went past. 'Everything okay?' he mouthed.

Carys nodded, and he continued to the kitchen, glancing back over his shoulder, clearly concerned. Aware of the tension in her shoulders, Carys took a deep breath and returned her attention to the woman. 'What he did was unforgivable.'

'It was bad,' the blonde woman agreed. 'But he's suffered for it.'

Carys reached for the cloth and absently wiped a stray pastry crumb into the palm of her hand. Tipped it into the bin. Her teeth clenched as she thought of the venomous words he'd written and how her heart had cracked reading them. How he'd posted not just one review, but three, how she'd come to work each day feeling watched. Hunted. All the tension seeped back. 'Did he send you?'

'No. He doesn't know I'm here. I won't tell him. He'd be angry I'd interfered. He's very . . .' she searched for the word ' . . . protective of you.'

Carys gave a bitter laugh. 'Oh, really?'

The woman went on, 'It was hard for you, but you know public opinion turned against him? He had a lot of abuse online and . . .' Biting her lip, the woman glanced away, as if debating whether to reveal more.

Carys began to grow impatient. If this woman had come here to plead for forgiveness on Mat's behalf, she'd wasted her time.

The woman met her gaze square on. 'You know he quit his job because of it all?'

She couldn't hide her shock. 'Quit his job?'

'He deleted Incognito's account and tried to bury her, but someone called the paper and told our boss who he was. An anonymous woman.'

'You think it was me?' She was astounded, but she could also see why she'd be the prime suspect.

'Who else could it have been? No one else knows.'

'It wasn't me,' Carys said. She picked up a pile of paper napkins and straightened them. This news had thrown her. 'So your boss sacked him?'

'No. He wanted Mat to write reviews for the paper, but Mat refused and quit.'

'A bit late to have principles. He shouldn't have written those reviews in the first place.'

The other woman said gently, 'We all make mistakes, Carys. I'm sure you've made some too.'

Her words made Carys feel uncomfortable. 'What will he do now – for work?' She remembered he'd said jobs in his field were few and far between.

'He hasn't found anything. You know he wrote the reviews because he thought it would lead to a job with a national newspaper?'

Carys didn't reply. He had tried to tell her, but she hadn't been ready to listen.

The blonde woman went on: 'The editor there was encouraging him, pushing him to make the reviews meaner and post them more frequently. Mat couldn't keep up, so he started reviewing places he'd been to already. It got out of hand, but he didn't intend it to be malicious. A lot of the places he reviewed did really well out of the publicity. Mat didn't mean to hurt you. He was just desperately unhappy in his job and hoped this was his ticket out of there.'

Carys tried to harden her heart against what she was hearing, but she remembered how desperate he'd been to get out. She could still see his blue eyes clouded with grey when he'd talked about his work, and she felt a wrench. She didn't want to understand or sympathise. She wanted to stay angry.

'Who are you?' she asked the woman.

The woman seemed surprised by the question. ‘Alice,’ she said, stripes of colour blooming in her cheeks. ‘I’m a friend.’

‘Why did you come here? What do you want?’

‘I wanted you to know what’s happened, that’s all. And why he did it.’ She shrugged. ‘It might help you both if you talked.’

‘I really don’t think that—’

‘He volunteers at the soup kitchen in Montparnasse. He’s there every weekend. I hope you’ll think about it, Carys. Let him explain.’

Alice left.

Carys tried to put the woman out of her mind and went back to work.

Yet long after she’d gone, Carys still felt rattled by her visit. *You know public opinion turned against him?* It had felt like vindication when people had come out in support of the café, and she’d felt a little uncomfortable for Incognito but hadn’t let herself dwell on it. Now she did a quick internet search to see exactly what had been written about the reviewer and her eyes widened. *Deserves to be taught a lesson . . . Too cowardly to reveal her identity . . . How would she like it if . . .* The back of her neck prickled. That was only scratching the surface. There was far worse, and she wondered what vitriol had been sent privately.

Guilt tugged at her, like an insistent child. He had quit his job, too.

Who had called his boss and outed him? Alice had clearly come here believing it was Carys. *Who else could it have been? No one else knows.*

A sickly hot feeling made her head spin. *We all make mistakes, Carys.* He’d lost his job – whereas the café was thriving. The tables had turned. People could be vicious, especially online. Social media was a monster.

It was not her problem, she told herself. It was nothing to do with her. She tried to put it out of her mind, to focus on the café and her customers.

But it was hard. Forgetting Mat was proving to be one of the hardest things she’d ever done.

‘Mat

Mat?’

Mat’s eyes narrowed as he recognised the voice on the phone. It was the editor from the newspaper. Again.

Mat had found half a dozen missed calls from him after his shift at the soup kitchen, but he hadn’t bothered to return them. What was the point? He probably wanted more reviews, but Mat wouldn’t do it. Then, as he’d been walking home, his phone had rung again. The editor was nothing if persistent.

‘Mat, I’m glad I’ve finally got hold of you. Sorry it’s been a while. I had to get something past the bosses before I called you.’

Mat gave a polite noncommittal reply and wondered what this was about.

‘Mat, I’d like to offer you a job.’

‘What?’ He stopped in the street. Someone bumped into him and tutted, but people soon began to stream around him, like water round a rock.

The editor repeated the offer. Mat was amazed. After all that had happened, it didn’t make sense. It was what he’d dreamed of.

The editor went on, ‘I like how you provoked such a divisive reaction. I think you have huge potential.’

‘The thing is, though, I deleted the Incognito account. There was a backlash against her. It was bad.’

‘Yes, I saw.’ Of course he had. Everyone had. ‘That’s fine. What I’m offering is a permanent job. Good salary, pension – get the picture?’

‘Em, yes.’ Mat blinked. ‘The thing is, I don’t want to write reviews any more. They did a lot of damage. I don’t want to earn a living from criticising other people’s work.’

The pause that followed seemed interminable. Finally the editor replied, ‘Thanks for being honest, Mathieu, but you’re a talented journalist and I’d

like to have you on our team. Why don't you come into the office and we'll see if there's another column you might be interested in?'

'Really?'

'Yes. Tell you what, take a few days to think about it, then give me a call.'

That evening Mat knocked on the door of Madame Parot's apartment.

There was a long wait, but finally she opened it and peered up at him. 'Mathieu. Ah, it's so good to see you. Come in, come in. Sit down.'

She looked delicate and pale, but his heart kicked with delight. 'It's good to see you, Rosette. Are you glad to be home?'

'Glad isn't the word. Hospital was unpleasant, but the nursing home where they sent me to recuperate was even worse. I told them I wouldn't eat their terrible food a moment longer. Believe me when I tell you it was bad.'

'I believe you. Here. I bought us both some quiche from the bakery.'

Her eyes lit up, and she patted his cheek as if he was three years old. 'Thank you. Now, tell me why you're not at work and why you look so terrible.'

He laughed at her bluntness. 'I quit my job.'

'Because of your terrible boss?'

'No. Well, partly. But mostly because I wrote something bad. I upset a lot of people – one person in particular. I . . . regret it now.' He dipped his head. Words didn't convey – and never would – how deep his regret ran. Like a coal mine, it tunnelled hundreds of metres down into the ground, and would always lurk there, the foundation of his life from now on.

'So?' She waved a bony hand through the air. 'You're not the first.'

He managed a weak laugh. 'No. But what I did was really bad.'

'I don't believe you. You have a heart of gold.'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I'm afraid you're wrong, Rosette.' He briefly considered explaining the whole story to her, but how did he begin to explain social media to a ninety-three-year-old who hadn't got to grips with email? And what was the point in raking over the past anyway? He had to move on and rebuild his life. 'Only a really bad person would have done what I did.'

‘Have you apologised?’ she asked, pinning him down with her beady eyes.

‘Yes, but—’

‘Well, then.’

He remembered Carys’s shock, her hurt. Then the rage that had twisted her features. ‘It’s not as simple as that.’

‘Why not? We all make mistakes. What’s important is that we admit we’ve done wrong, ask for forgiveness, and move on.’ She added, ‘And learn from it. That’s important too.’

‘She won’t forgive me. I don’t expect her to.’

Understanding seemed to dawn – he saw it in her eyes. ‘Carys?’

‘How did you guess?’

‘Because you look terrible. It had to be heartbreak. Couldn’t be anything else.’

‘I don’t look that bad, surely? Come on. Beards are the fashion, you know?’ He threw her a lopsided grin.

She tutted. ‘I’m surprised at her. I liked that girl.’

His smile faded. ‘You don’t know what I wrote.’

Sharp eyes studied him closely. Then she asked, ‘Have you been to see her?’

‘I tried. It didn’t go well.’

She considered this. Then, ‘Maybe you should see her again.’

‘I hurt her enough already. She’s better off without me.’

‘What nonsense. Well, if you won’t listen to me perhaps you’ll eat with me. You look thin. How about we heat up this quiche and eat together?’

‘But it’s for you,’ he protested.

‘Pff! You know I can’t eat all that by myself. And perhaps you can run down to the shops and get me some salad and a few other groceries, too.’

He grinned. ‘Of course. Tell me what you need.’

Carys

The February wind was biting. Silvery clouds whistled past overhead as Carys weaved through the flea market. It was Léo's birthday this week and she'd come here hoping to find inspiration for a gift, perhaps something music-related, but as she passed the vinyl record stalls she was reminded of Mat. She hurried on.

In the café, Madame Incognito had long been forgotten and Carys's life was back to the happy routine of tasting Emile's latest mouth-watering *pâtisseries*, serving a stream of customers, and keeping on top of the paperwork and accounts. But Sundays – like today – were not so good. That was when the loneliness hit hard.

It had been the day she spent with Mat, but over time she'd gradually filled it with other stuff. She attended a t'ai chi class in the square outside her apartment block, followed by sightseeing and sometimes hanging out with other young people in the neighbouring studios. She'd finally met the saxophonist, who turned out to be the gorgeous tall guy she'd passed on the stairs. He was a medical student. But he didn't rouse a spark in her. Not the kind she'd felt for Mat. Ironically, she'd completed her list of things to do and see in Paris, yet she hadn't derived much satisfaction from it. The most exciting places and experiences could be dull by yourself, yet a mundane day in the park could be thrilling in the company of the right person.

Her mind spun back to when she'd made the decision to leave Willowbrook, how stifled she'd felt. In her interview with Mark and Ingrid she would have done anything to get the job. She'd lied about her experience because she was so desperate to come to Paris.

And she'd been lucky. Managing the café had worked out okay for her – but it could easily have gone the other way, couldn't it? She thought of Mat,

and what Alice had told her. He'd been desperate, too – to get out of a bad work situation and further his dreams. Perhaps what he'd done hadn't been so different from her interview: they'd both exaggerated, been careless with the truth. Something innocent had unintentionally got out of control.

No, it wasn't the same. She hadn't been vindictive, hadn't hurt anyone.

But she *could* have hurt Mark and Ingrid. She could have damaged their business, cost them money. Emile, Léo and Aurélie could have lost their jobs. And her lies had caught up with her because guilt and insecurity had made her more sensitive to criticism. She saw that now. Having been carried away from the truth herself, who was she to condemn Mat?

She wondered what he was doing now.

Sighing, she pulled her hat down against the cold. No matter how hard she tried to put it behind her, he continued to haunt her thoughts. And however much she thought about it, she simply couldn't untangle black from white in this whole story. Maybe there was no black or white. Maybe right and wrong were never so clear cut.

But love was, wasn't it? You either had feelings for someone or you didn't. And, listening to her heart, she did. Still.

Aurélie came in from outside with a cup in her hand, grimacing. 'Too cold, not strong enough. Some people are never happy,' she muttered, as she tipped it down the sink. She plucked a fresh cup from the shelf and prepared another coffee.

Carys glanced at the customer, then at Aurélie. 'Slow down, Aurélie. Give him a double shot and take care over it. We don't want a bad review,' she joked bitterly.

'Ha! Let him try. It didn't end well for Incognito, did it?'

'Aurélie!'

The girl shrugged. 'Well, it didn't. He lost his job.'

Carys stilled. The coffee machine finished, and Aurélie took the drink to the customer. When she came back, Carys asked, 'What makes you think he lost his job?'

She was certain Aurélie hadn't been in on the day Alice had come into the

café, and Carys had never spoken about it to her.

Aurélie's gaze slid away fast. She shuffled her feet and ribbons of guilty pink touched her cheeks. 'Well, he doesn't write for them any more, does he?'

Who else could it have been? No one else knows. 'He didn't lose his job. He quit because someone outed him.'

'Same thing.'

'His boss at the newspaper received a call from an anonymous woman.'

Aurélie picked up a pile of jumbled forks and began to put them away one at a time, prongs all facing up. 'Did he?'

He. She knew his boss had been a 'he'. Carys stepped in front of her. 'Aurélie. Was it you?'

She hesitated, then looked up. Her grey eyes sparked like Raoul's. 'Yes, it was me. He deserved it after what he did to you,' she said savagely. 'He broke your heart, the bastard.'

The soup kitchen wasn't difficult to find. Inside, however, Carys stared at the dozens of faces, bewildered. People sat cradling hot drinks, huddled in small groups chatting. Volunteers collected empty cups and loaded them onto tall trolleys, wheeling them away. The noise level was high, punctuated by the clatter of metal from the kitchen. She clutched the large white box in her hands.

Spotting the serving hatch in the far corner, she slowly made her way through the busy room towards it. The volunteers wore white T-shirts, and some were handing out hot drinks while others worked in the kitchen behind. She scoured their faces.

'Can I help you?'

She whipped round, startled. A man in a white T-shirt smiled at her. He stood beside a trolley loaded with trays of used crockery. 'You look a little lost.'

'I brought these.' She held out the box of gingerbread biscuits. Emile had baked them that morning and their scent had filled the café, delicious and warming on a cold February day. 'A donation.'

His smile was gentle, his expression warm with kindness. ‘Thank you. That’s very kind. Our clients will appreciate it.’ He took the box and placed it on top of the trolley. But, when she didn’t move to leave, he peered at her curiously.

‘I’m also – ah – looking for someone,’ she said. ‘Mat Devine. He’s a volunteer here.’

‘Yes, I know him. I’ll find him for you.’

She watched as he headed towards the kitchen, pushing the trolley.

People jostled past her. She stepped back, conscious that she was in the way, but didn’t dare move too far for fear that the man wouldn’t find her when he returned. Volunteers hurried in and out of the kitchen, and she kept an eye on the swing doors in case Mat emerged from them. She wasn’t even sure what to say to him.

Someone caught her elbow as they passed. ‘*Pardon—*’

His voice. He turned, hand outstretched in apology – and stopped when he recognised her. He froze. ‘Carys?’

The noise around her was suddenly sucked away. Her skin prickled with goose bumps at the sight of him. Those blue eyes. But he’d grown a beard and there were shadows under his eyes. A confusing jumble of sympathy and hurt jostled inside her.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

The concern in his expression transported her straight back in time to when she was lying in bed in his apartment. She’d bared her soul about the accident, and he’d been so understanding. He’d promised it wouldn’t change anything. He wouldn’t fuss or treat her with kid gloves. Oh, the irony. ‘I – I’m fine. I just – wanted to talk to you.’

He glanced around. ‘I have to finish my shift. Can you wait twenty minutes?’

She nodded. He pointed to a quiet table. ‘Why don’t you sit down? I’ll be there soon. Or you could wait outside, if you prefer.’

‘Here is fine.’

He went behind the serving station and joined the other volunteers pouring hot drinks. She watched him work. Lots of people knew him. They said hello

as they passed him or made jokes, and he laughed along. One glanced at her and said something that made Mat blush.

Carys had forgotten how self-effacing he could be, how modest. But always kind. A good listener.

Her brow furrowed. Yet he'd written those words.

'Sorry about that,' Mat said, when his shift was over. 'Er – where do you want to go? Shall we walk somewhere?'

'Is there a park round here?'

It was a place she'd never been to before, *un square*, as the French called them, a small recreation park with black metal railings all around. This one was fringed with trees and bushes, and at one end there was a children's play area, but the main part was sandy gravel, perfect for playing *boules* or kicking a football. She and Mat found a bench and sat down.

In the past they used to fall into easy chatter and laughter, but today they sat in stiff silence.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' Mat said eventually. 'How did you know where to find me?'

She glanced at him, surprised he didn't know. Alice had said she wouldn't tell him, but so much time had gone by since then that Carys had assumed it would have slipped out. 'Your colleague,' she said. 'She came to see me a few weeks ago.'

'Alice?'

'Yes. She – she told me you left your job.'

A frown pulled at his forehead.

'I think she thought I might be responsible for telling your boss you were Madame Incognito. But I wasn't.'

Their eyes met and held for the first time. 'I believe you.'

She rubbed her scar. It wasn't easy, but she had to come clean. A beat passed before she added slowly, 'But I think I know who was. And that's why I came . . . to apologise.'

He raised an eyebrow, querying. An ambulance siren sounded, reminding them they were still in the city despite the greenery that surrounded them.

Carys flinched, steeling herself for a flashback – but it didn't come.

She went on, 'One of my staff was very angry. I didn't know she'd done it, though, until yesterday.' She bit her lip. 'I'm sorry. I don't suppose there's anything I can do to make amends?'

'No.' He gave a gentle laugh. 'But thank you.'

A couple of young children ran past, coats and scarves streaming behind them. Their squeals and laughter were like fairy lights. Bright. Joyous.

Mat added, 'I'm well shot of that job. It was a toxic place to work.'

She drew a breath. 'Alice said you wrote the reviews because you'd been promised a job with a broadsheet. Is that right?'

He held her gaze. 'Yes.'

She could imagine it now, how he'd chased the glimmer of success that the reviews had given him. They'd been so popular, and the promise of a job with a national newspaper must have been irresistible. Yes, she could see how it had happened. It wasn't the same as being ready to forgive, but she understood more clearly. 'I wish you'd told me.'

'So do I,' he said heavily, and when he glanced at her his eyes were grey with regret. He seemed to have aged ten years.

'But the job they promised you never materialised?'

'Actually, it did. But I turned it down.'

She stared at him. 'Why? It was your dream job.'

'It was. But I couldn't do it. I don't want to be in that position again – where I have to write what other people tell me to write. What happened with you made me rethink everything.'

'So what will you do? Apart from volunteering at the soup kitchen, I mean.'

'I'm retraining as a teacher. I'll be teaching French and English. It involves a lot of literature, which I like.'

'And you'll get to help people.' She grinned. 'You'll be a great teacher.'

'I'll do my best. I've been helping in a college and it's going really well. I'm finding it rewarding in ways I hadn't expected.' His lips curved and his eyes creased.

Her heart soared for him. 'Tell me.'

He tipped his head to one side. ‘Helping the students. It’s not about me or my achievements. It’s about them and their progress, their development. Tiny things, like the look on the face of a teenager who needed a word of praise. When they suddenly understand a beautiful book or perform well in an exam it’s the best feeling. I love it.’

Carys smiled. ‘I get it.’ This was how it had been between them, this understanding, the connection, the sharing of values. ‘Those things can make a real difference. I’m so glad it’s going well. You look happy. Much happier than when you worked at the paper.’

‘I am. And it frees me up to spend more time writing music.’ He chuckled softly. ‘It turns out the small things in life make me happier than chasing “success”, whatever that is.’

‘You’re still writing songs?’

He nodded, and she was thrilled. ‘I’ve written thirty or so.’

‘That’s two albums!’

Hot colour filled his cheeks. ‘Doesn’t mean they’re any good. But it’s a start. And I’m enjoying it. The creative outlet – it’s something else. I recorded a few, too. Made friends with a couple of teachers in the music department at school who sing and play the drums, so we had a go. It was fun.’

‘Did you upload them online?’

‘Yeah. And no one’s trolled us yet. That’s good enough for me.’

‘I’d love to hear them.’

He hesitated. ‘I can send you the link, if you like?’

She held his gaze. ‘I’d like that very much.’

A couple of pigeons fluttered down from the trees and began to peck at the ground in front of them.

‘Carys,’ he said carefully, ‘I apologised before, but I want you to know that I meant it. I’ll always regret what I did and I’ve vowed to listen to my gut in future. I’ll never do anything again that feels wrong, no matter what.’

She reached for his hand. His skin was soft and warm. ‘We all make mistakes.’

‘But not usually such big ones, monumental ones . . .’

She felt the sharpest pang.

He went on, 'And not mistakes that cost you the love of your life.'

She stared at him.

He murmured to the heavens, 'What the hell? I have nothing to lose – not even my pride.' He placed his free hand over hers. 'Carys, I only ever spoke the truth. I love you.' His voice sounded raw. 'That week over Christmas – I'll carry the memory of it in my heart always. It was . . . perfect. You were perfect. I never deserved you.'

She dropped her gaze, trying to shift the lump of emotion lodged in her chest. She'd come here to apologise, braced to protect her heart with the armour she'd built up during the last few weeks. Yet now her resolutions peeled away like flakes of dried paint. 'I – I reckon we could start again,' she said quietly.

It felt right. It wasn't what she'd planned, but instinct led her. 'From the beginning. We could try being friends and take it from there.'

Joy bubbled in his eyes, though she could see he tried to temper it. 'You'd do that?'

A whole explosion of emotions rushed at her. She slanted him a mischievous smile. 'I would. I like you too, Devine. Incognito, not so much. But Mat? I like him a lot.'

Epilogue

Ten months later
Carys

It was 24 December, the night when the French celebrated Christmas, and as the sun set over the city the Red Cat Café sparkled magically. Carys had strung fairy lights everywhere, and candles flickered as darkness made the street outside recede.

She had dithered over whether to go home to Willowbrook for the holidays or stay here. In the end she'd decided to open the café and hold open house for any customers who wanted to spend Christmas there. As she waited for her guests to arrive, she glanced around the place, checking everything was ready. She'd pushed the tables together to form a large square draped with a silver cloth. Candles and greenery decorated the centre, and at each place was a small gift. The smell of roasting drifted through from the kitchen, and a knock at the door sent her scurrying to open it.

'Mat,' she greeted him. 'Or should I say Santa? The rosy cheeks really suit you.'

He'd been helping at the soup kitchen and was still wearing his costume. 'Joyeux Noël,' he said, and smiled.

He reached to kiss her, and as their lips touched she couldn't help but smile at the shiver of pleasure that darted through her. He took off his coat and scarf and rolled up his sleeves. 'Tell me what I can do. I'm at your service, Chef.'

Carys threw him a cheeky grin and drew him back towards her. 'I like the sound of that—'

But they were interrupted by another knock at the door. 'Behave, you

two.’ Aurélie rolled her eyes. ‘There are children around.’ Her hands rested protectively on the heads of two red-haired boys.

‘Adam! Maxence! Come in,’ Carys said. ‘I’ve prepared a little game for you. Do you like treasure hunts?’

An hour later, everyone was seated around the table with glasses of fizzy wine. The food was almost ready to serve. Carys had cooked a traditional English turkey so her staff could have the night off, but they’d all insisted on bringing food – a smoked-salmon starter, side dishes and, in Emile’s case, a chocolate log. And they’d come with their families, partners and children: Léo with his boyfriend, Grégoire, and Alice with her new boyfriend Victor, a research scientist she’d met when she’d interviewed him for an article on pollution levels. Some of the regular customers had come too: Madame Jalibert was holding court at the head of the table, and Gérard had brought his godson. Carys had seen his violin case in the corner, and there would undoubtedly be music later. Madame Parot had needed more persuasion to accept her invitation, but Mat had talked her round, and Carys was glad to see that she and Madame Jalibert were happily chatting away, reminiscing about Paris in the seventies from what she could hear.

Carys leaned in to Mat. ‘I’ll just check on the food. It should be ready any time now.’

‘I’ll help,’ he said.

The low growl of an engine outside made them turn. Beneath the streetlight she saw a large motorbike pull up. Its headlamp dimmed as the engine was cut. She did a double-take when she saw the two riders dismount and head towards the café door. They knocked.

The room hushed a little and heads turned to see.

‘Are you expecting anyone else?’ asked Emile, who was sitting nearest the door.

‘No one,’ said Carys. Oh dear, she should have known they might get strangers knocking. It was a café, after all. But that was all right. No one should be alone at Christmas.

Emile went over to the door.

‘*Joyeux Noël!*’ the pair cried, as they stepped inside.

Liberty's long red hair dazzled in the coloured fairy lights, and Alex winked at Carys. 'Surprise!'

She gasped, delighted. Excitement fizzed up in her as she pushed her chair back and opened her arms to greet them. 'What are you doing here? You said you were spending Christmas in Provence with Alex's family.'

They exchanged a glance. 'We were going to, but Liberty wanted to see you too,' Alex said. 'So we decided to stop here on the way, and tomorrow we'll travel on to see them.'

'It was my idea to surprise you,' Liberty said. 'I hope you don't mind. But you sounded so busy I didn't want to add to your stress. We'll stay at the hotel, but we thought we'd pop in before you eat and say hello.'

'What? You are not popping in! You must stay. We have tons of food and wine and, oh, it's just wonderful to see you. Grab a chair.' She turned to the others. 'Everyone, move up, please. Make room for two more. I want you to meet Alex and Liberty. Lib is—' Emotion overwhelmed her. The room fell silent. Carys squeezed her hand and went on, 'She's like a sister to me. And having her here tonight has made my Christmas just . . . perfect.'

It was well after eleven, but the café was still buzzing. The little ones had been tucked up on the sofa in the office to watch a movie, and the adults were taking their time to finish the meal. Mat had explained to Carys that it was fine to leave long gaps between courses so a special dinner could stretch on in this way, and some of their guests were planning to go to church later.

Liberty leaned in to Carys. 'You left Willowbrook and came all the way to the big city,' she said, 'but do you realise you've created your own little community here?'

Carys followed her gaze as it swept around the room, taking in the faces that had become so familiar now. 'I suppose I have. We're all friends here.'

Liberty examined her, smiling. 'You look so different,' she said affectionately.

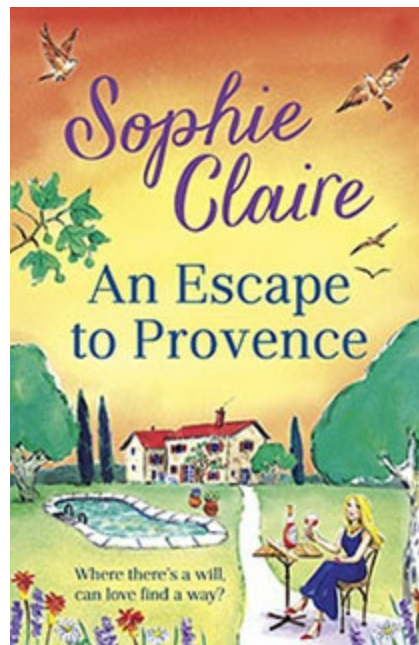
'I know. I had my hair cut even shorter than before. Do you like it?' She twisted her head so Liberty could see the back. The nape of her neck was shaved beneath her sleek bob so her scar was highly visible. Deliberately so.

‘I love it. But that’s not all I meant, Car. You seem really changed – in yourself.’

‘Ah.’ Carys glanced at Mat. ‘Well, maybe that’s because I found my happy.’

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Recipes

Quiche Lorraine

This is the recipe handed down to me by my French *grandmère*, who was a brilliant cook. Although Provence later became her home, she grew up in Nancy in the Lorraine, so she considered herself well-qualified in this regional speciality. I spent my summer holidays at her house and I have vivid memories of waking up to find quiches cooling in the kitchen because she'd been up in the early hours baking before it became too hot. The delicious smell filled the house.

Ingredients

butter, for greasing

500g shortcrust pastry

150g bacon, chopped

4 eggs

284ml double cream (or you can use half cream, half milk)

100g grated Emmental

seasoning

Grease a 28cm metal tart tin with butter. Roll out the pastry and use it to line the tart tin. Chill for 30 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 200°C/fan 180°C/gas 6. Prick the pastry with a fork. Line it with baking parchment, or similar, and scatter over some dried beans, then blind bake it for 20 minutes. Remove the lining and the beans and bake for another 5 minutes.

Meanwhile heat a frying pan and dry fry the bacon until golden. Scatter it

over the cooked pastry base. In a measuring jug, mix the eggs, the cream, the Emmental and some seasoning. Pour it over the bacon. Bake for 30–35 minutes. Serve warm or cold.

Pissaladière

This onion tart is usually made with a pizza-dough base, but my cheat's version uses ready-rolled puff pastry.

Ingredients

4 tablespoons olive oil
1kg onions, thinly sliced
4 tomatoes, skinned and chopped
1 teaspoon dried thyme or *herbes de Provence*
black pepper
320g ready-rolled puff pastry
2 x 80g cans of anchovies, drained
100g black olives

Heat the oil in a large, deep frying pan and fry the onions on a gentle heat for 10 minutes to soften. Add the tomatoes, thyme or *herbes de Provence*, and season with black pepper. Stir well. Cover and cook on a gentle heat for a further 45 minutes, stirring occasionally and removing the lid for the last 10 minutes to reduce the liquid. Remove from the heat.

Preheat the oven to 220°C/200°C fan/gas 7. Unroll the pastry and place on a lined baking sheet. Mark a 2cm border around the edge, going almost but not quite through the pastry. Spread the onion mixture over the centre, then arrange the anchovies on top in a criss-cross pattern. Stud each window between the anchovies with an olive, then bake for 20–25 minutes until golden. Serve warm.

Cake aux Olives

It always makes me giggle that the French call this savoury loaf a ‘cake’, but this is a favourite that I like to make as an apéritif for special occasions. It’s best eaten on the day it’s made, and even better still warm from the oven (be warned: it’s very moreish!).

Ingredients

200g self-raising flour

½ teaspoon dried thyme

3 eggs, beaten

100ml olive oil

100ml milk

a handful of pitted black olives

100g Emmental, grated

100g sundried tomatoes, drained and chopped

seasoning

Preheat the oven to 190°C/170°C fan/Gas 5. Line a 500g loaf tin with baking parchment.

In a large bowl mix the flour and thyme and season well. Make a well in the centre, then add the eggs, oil and milk, stirring all the time to draw the flour into the centre. Beat to make a smooth batter. Set aside a few olives and a third of the cheese for the topping. Add the remaining olives, the cheese and the tomatoes to the batter and mix lightly. Pour into the tin, then scatter over the reserved olives and cheese. Bake for 35–40 minutes until golden and crusty on top. Let it cool in the tin for a few minutes, then transfer to a wire rack.

Acknowledgements

Being published was my dream for a long time before it became real, and it was even more rewarding than I hoped it would be. However, nothing prepared me for the cutting reviews some people leave online. For some reason, romance novels especially are seen as a fair target for snobbery and misogyny, even by female readers. And, reading other writers' reviews, I could see it wasn't just my books that were – on the receiving end. Fortunately, I haven't had many one-star reviews, but those I did had a lasting effect. I could read thirty glowing reviews, yet the only negative one would stick in my mind for weeks after. I asked writer friends how they cope. Some choose not to read them; others only look when they're feeling strong; and some people laugh them off. And yet everyone I asked admitted that they sometimes leave bad reviews too. Perhaps not for books, but for products or tradesmen they feel have been shoddy. This fascinated me. We can be deeply hurt by one-star reviews, yet most of us have felt so angry that we were compelled to warn others against a product or service. We can be the victim and the perpetrator. And that's where the idea for this book was born. I loved the idea that my characters might be best friends in real life but worst enemies online – the reverse of Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks in *You've Got Mail* – and I was keen for Carys to get her own story after her cameo part in *A Winter's Dream*.

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As always, thanks to my wonderful readers for your support. If you'd like to hear the latest Sophie Claire news, you can sign up for my newsletter here: bit.ly/3MFoM4Q



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