

FROM BEST-SELLING LESBIAN ROMANCE AUTHOR

CLARE LYDON

CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

GALORE!



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ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS, CHRISTMAS IN MISTLETOE &
THE CHRISTMAS CATCH



CLARE LYDON



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First Edition November 2023
Published by Custard Books
Copyright © 2023 Clare Lydon
ISBN: 978-1-912019-22-9

Cover Design: Kevin Pruitt
Editors: Laura Kingsley, Cheyenne Blue, Kelli Collins

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From Best-Selling Lesbian Romance Author

CLARE LYDON

All I
Want For
Christmas



*This novel is dedicated to you.
Thanks for buying the book & Happy Christmas!*

FRIDAY NOVEMBER 25TH



“*Y*ou know, I don’t want a lot for Christmas.” That was me, Tori Hammond saying that. Lover of all things Christmas and festive. Even I couldn’t believe the words were coming from my mouth, but they were definitely mine.

“Thank you, Mariah.” That was my best friend Holly replying.

I pulled my thick grey scarf around me and shivered in the early evening air. We were sat on our bench at the top of our hill, looking up at the charcoal sky. It had been our hill since school, where we’d met 16 years ago. As teenagers, Holly and I had sat and discussed boys here because we thought that’s what we were meant to do. Now aged 27, we sat and bemoaned women and pretended our world had evolved.

Behind us was a path lined with bare chestnut trees, their leaves long since dropped. Ahead of us was the smudged outline of the city, fogging up with every breath we took.

“No, I mean it,” I said, my breath a ghostly circle swirling in front of me. “I don’t need any new clothes or shoes, jewellery or perfume. My mum keeps asking me what I want, and I don’t know what to tell her.”

Holly rapped her knuckles lightly on my skull. Her long legs were crossed, her green duffel coat done right up, her short dark hair peeking out of her hat on one side, part-shaved on the other. In the darkening light, her

pointed features appeared almost sinister, but Holly was one of the kindest people I knew — she was anything but sinister.

“Hello, Earth to Tori — is that you or have you been taken over by some alien invaders? You love Christmas! You’re the biggest Christmas lover I know.”

I shrugged. “And that hasn’t changed — Christmas is still my most favourite time of the year. I just don’t want any big presents this time.”

“I’ll remind you of that when I give you nothing,” Holly said. “You could tell your mum to give you a Good Gift — a goat for a family in Africa or something. My gran bought my mum the gift of sight for five children last year.”

I turned my head. “How did she react?”

Holly smiled her lopsided smile. “Mum said it was a nice gesture, but a bottle of gin to go with it wouldn’t have gone amiss.”

I smiled as I turned to face front again, looking out over the city skyline that was twinkling in the inky gloom before me. “Does it mean I’m getting old? Soon, I’ll be leaving presents to open till after lunch. I might even fall asleep before opening them. Imagine that.”

Holly nudged me with her elbow. “Does anyone in your family do that?”

An image of Christmas Day with Mum, Gran and Aunt Ellen ripping open their presents one after the other and holding their favoured loot aloft came to my mind. They could hardly contain themselves till after breakfast.

I shook my head. “Not really.”

“Well then.”

We sat in silence for a few moments, the air stained and blurry. The smell of flattened mud and grass filled the air, the path in front of us chilled and damp. Holly wore black jeans, a green beanie and a new pair of black and gold Nikes. She’d always followed fashion way more than I did, mainly because she had the 6-foot-2 frame to pull off any item of clothing she fancied.

“You know what I really want for Christmas?” I said.

Holly sunk lower on the bench. “A minute ago, it was nothing, but do tell.”

“I want a girlfriend. Last year I didn’t have one, but that was okay because it was too soon after Amy. But this year is different. This year, I want to share my favourite time of year with someone special. I want to really enjoy the holidays.”

I heard Holly grin — her jaw always made a noise when she did. “You want a girlfriend for Christmas?”

“I do.”

“Well that’s easy enough,” she said.

I sat up and looked at her. “Is it?”

She nodded. “Sure. We just make you a billboard, drop you in the middle of Oxford Street and away you go.”

I scowled. “I’m being serious.”

She smiled. “So am I.”

I stood up and paced around in front of Holly, the nearby trees creating eerie shadows. “If I had a girlfriend, she’d have to buy me something — *she’d* have to think of an amazing present, wouldn’t she?”

“Which is the perfect reason to get one.” Holly was being ironic, but I ignored her.

I cast my mind back to the last time I’d had a serious girlfriend. Amy. For Christmas, she’d bought me a hot-air balloon ride one year, a ski jacket the next. I wanted that this year. I wanted to receive presents not bought by my mum or gran. I wanted to go ice-skating and kiss while we held hands. I wanted drunken Christmas sex. And I wanted it all now.

“But it’s November 25th — Christmas is only a month away,” Holly said. She was far more practical than me. Holly favoured order and spreadsheets, so I could see how this sudden plan troubled her.

I wagged a finger in her direction, twisting one way, then the other. “It

involves a deadline though, and you must admit I work well to deadlines.”

Holly nodded. “You do.” Then she cocked her head, holding up a single finger. “But I have one question.”

“Shoot.”

“Is this all because of Melanie Taylor?”

I paused, then bit the inside of my right cheek. “No.” It was, but I wasn’t about to admit that right away.

“So it’s just coincidence we heard she’s getting married this morning, you think she’s an idiot, and now you want a girlfriend?”

I bristled at the suggestion, mainly because it was mostly true.

“It’s not to do with her — it’s just time. It’s been nearly a year and a half since Amy, and I’m ready for another relationship. I’m not talking about marriage, I’m talking about getting a girlfriend. There’s a big difference.” I turned my head to Holly as the wind whipped my hair in my face. I swiped it left. “It would just be nice to meet someone who gets me.”

“I get you,” Holly said, spreading her palms.

“Is that an offer?” I asked.

Holly and I had always flirted, it was part of our make-up. But we’d been friends for 16 years now, and we both knew that flirting was as far as it was ever going to go.

Holly grinned at me. “Do you want it to be?”

I rolled my eyes and resumed my pacing. “You know what I mean. Yes, you get me, but I want a romantic partner to get me. I want someone to take me to dinner, have a conversation and laugh at my jokes. I want to be wooed.”

Holly’s laughter punctured the descending gloom. “Laughing at your jokes? That’s a tall order.”

“My jokes are legendary,” I said.

“In your head,” Holly replied. “That one about the stick?”

“What’s brown and sticky? That’s a classic.”

We both laughed now.

It had been one of those crisp, sunny autumn days that I loved, the kind that made you want to snap out of your normal life, roll up the sunshine and start afresh. Sometimes in autumn, the barren trees left me feeling empty, but today, they were lining a new path, setting me off in a new direction.

Holly was silent for a moment, her nose pointing skywards, her cheeks flushed from the cold. She sat forward before speaking. “You’re a romantic, Tori. Always have been, always will be. But I’ll help if that’s what you want.” She crossed her legs in front of her. “How do you plan on scoring said perfect woman?”

I rubbed my hands together and breathed on them, even though I knew it wouldn’t do any good. We needed to get inside where it was warm. “I don’t know, I only just decided. But the internet seems a good place to start.” I started to hop from one foot to the other.

“If you like weirdos.”

“I love weirdos, you know that. I thrive on them.” Of course, I hadn’t really thought about exactly how I was going to snag my perfect mate — the idea had only come to me today after getting Melanie Taylor’s news.

We began to walk towards the park gates, Holly towering over me. Holly’s height drew stares everywhere we walked, like now. We didn’t pay them any attention — we were used to it.

“Anyway,” I continued. “Melanie met whatshername online.”

Holly punched her hands into the pockets of her thick coat, her laughter a howling gale around us both. “You’re using Melanie’s relationship as a barometer of online sanity? Can I remind you Melanie is a circus freak show all on her own?”

I nudged Holly with my elbow. “She’s not that bad — and she’s got a girlfriend.”

Holly stopped walking. “We are talking about the same Melanie, aren’t we? The one who got so off her face at Alison’s wedding, she puked on the

groom's mum? The same Melanie who drove her car into a fence when she was on an empty road? The same Melanie who married someone and divorced them within three months?"

I let the sentence hang for a few seconds before replying. "I know all of that — but Milly says she's changed since she met this woman. Apparently, she's way calmer, a different person. And Milly said she seemed happier too — happier than she's seen her in a long time."

Holly scoffed again. "It won't last. Melanie has crazy stamped through her core. She'll find a way to fuck it up."

We were approaching the tall, black iron park gates now, the early evening sharp around us.

"I disagree. I think Melanie was just waiting for the right person and she's found her. She's been saved. I like the thought of that. I want someone to come along and sweep me off my feet, make me see the world in a different way. And if that could happen at Christmas time, I might burst with happiness."

Holly blew on to her hands before putting an arm around me. "You don't need saving — you're fine as you are."

"Maybe." I paused before continuing. "But maybe there's someone out there who can make me the best version of myself I can possibly be — there's always room for improvement, isn't there?"

Holly shrugged. "I suppose."

"Good," I said. "So starting tonight, it's Operation Christmas and you're going to be my wingwoman, just like in a terrible 80s movie." I stopped walking and turned to Holly who had an amused look on her face. "And I know you don't believe me, but I'm deadly serious." I paused. "Are you in?"

Holly stroked her rounded chin before answering. "One month is a tight deadline to meet someone and call them your girlfriend."

"I'm aware."

"But if a Christmas girlfriend is what you're after, together we'll look in

every street in London to find the perfect woman. Who knows, we might even find someone for me too.” Holly smiled at the thought.

“We might both find a girlfriend for Christmas,” I said, my smile radiating just how happy that would make me. “Now that really would be a Hollywood movie ending.” I linked my arm through Holly’s as we walked on to the main road and headed back to our flat.

“But I’d like to say again,” Holly added, “the current version of you doesn’t need any saving. You’re fine just the way you are.”

I grinned up at her. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: your sweet talk will get you everywhere.”

SATURDAY NOVEMBER 26TH



To get online, the first thing I had to do was write my profile. I pulled up the app Melanie had success with, and after filling in all my details, I was asked for five key phrases to describe myself.

What would my friends say? Flighty, indecisive, tequila-intolerant, brunette, good tits. I wasn't sure I should go with that.

What about me? I pulled out a pad and pen, then began writing. Average height and build, shoulder-length maple brown hair, loves cats, tans easily. I wrinkled my nose — I needed to make it more than just another lesbian with a fondness for pussies.

Okay, take two. Five phrases or words. I could do this, I worked in marketing for goodness sake. I tapped my pen on my pad but my mind went blank. Eventually after a few minutes, I wrote: athletic, good dancer, blue eyes, deadline-driven, likes avocados. *Deadline-driven?* Honestly, I was rubbish at this. Perhaps this was why GSOH was so popular.

I needed help. I got up and walked through to the lounge, where Holly was stretched out on the couch watching football. Holly worked as a recruitment consultant in the City, a hangover of a job from her post-university years. She had a degree in history and politics, which she'd soon realised led to precisely no jobs in the real world. So when a friend of a friend had offered her a position in his firm, she'd taken it. That had been five years

ago. Now, she spent her days placing people in jobs they may or may not want and got paid handsomely for it.

I squinted at the TV. “Who’s playing?” I sat on the opposite end of the sofa.

Holly didn’t move her gaze from the screen. “Us and Chelsea.”

I tapped my foot a few times before speaking again. “So you know my profile?”

Holly didn’t respond.

“Hols?”

She ignored me again.

“Hollister?”

She looked at me. “Your profile.”

“Yeah — can you help me?”

“At half-time.”

“Okay.” I stood up, biting my fingernail. “You want a cup of tea?”

“Please,” she replied.

Our shared flat had white walls and a laminate floor, a blank canvas to decorate. However, because we were renting, we couldn’t do that without our landlord’s permission so we kept it minimalist. One corner of our living room held the L-shaped sofa and TV, one corner a small white dining table and chairs. The kitchen took up another corner, and we also managed to fit in a small desk. Surprisingly, the room still felt spacious.

At half-time, Holly slurped her tea while thinking of five key phrases to describe me. “How about annoying, interrupts football matches, drinks wine too fast, prone to hiccups, perky breasts?” She waited for my response.

“I predicted you’d mention my breasts.”

“They’re worth mentioning,” Holly said. “I’ve always told you, I’ll exchange some of my height for some of your breasts. Seems a fair swap.”

I laughed. “It would be — but it’s not helping to write my profile, is it? And I’m not mentioning my breasts — that seems desperate.”

Holly raised an eyebrow in my direction.

“I am *not* desperate!”

Holly grinned as a train rattled by on the track just outside the window.

Our flat was in a shabby chic, up-and-coming area. South-facing, it was baking hot all year round, which meant we had the windows open constantly. It was also noisy, built right next to a train track. Hence when a train passed by, it was best to shut up until it'd passed if you wanted to be heard. We both stared at the train full of people heading into the city. Once the train was out of earshot, we refocused.

After a couple of minutes, Holly clicked her fingers together. “Got it — how about this: Christmas cracker seeks possible Mrs Claus. Must love Christmas, tinsel, ice-skating and mulled wine. Post-Christmas activities also considered on application.”

“It makes me sound like I might murder them in their sleep with my special Christmas ham.”

“I disagree — it's themed, it's unusual, it'll make you stand out. Plus, isn't this quest all about finding someone for Christmas, someone to spend the holiday with? You want them to love Christmas, don't you?”

I paused. “Of course, but there might be a gorgeous Muslim or Jewish lesbian out there who doesn't do Christmas. I don't want to alienate her.”

Holly waved a hand through the air. “You're over-thinking it. If there's a non-Christian dyke who likes the sound of you, I don't think the whole Christmas deal will put her off. Plus, Christmas is cute. It's fun, it's light, it's airy. Christmas spells romance.”

Half an hour later, I was sat on my bed with my iPad, trying to work Holly's spiel into a more workable format. But the more I thought about it, the more I was inclined to agree. This would make me stand out from the crowd. People might think I was a Christmas nut who secretly wanted to be an angel or a fairy, but so be it. It was worth a shot, and if I had no bites in a few days, I could always change it. I posted the best image of me I could

find, hammered out the words before I could talk myself out of it and clicked post.

Let the games commence.



MY HISTORY as a lesbian Lothario wasn't great, truth be told — but I was determined this December was going to be different and memorable. I was tired of floating in a sea of lesbian debris. This time, I wanted to take control and steer my course with confidence.

I first kissed another woman in the school library when I was 16. Her name was Nicola Sheen and she had the smoothest skin in our class. Honestly, if Nicola walked in right now, the girlfriend search would be over because to my 16-year-old self, Nicola Sheen was the perfect woman. Tall, dark and devastatingly handsome, the fact she had a boyfriend called Craig only made me want her more. At 16, she hadn't yet realised her true vocation was to love me.

I became friends with Nicola when we were 14, quite late in my school career — Holly treated her with suspicion, seeing as she'd been by my side since the age of 11. By the time we turned 15, I wanted to spend every waking minute with Nicola, but had no idea why. Every opportunity I had, I texted Nicola and hung out with her, and we told each other our deepest, darkest secrets. She told me she had a crush on Craig Dale way before they got together. In turn, I told her I liked Ed Hartman. It was a lie, but I had to say something.

When we told each other stuff like this, Nicola favoured lying together on the bed — she'd watched too many American movies, but I wasn't complaining. Lying next to Nicola on my flowery duvet, I'd never felt so almost-content in my whole life.

We so nearly kissed a few times, but it was always her who pulled back,

always her who had a freakish look in her eyes. But then, one day in the library down the history aisle, the lines blurred. When our lips locked, the klaxon that sounded in my head was loud enough to be heard in Scotland. In that moment, I knew what the invisible struggle I'd been grappling with was, and my life changed.

Nicola sunk into the kiss, even slipping her tongue into my mouth. I remember I groaned — why wouldn't I? I'd been waiting for this moment for 16 years. Most straight people have their first meaningful kiss before they reach their teenage years. Mine didn't arrive till I was old enough to get married, smoke and join the army. I'd kissed boys before, but kissing Nicola Sheen made *much* more sense. If she'd proposed right there and then, I'd have dropped everything and said yes.

But she didn't. Of course she didn't. Instead, she pulled back, looked at me with a veil of horror falling over her face and ran out of the history aisle as if I'd just produced a gun. She avoided me for days afterwards, despite my constant texting. And when she did eventually speak to me, it was to tell me we should keep our distance from each other, because what happened could never happen again.

However, such grand statements only played more into my love-struck hands. I was studying English literature after all, and this seemed to have all the hallmarks of a dramatic Shakespearian tragedy. Only, I was convinced our story would have a happy ending — the folly of youth.

Three months later, Nicola announced she was pregnant. She *really* went out of her way to tell the world she wasn't a lesbian. After that, she moved away and we lost touch. I knew she had a miscarriage and went to university, but I often wondered where she was and if she ever thought of me and that kiss. Or even if she'd ever had another kiss like that one. I knew I hadn't.

At university, I got together with a woman named Melissa. She was on the hockey team and was a real competitor at everything in life — including being the best in our relationship. She was an expert in putting me down and

I was an expert at taking it, until around two years into our liaison when she decided to sleep with someone else and I was off the hook. I slept with a couple more women after that, but gave up on relationships for a while, happy to have the space to breathe.

I stayed in Bristol after graduating from its university, taking a job in a local marketing firm that set sail to my current career. The company was a small family-run business and I loved it there — I'm still in touch with them and visit every time I head west. Three months into working there, I met Amy, who owned the pet shop next door.

And after Nicola Sheen, Amy was my second significant love.

Everybody loved Amy — my mum, my friends, my colleagues — *everyone*. There really was nothing not to love. She owned her own business, loved animals and was one of the most caring people I'd ever met.

After a year, I moved into her neat three-bed terrace, the floors covered with Amy's carpets, the walls with Amy's artwork. After two years, Amy started making noises about having children — at 35, her biological clock was booming. At 24, mine was not. A year later, Amy proposed: one knee, roses, diamonds, the works. I accepted, we told the world, and the world embraced us as one.

Only I couldn't sleep. Couldn't close my eyes without thinking about getting married and having children, all before I knew what I was doing with my life. Before I was ready. I was only in my mid-20s, and suddenly, my life had been thrown into fifth gear.

After three months, Amy asked if I still wanted to get married.

I told her I didn't know.

That was enough for her.

We split up two months later amid a backdrop of tears and what-ifs. I couldn't stay in Bristol, so I handed in my notice and moved into Holly's spare room in east London. Moving in with her was the perfect choice because Holly had known me for over half my life. She knew I loved

Mexican food, garlic mayonnaise, and cats. She knew I'd still worn knee-high socks at High School far later than it was considered cool to do so. She'd held my hair when I vomited after drinking too many pints of Snake Bite on my 18th birthday. Aged 25, London and Holly were the far better option — better than being married with kids.

So yes, love. It's come my way twice, and if I'm honest, I sometimes wonder if I've used up my lot. Should I have married Amy and stayed in Bristol? I might already be a mother — I knew Amy was.

I shook my head. No, I'd done the right thing moving east. But now, 18 months later and after precisely three one-night stands and a four-date fling, I was ready to get back in the game. I wanted a girlfriend. I'd already fallen in love with city life, which took a little time for a country bumpkin like me. Now, I was ready to fall in love for real with a living, breathing woman, rather than that mannequin in Top Shop who I always think would make a fine lesbian.

Tomorrow night was date one. Her name was Ruby.

If she kissed anything like Nicola Sheen, that would be amazing.

MONDAY NOVEMBER 28TH



I was a Cancerian and Ruby was a Scorpio. According to most experts, that meant we were a match made in lesbo-heaven. If we got together, my future was set to be awash with emotional rapport, empathy, compassion and sensitivity. One site I checked last night even said we were ‘sextile’, whatever that meant. One thing was certain — even before Ruby turned up, we were destined for greatness.

We’d arranged to meet in the West End, in a run-of-the-mill Soho boozier. It wasn’t a gay bar, but then again, there weren’t many of those left these days. Apparently with equal marriage and all the rest, we simply didn’t need gay bars any more. I wasn’t sure I agreed.

I loved this part of Christmas — the build-up. Don’t get me wrong, I loved the day itself too, but it was the anticipation that thrilled me every year. When I was little, my parents would bring me to the West End to see the Christmas lights as an annual treat. We’d get hot chocolate, hot dogs and cinnamon donuts, and the size and sparkle of the event never failed to amaze me. Even now, years later, the sight of the West End Christmas lights still flush my insides with festive cheer. They also make me miss my dad so much, I have to stop and catch my breath.

I’d styled my shoulder-length chestnut hair with a new product, but it felt odd, like a dry alien life-form perched on top of my scalp. However, my

foundation was smoothed in, my lipstick so bright it could stop ships. I'd done a fashion show for Holly the night before and we'd settled on some tailored black trousers and a black shirt — simple, but effective. The stage was set, now I just needed my Juliet. Or Ruby, as the case may be.

I bought myself a glass of Merlot and nabbed a table at the back of the pub. It was November 28th and already the place was overrun with Christmas spirit — by that, I mean drunk office workers. Scarves lay abandoned on the scuffed wooden floor as drinks were hoisted, ties were loosened and heels crunched on broken glass. London had come alive to celebrate the imminent birth of baby Jesus.

I recognised Ruby straight away from her profile picture — she had crazy curly hair, so she was easy to spot. She struck me as the kind of person who was always catching her breath, always rushing, always late. She just had that aura about her.

It was her love of tennis that had drawn me to her profile — that, and the fact she made a good joke about cats. I was desperate for a cat, but Holly wasn't keen — I was still working on her. If I ended up with Ruby, not only were we sextile, we'd also have cats. Perhaps three of them.

She squeezed past the crowd to sit down in the chair I pushed out for her. Ruby was carrying a pint of lager and a posh-looking laptop bag that screamed “steal me!”.

She shook off her coat and smoothed herself down, before we smiled shyly at each other and shook hands. She had a strong handshake, not too firm, just right.

Ruby turned out to be in the music industry. I pricked up my ears — not only cats and perfect compatibility, but also free gig tickets on the horizon. This was getting better. She was around my age but needed a better moisturising routine — the skin around her eyes and mouth was dry and drawn — but winter could do that to you. She was wearing a floral perfume that she'd clearly just reapplied, and her pink lips were rounded and

glistening with lip balm. I leaned closer to get a look at the logo that was stamped liberally around her shirt.

“Is it a squirrel?” I pointed my finger at one of the animals sitting happily on her breast. However, Ruby moved at that critical moment and my finger brushed her nipple.

She shot backwards as if I’d just slapped her.

I held up a hand as my cheeks hissed into red action. “Sorry — I was just pointing at the animal on your breast.” More blushing. “I mean, your shirt. Is it a squirrel?” This wasn’t going well.

Luckily, Ruby had a sense of humour. She peered down at her shirt. “That’s a funny-looking squirrel — it was a rabbit last time I looked.” She gave me a grin. “So, is this a usual habit — feeling up your dates within five minutes?” She took a sip of her pint, never taking her eyes from me.

I blushed a deeper shade of red. “I normally give it at least ten.”

But after that, things took a turn for the better. One thing I didn’t have to worry about was flowing conversation. Ruby liked to talk. And talk and talk, which suited me as I was happy to listen, smile, nod and assess. Was Ruby going to be my future girlfriend? I was just happy that the chat was about celebrities, the best lunchtime salads, cats and tennis.

“So do you have a cat?”

Ruby shook her head. “I’d like one, but it’s just not very practical. Living in a flat-share isn’t the ideal environment for a couple of kittens, is it? When I get a place of my own, which will be in about 200 years at the current rate of progress with my finances, then maybe.” She sighed and sat back in her chair. “Until then, I’m going to be catless and sad.” She pouted to emphasise the point.

I decided Ruby was a contender — she had an easy smile and was wearing heels, which showed effort or stupidity, depending on how you looked at it. Her hair looked like it had been dipped in sunshine and she made me feel completely at ease, which was no mean feat. Perhaps the girlfriend

quest would be over before December had even dawned? Perhaps Ruby was the one to tip the balance and prove that not everyone on the internet was desperate?

She seemed too good to be true. Why the hell was she still single?



TWO HOURS LATER, I had my first clue as to just why that might be.

First, Ruby was a fan of drinking and this became obvious to me just over an hour into our date. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not a teetotal prude, far from it. However, Ruby was on to her fifth pint of lager while I was still sipping my second glass of wine. Perhaps she was nervous and deserved the benefit of the doubt? All of a sudden, that wrinkled skin around her eyes made more sense.

Second, by her fifth pint, she also told me she'd love to introduce me to Jesus Christ our Lord. A personal introduction? I was flattered.

"What are you doing on Thursday?" Ruby asked, her eyes glassy, her skin blotchy.

"Why?" Nothing that involved her, I was pretty sure.

"We've got a special 'Let Jesus Into Your Life At Christmas' evening at our church. I'd love for you to come along," she replied.

"Oh, I'm busy on Thursday," I lied, smiling.

I checked my watch. With any luck, Holly should be ringing any minute now with my get-out-of-jail phone call.

HOLLY FORGOT HER EMERGENCY CALL.

TUESDAY NOVEMBER 29TH



“An extra hour of pain and an extra £7 — that’s what your failed call cost me.” I scowled at Holly from one end of our grey sofa. She was lying on the longer part as usual, with the TV set to the food channel. When left alone, Holly had been known to ingest three or four hours of food programming at a time. It was a habit that needed checking occasionally.

“Why £7?”

“That’s how much my extra glass of wine cost me.” I paused. “I should charge you.”

Holly spluttered as she laughed. “You could try, but I don’t think you’d get very far.”

I sighed and spread my palms upwards. “I’m just not sure this internet dating game is for me. I mean, how can things go so wrong? On paper, she was perfect.” I sighed. “We’re on to day four now, it’s nearly December. I don’t have time to waste.”

“You’re being unrealistic. This was your first date. The next one is bound to be better. I mean, it really has to be judging by what you just told me.” Holly was eating a packet of pickled onion Monster Munch and the smell was seeping into every square inch of the living room.

“I know,” I said. “But it was a pretty inauspicious start.” I frowned my best frown.

“It could have been worse — at least she was pretty.” Holly licked her fingers of Monster Munch debris. “And she liked a bit of Jesus, so what? You like Barry Manilow, everybody has their vices.” She gave me a wide grin. “Anyhow, date number two is a goer. I can feel it in my bones. What’s her name again?”

“Anna,” I replied.

Holly gave a curt nod. “She sounds reliable. Anna won’t let you down. She’ll laugh at your jokes, I guarantee it.”

I didn’t look so sure. “I dunno — she sounds like a librarian.”

Holly scrunched up her face. “And what’s wrong with librarians? Without them, the world would be in chaos. In my experience, librarians are cool, calm and collected. And they know where you left your keys.”

“She’s not *actually* a librarian. She does something in the City.”

Holly yawned, mouth wide open, arms stretched above her head. “Even better. Ordered and rich. She can sort your spreadsheets out. And if this one fails, just remember, you’ve got me to come home to. What could be better?”

I gave her a wide smile. “Just don’t forget the phone call this time, okay?”

“That’s the spirit,” Holly replied.

THURSDAY DECEMBER 1ST



I was sitting in the staff lounge when my phone went — it was my mum. I turned down the radio, which was blaring out ‘Do They Know It’s Christmas’, the original Band Aid version.

“Hey kiddo.” It was my mum’s standard greeting. “Just calling to make sure your December plans are in place.”

I smiled a sad smile — Mum did this call every year now. It used to be the province of my dad, the original Christmas enthusiast and the person who had pumped the festive season into an unmissable yearly excitement-fest for me.

Unfortunately, he’d also died on the same day seven years earlier, just a few months after my 20th birthday. An untimely heart attack on his second favourite day of the year, December 1st. Despite that though, Mum had carried on their traditions without missing a beat, even though I know how hard that must have been for her. And now, here she was, keeping the spirit alive.

“All good — I’ll be putting up the tree and the decorations later, like always,” I said.

“Did you get the Advent calendar?”

I swallowed down some tears that threatened. Even seven years on, they could take me by surprise. “I did, thanks. It arrived yesterday.”

Dad always bought us all individual calendars for the festive season, and this was another tradition that had continued even when I'd left home. Dad said he'd do it until I was married, then my wife could take over. For now, it was still Mum calling the Advent calendar shots.

"I got you a chocolate one — got myself a picture one, though. You're still young enough, I've got to watch my waistline."

I blinked as I pictured my dad with his chocolate calendar. He was always up first and he'd always eaten his chocolate before anyone else, like a naughty schoolboy. I always assumed he'd been hard done by as a child, but apparently not — he just loved Christmas and chocolate.

"How you doing?" My voice was shaky, but I knew Mum would understand.

"I'm okay," she replied. "Some days are better than others." A pause. "But I still love Christmas, still love all the memories we made over the years." She rallied. "I bought your gran a calendar too. She told me I was mad, but I think she was secretly pleased."

I chuckled down the phone. "Like every year?"

"Pretty much." She paused. "So what's new with you — job okay?"

I nodded, even though I knew she couldn't see me. "Yep, all fine. Job's good, and I'm on a dating marathon to find a girlfriend by Christmas. It's not going too well so far."

I could hear Mum frown down the phone.

"Stop frowning," I said.

"How do you know I'm frowning?"

"I just do."

A pause. "A dating marathon? Those two words don't sound like they go together."

"You might be right, but I'll let you know after date two, which is tonight."

Another pause — I could tell Mum wasn't behind this plan. "Why the

sudden rush to get a girlfriend?”

“I just thought it was time, you know.” I let the sentence hang, and so did my mum.

“And what does Holly have to say about this?” she asked eventually.

“About the same as you — she thinks I’m being ridiculous.”

My mum’s soft laugh landed in my ear. “Well, tell her hi from me, and tell her she’s welcome at Christmas too.”

“I will,” I said. “Listen, I have to go. Thanks for the calendar. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay, but just be careful,” Mum replied. “You’re my only daughter and I worry about your heart. Listen to what Holly says, I trust her.”

“More than you trust me?” There was a slight hint of indignation in my voice.

“Sometimes, yes.”

FRIDAY DECEMBER 2ND



I worked for an online marketing company in central London, and I loved the buzz of working in the capital. Based in a team of 30, I was a solid performer, a big fish in a small pond. The owner, Sal, trusted my judgement, there was a fantastic coffee machine and free pastries daily. It's amazing what such small stuff can do for staff morale.

I was sitting at the staff room table, working out some figures for a quote when Sal walked in. Sal used to have long, flowing red hair, but last year she'd been diagnosed with cancer and had lost it all to chemo. Now, she wore it short and it really suited her. She was also mistaken for a lesbian far more these days, but told me she quite enjoyed the added attention.

"Morning, No. 1 Lesbian." That's what she called me. Honestly, without any prompting. "How's the dating game?" Sal made herself an espresso, then came and sat opposite me at the table.

"Painful." I turned down both sides of my mouth in a comedy frown.

"Oh dear, what happened?"

"Let's see," I said, counting on my fingers. "Date one was with a drunk Christian, and date two was with an uptight banker who called time on our date after a single coffee — like I'm the worst catch of the century."

"Ouch," Sal said. "Some people just don't know when they strike it lucky. What was her problem?"

I shrugged. “No idea, but Anna did not like what she saw when confronted with me, so she bailed sharpish. Holly was so sure it would work too. I couldn’t sleep last night thinking about it — am I that bad she had to run when the froth on her flat white was still warm?”

“And there was me going to start moaning about my life. Sounds like you need a coffee.”

“So long as it’s not a flat white,” I said, laughing despite myself. “But let’s see what date three brings tonight.”

“Tonight? You’re packing them in.”

I laughed. “That’s what Holly said. She reminded me I had a duty to go out with her too. So we’re doing that tomorrow — a date-free Saturday.”

“Good. I don’t want you turning into one of those serial daters who struggle to cope with the real world.” Sal took a sip of her coffee and sighed. She looked tired, but that’s what having two-year-old twins will do.

“I promise I’ll get out before I turn too weird.” I paused. “Besides, I can’t do this for a prolonged period of time. I think my body might have a breakdown and I know my wallet would. Dating is an expensive pastime and I’m already exhausted. Can’t you see the amount of make-up I’m wearing today?” I circled my face and jutted out my chin.

“You’ll get no sympathy here with tales of sleep woe. Sleep is something I fondly remember, like something from another, simpler life. Only my lack of sleep is due to two little rascals, rather than burning the candle at both ends.” A smile crossed Sal’s face as she spoke about her daughters. Then she leaned over the table and fixed me with her gaze. “But the question is, have you had a snog out of it yet?”

I gave her a rueful smile. “Not last night, she bailed before I’d finished stirring my drink. And Ruby? Well, she tried to kiss me as we left, but she only got my cheek. Nothing passionate.”

“But tonight could be the passionate one?”

I shrugged. “We’ll see. She might be a raving lunatic or she might be the

woman of my dreams.”

Sal laughed. “What’s her name?”

“Sienna,” I replied.

Sal gave a slow nod. “Sienna — sounds like a bit of posh totty to me.” She smiled, before raising her espresso cup. “Here’s to you and Sienna — may you have a night filled with passionate kisses.”

I clinked my imaginary coffee cup to hers.



DECEMBER 2ND and I was already on date three — even I was impressed at the speed of my progress. Holly had already told me I had to be more choosy, but being choosy was what had got me here in the first place.

I was still exhausted, as today had been a busy day with three external meetings. I’d tramped across half of London, and my face felt like it needed to be put on a hot wash after miles of Tube travel. About the last thing I wanted to do right now was go on a date. My ideal date for tonight would be my duvet and my bed.

I headed to the Thai restaurant where I was meeting Sienna, which was decorated in suitably chintzy shades of gold and pink. I’d wanted to try out this restaurant for a while now as it’d been getting stellar reviews. Tonight it was packed with customers all chowing down on Thai classics with a modern twist, and the scent of coriander, garlic and chilli made my mouth water. I spruced up my make-up in the toilets before taking a seat.

Sienna worked in the charity sector, which immediately put her on the moral high ground. She was from East London, had a cockney accent that curled at the edges and a definite orange hue. She arrived half an hour late which didn’t endear her to me, causing me to drink a glass of wine before she arrived. Couple that with my extreme tiredness and I could feel my eyelids getting heavy before she sat down.

“Sorry I’m late, I got stuck at work.” A waft of cigarette smoke sailed across my nostrils as she unwound her massive rainbow scarf and sat down, eagerly perusing the menu. “Have you ordered already?”

“Only a glass of wine while I waited.” I indicated my empty glass.

“Fab — I’ll get a bottle. Was it red?”

I nodded and she got the attention of a nearby waiter.

So, Sienna looked like her profile picture — tick. After all the scary stories I’d heard about online dating, I half-expected one of my dates to turn up and be a man. However, Sienna was very much a woman, her low-cut top providing an invitation to her breasts — double tick. She had short, black hair and was dressed casually in trousers and a red top. She was promising.

“So sorry about my time-keeping again. Our American office decided they wanted to chat just as I was walking out the door.” She threw me an apologetic smile as she shifted in her seat to get comfortable.

“American office? Sounds like you’re in banking and not the charity sector.”

She shook her head. “A lot of people think that — but the charity sector is a big, global business these days. We’re always on the lookout for donations and ways to spend the money best. Nobody sleeps, believe me.”

Mention of sleep deprivation made me open my eyes wider. I wanted to appear as alert as possible, even though I was *this* close to slumping on the table.

The wine arrived a few minutes later and we ordered our food, then settled back to get to know each other. It turned out that Sienna was born and raised in London and her parents still lived within a ten-minute walk of her front door.

“Really? I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who didn’t move *to* London. I can’t imagine being raised here.” I shook my head. “That means you’ve been riding the Tube your whole life.”

Sienna laughed. “I have. I used to take the Tube into town with my mates

at the weekend and cause havoc. Still do, but I'm an adult now, so it's overlooked."

I grinned at her. "Funny how that works, isn't it?"

"How about you? I can't detect an accent."

I shook my head. "Oxford, no accent required. My mum's a professor there."

"Does that mean you're posh?" Sienna poured wine into my glass with a reassuring glug.

"People tend to think so, but no, it doesn't just rub off like gold dust. Besides, being a professor is a grand title with poor pay. At least, that's what my mum always tells me when I try to tap her up for a loan."

We chatted for another half an hour with no sign of food. With another glass of wine in my empty stomach, I kept having to shake my head to snap myself awake. Falling asleep at the table was definitely bad manners, but I desperately needed some food to sustain me.

A few minutes later, I excused myself to go to the loo — all the liquid had taken its toll. I sat down, sighing with tiredness, closed my eyes and leaned my head on the cool, white tiles of the toilet stall. Against my hot, red cheek they were wonderfully soothing.

Date number three wasn't going so bad. First, she'd ordered a bottle of wine which meant she had no intention of running away any time soon. Second, she hadn't tried to convert me to Jesus yet. What's more, she was attractive and seemed on my wavelength. This could be the start of something, so perhaps Sienna would be my Christmas girlfriend? Plus, Sienna was a beautiful name — I could well get used to going out with a Sienna.

I let my mind drift off as I rested my head heavier against the reassuring toilet wall. Perhaps we'd kiss outside the restaurant later, then go on to a bar and sit closer than necessary to each other. Then perhaps we'd brush each other's hands under the table. Kiss at the bus stop on the way home and send

each other soppy messages tomorrow as we made plans for our second date and beyond. Perhaps...

However, when I woke up 35 minutes later, those were not the thoughts I was thinking. On opening my eyes, I squinted into the bright light of the cubicle, clutched the toilet seat and steadied myself. I peeled my head off the wall, wincing as my neck screeched at me for leaving it at such an awkward angle for over half an hour.

Where the hell was I? I rolled my shoulder and tried to loosen my upper body, which was stiff from lack of movement. I winced at the pain, while wiping up dribble from my chin and my shoulder with some toilet tissue.

I clung on to the toilet roll dispenser while my brain tried to make sense of the situation. Why was I asleep on a toilet? A toilet that wasn't even mine? And since when did I fall asleep on toilets?

And then it came to me.

I was on a date. I was on a *ruddy date*.

But instead of sitting opposite my date, being charming and laughing at all of her jokes, I was dribbling on a toilet with my trousers around my ankles.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. I was the world's worst date, in widescreen technicolour. With a cherry on the top.

And it had all been going so well.

The last thing I wanted to do right now was get up off the toilet and face my mistake. But it was the one thing I had to do, especially if I wanted the kissing, drinking and soppy text messages to take place. All of which had seemed a pretty sure bet 40 minutes ago. But now? Not so much.

I rubbed the heels of my hands into my eyes to wake myself up, then swore lightly under my breath as I remembered too late I'd applied extra mascara before the date. I was now pretty sure that extra mascara was smeared down my cheeks. I wiped dribble from my mouth again and got myself upright, pulling up my trousers and crashing into the toilet wall as I

did. I stopped and steadied myself again, breathing deeply through a blurred haze. My head was foggy, like I was shipwrecked.

I hurled myself out of the stall, staggering left, then right. I slowed my movements, allowing my body a chance to wake up — it was clearly still asleep and who could blame it? I clutched the sink in front of me, and sure enough, when I surveyed my face, I looked like a drunk, mascara-obsessed panda. Triffic.

I splashed some water on my face and frantically tried to use some tissue to clean it up, but I only managed to smear the mascara over a wider area. I shook my head and laughed at my reflection, mild hysteria swelling inside. If Sienna hadn't already left, she was certain to run like the wind when she saw the horror story walking towards her.

I straightened my hair the best I could, already composing my apologies in my head. But what exactly did you say to someone when you'd left them sitting alone for over half an hour? Did you admit to falling asleep, or make up some emergency? I decided to go with the emergency option.

I drew myself up to my full height, pulling my shoulders back as my mother always told me to. Then I pushed open the door and strode back into the restaurant with as much swagger as I could muster, only to be greeted by an empty table and a half-drunk glass of wine. I spun my gaze around the room but I had to face facts — Sienna had gone and I can't say I blamed her.

I sat down and exhaled, before getting the waiter's attention as my stomach rumbled.

“The other woman — has she left?”

The waiter gave me a sad smile and a nod. “She go,” he said, turning his head towards the door. “And she cancel your food too.”

Shit. This was not going to be good for my dating reputation. I put my head in my hands as my stomach rumbled again. Then I reached into my bag and grabbed my phone, pulling up Sienna's number. I paused, my fingers hovering over the keys. Now I had the phone in my hand, what exactly was I

supposed to say? ‘So sorry, I fell asleep in the toilet’? Try as I might, I couldn’t come up with a better plan. I decided to sleep on it.

I put my phone on the table and glanced at my watch: just gone 9pm. There was still wine left, and I’d wanted to try this restaurant for a while now. Plus, I was starving as my stomach kept reminding me. I needed something to soak up the alcohol.

I signalled to the waiter again.

“Could I still get some food?”

He nodded.

I consulted the menu again, ordered and sat back. At least if the food was as good as the reviews, this night wouldn’t turn out to be a total disaster. Best to look on the bright side.

Just then, ‘Last Christmas’ by Wham! began to flow from the restaurant speakers, presumably to rub salt in my wounds. I had nobody special to give my heart to. I was a sad, sleepy loser.

I poured Sienna’s wine into my glass and saw someone waving out of the corner of my eye. I turned to my left.

It was Melanie Taylor, a smile breaking out on her face as she saw me. She was sitting with what I could only assume was her new fiancée, just two tables along from me.

Oh no, not now. Not when I looked like a starved raccoon.

Before I could react, Melanie was on the move, reaching my table in seconds. Her closely cropped hair was sitting just-so on her head, and I wasn’t sure her smile could get any wider. Clearly, Melanie was loved up.

“How *are* you?” Melanie already had her arms wide open, and her smile had changed to a concerned, pitiful expression that said ‘eating out alone again?’ I wanted to sink under the table. On top of everything, I didn’t need Melanie Taylor to rub her happiness in my face. However, I was out of luck.

“I want you to meet my fiancée!” Melanie turned and beckoned her over with rapid hand movements. I heard a chair scrape back as I braced myself to

be nice — after all, it wasn't Melanie's fault that love was shining on her, but not me.

Within seconds, her new partner was standing beside her, giving me an awkward smile. Melanie Taylor had landed on her feet and no mistake. But hang on, there was something ever-so-familiar about her partner — a smile I knew, piercing almond eyes that I'd looked into before. It couldn't be, could it?

But before my sleepy brain could piece the puzzle together, Melanie had her arm around her girlfriend's shoulders, her face radiating so much happiness, I felt the heat. However, my whole body heated up for a totally different reason now her girlfriend was up close and personal.

I did know those eyes, that mouth.

And from the narrowing of her eyes, she recognised me too.

“Tori, I want you to meet Nic, my fiancée. Nic, this is Tori.”

We both stared at each other and nobody said a word.

I could see Melanie was confused, and rightly so. She'd just introduced her fiancée to one of her friends, and now neither was saying a word to the other. However, if she'd peered inside my head at that moment, she would have seen a ticker-tape parade reading ‘OMG! OMG! OMG!’ circling round my brain.

Nicola Sheen, my first love, had just shown up at my table and she was engaged to my crazy friend. I heard the crescendo in my ears as my heart sank to the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. I wanted to stand up and shake Nicola, ask her what the hell she was doing here after all these years. And engaged to *someone else*.

But I didn't. I just sat and stared. Externally, I was quiet. Inside, I was exploding like a gamma-ray.

After what seemed like an eternity, Nicola put out her hand. “Victoria Hammond?” Her flushed face told me she couldn't believe she was asking.

Truth be told, I couldn't either. I'd been waiting to hear those words and

touch this skin again for over ten years. And now, here she was. I wanted to get up and embrace Nicola, feel her against me after all this time. But I knew that wasn't social etiquette, so I stayed seated.

"Nicola." I shook my head. "All this time, and now you're Melanie's fiancée. I can't believe it!" I didn't mean that quite the way it came out.

Or perhaps I did.

Seeing her was just such a shock.

When she touched me, it took me right back — right back to the library, my bedroom, my heartbreak.

She nodded, still holding my hand. "Bit of a whirlwind, but yes, engaged." She glanced up at Melanie, before refocusing on me.

Her gaze burnt into me, and I had to remember to breathe. Nicola looked older, of course she did. Her hair was shorter, her features fuller, her body more solid. But she was still Nicola Sheen, she still owned those eyes and she still commanded that my eyes couldn't look away.

And of course, she had to meet me just after my failed date when I was looking like *this*. Thanks a bunch, universe.

I stared at her hand, then at Melanie's. There were no rings.

"Haven't got around to it yet," Melanie said as if reading my mind. "Rings are next on the list, aren't they, sweetheart?" She was gripping Nicola's shoulder harder now as if she was trying to stop the situation slipping out of her control. Melanie had brought Nicola over here to gloat. Now it turned out, she was reintroducing me to my first love and I was pretty sure that vibe was seeping out of every single pore of my body.

"I take it you two know each other?" Melanie looked from Nicola to me, then back. Her voice was too high. It scratched my skin.

I nodded. "Went to school together. Best friends for a time, weren't we?" I locked eyes with Nicola. My stomach dropped. Best friends, first kiss, could-have-been lovers. All I knew was the story we'd written at school had never been fully erased, nor fully written.

“We were, but it feels like a different life,” Nicola said. And then she had the good grace to look away.

A wave of nausea hit me as Melanie kissed Nicola on the cheek — it was as if I’d just been slapped. I didn’t even want to think about them having sex.

I shut my eyes, and when I reopened them, Melanie had her concerned face on again. “You know, you’re welcome to come and eat with us if you’re eating on your own.” She looked like she wanted to take a jar of pity and smother it all over me.

I glanced at Nicola, whose face didn’t alter, but I could spy alarm in her eyes — it was a look I was used to seeing when it came to her. Did Melanie know the signs yet? I doubted it.

I shook my head. “That’s kind, but I’m just popping in on the way to meeting someone, so I won’t be long.” It was gone 9pm, so I was clearly lying. I smiled up at Melanie. Could she tell I’d rather stick pins in my eyes than have dinner with them?

If she did, she said nothing. Instead, they walked back to their table with a promise to meet for drinks soon, Nicola Sheen avoiding my gaze.

I couldn’t wait.

I took a slug of wine, refilled my glass to the top and hoped my food arrived soon. I was desperate to turn my head and get a good look at Nicola, but I knew I couldn’t.

Nicola Bloody Sheen. Engaged to Melanie Bloody Taylor.

Holly was not going to believe this, and truth be told, neither did I.

I hadn’t planned on getting drunk tonight, but now there seemed no other option. I downed my wine in a few gulps and ordered another large glass of red from the waiter. I didn’t care how I looked anymore or what else could happen tonight — the roof of my world was already sagging to the point of near collapse. I’d been deserted on a date, fallen asleep with my trousers down and had just bumped into my first love, who was engaged to my friend. Isn’t it ironic?

I made a mental note to call Alanis Morissette and see what she thought.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 3RD



*H*olly had to stop walking, she was laughing so much. “You didn’t?”

I nodded. “I did. I woke myself up dribbling.” I smirked. “And it’s not funny, by the way.”

Holly’s laughter begged to differ. “It’s kinda funny, you have to admit. You go on a date and fall asleep in the toilet? That is the stuff of legend.” She snorted. “I did tell you to slow down with these dates, but I thought you could take three in a week. Clearly I was wrong.”

We were walking around our local park, and it was another beautifully sunny day. To our right, barren trees lined the path ahead. To our left, a group of carol singers were belting out ‘Jingle Bells’ with gusto. I dropped a pound coin into their collecting bucket as we passed and it hit the bottom with a thud.

“You were. Perhaps I’m developing narcolepsy like in that film. Whatever it is, this is going to seriously dent my lesbian kerb appeal.” I kicked a stone and it hit a nearby tree.

Holly chuckled, her grey woollen bobble-hat waggling as she walked. “It’s not ideal.”

I pouted at her and sighed. “We’re into December now and the girlfriend quest isn’t improving, is it? Ruby was a dud, Anna couldn’t leave me quick enough, then on the third... well, you know the rest.”

Holly put an arm around me and squeezed. “You’re being impatient, you just need to relax and give it time. Romance doesn’t just knock on your door — that only happens in those films you love. Romance, like anything worthwhile, takes time and you need to give it space to breathe. You might bump into Sienna again and you’ll live happily ever after. You just never know.”

I raised an eyebrow in Holly’s direction.

She smiled. “Long shot, but it might happen.” She paused, looking away. “Or you might get together with someone you never even thought of. Someone on your doorstep, or someone who’s just about to walk into your life.”

I sat down on a park bench dedicated to a man called Fred — his plaque said he’d loved sitting there, and I could see the appeal. From this bench, the views of the surrounding area were laid out as far as the eye could see.

“Funny you should say that — there’s more,” I told Holly as she sat down next to me.

“What?”

“Last night,” I began. “After Sienna left, I was still hungry. So I ordered some food.” I paused. “And bear in mind, this is just after I’ve woken up with my trousers down and just after I’ve smeared mascara across my face to look like a crazy raccoon lady.”

“Good image,” Holly replied, snorting.

I put my head in my hands just thinking about it, then started to laugh. “Yeah so, I’m sitting there looking gorgeous. Then just before my food arrives, guess who walks up to my table when I’m sitting there like a loser, dining alone?”

“Who?”

“Melanie Taylor.”

I had Holly’s interest now. She spread her hands on her jeans before twisting her body to me. “Was she with her new woman?”

“She was,” I said. “And we know her.”

Now it was Holly’s turn to look surprised. “We do? Who is it?”

“Someone you’ll never guess in a million years.”

A few seconds went by.

“Why aren’t you guessing?”

“You just told me it was pointless, so why would I try?” she said.

Fair point. I took a deep breath. “Melanie Taylor is engaged to Nicola Sheen.”

Holly’s brow furrowed as she took in the news and began to process it. Her face went from disbelief to horror to comedy in a matter of seconds, but then she saw I wasn’t laughing and tempered her reaction. Holly, of all people, knew my feelings on Nicola Sheen.

“Hang on,” she said, circling her finger as if she was dialling back time. “Nicola Sheen is a *lesbian*?” Her voice rose at the end of her sentence.

“Apparently, yes.”

Holly let out a low whistle. “Holy shit. And I bet Melanie Taylor has no idea that you were the woman who started her on the road to the promised land of lesbianville. You were the magnet who drew her in—”

“—and I was the one she fucked over for Craig Dale. *She* might not know, but I do.” I shook my head, still swallowing down disbelief. “Can you believe it? Of all the women in the whole world, Melanie Taylor has to go and meet her. *Online*. This has been my dream for over ten years. How come it didn’t happen to me?”

“Because you weren’t registered on the app?”

I shot Holly a look. “It’s ridiculous. She’s known her for two months and they’re *getting married*.” My cheeks had flushed crimson and I could tell my ear lobes were following suit. “How can it be that Melanie Taylor has stolen my first love and is now going to be living the life I was meant to be living?”

A shard of Holly’s laughter pierced the air. “Your life? Slight over-reaction perhaps?” Holly peered down at me. “And what happened to being

happy for Melanie, seeing her turn over a new leaf and find happiness?”

“That was before that happiness was attached to Nicola Sheen,” I replied.

We both stared out into the milky December sunshine. Nearby, a small child tottered, then fell over, but no crying ensued — he just got up and carried on with the aid of his mum.

“What did she say when she saw you?” Holly crossed her right leg over her left and concentrated on my answer.

“Neither of us said much. I mean, all these years, wondering where she was and whether or not that kiss had meant anything. And now she shows up in London and she’s a *lesbian*.”

“She didn’t mention the panda eyes?” Holly was grinning now, barely able to contain herself.

“Let’s assume she was overwhelmed with my beauty,” I said, smiling despite myself.

Holly’s mouth twitched. “And what did she look like, more importantly? Ten years can do things to people. I don’t look much like the tall girl with the flowing hair any more.”

I stretched my neck backwards and exhaled. “She looked like Nicola,” I said before glancing sideways. “Close up, I would know those eyes and that mouth anywhere. She was a bit more filled out, but not fat, and her hair was about the same length, but styled — very chic. But she’s still very much Nicola Sheen.”

“Soon to be Nicola Sheen-Taylor or vice versa.”

I sat forward and put my head in my hands, shaking my head as I did.

“There’s nothing you can do about this, you know that, right? Yes, you once kissed Nicola Sheen and ever since you have put her on a pedestal. But she exists in a bubble, in a snapshot of time. You kissed Nicola once when you were 16, and she’s still the benchmark of first kisses. But here’s a newsflash — you don’t know Nicola Sheen. She dumped you like a hot potato after you kissed, and then she got pregnant, which was a huge over-

reaction if you don't mind me saying."

I sat back up and glanced sideways at Holly. "But she was my first love."

Holly nodded. "I know — we all had one. That doesn't mean when we meet them later on in life, they're still our destiny. Everybody needs a first love, it's a marker. But then that's done — it's a first love, you move on and you meet someone new." Holly paused, clearly waiting to see if I was listening.

I was.

She carried on. "Nicola's done that — she's come out and she's met someone new. And now it's time for you to do that too. Nicola Sheen might not have given you another thought after your kiss. You might have been just one in a long line of kisses, leading up to her first girlfriend. Don't assume she's hankered after you for the past ten years in the same way that you have her."

Holly's face had turned stern now — she was flushed from her speech and her eyes were watery. I never knew Holly felt like this about my Nicola Sheen obsession. I was somewhat startled, and a bit hurt. Way to kick a girl when she's down.

I glanced at her nervously before replying. "I know all that. I know she's probably not given me another thought, and now probably won't again after seeing me in such a state. But then again, we were each other's first female kiss—"

"How do you know that?" Holly threw her hands up in the air as she spoke. "That's your presumption, but you don't know for sure." She paused. "What would you say if I told you I snogged Nicola Sheen?"

My mouth fell open. "You didn't?" My words came out in a whisper.

Holly began to laugh. "No, I didn't. But I might have. You may or may not have been her first kiss. But even if I had, it was over ten years ago!" Holly shook her head. "You're ridiculous sometimes, you know that?"

I licked my lips and stared at her. "Why are you getting so wound up

about this?”

“Because I have to live with your crazy obsessions and then I have to pick up the pieces when things don’t work out as you’ve planned them in your mind. It’s always me, Tori. Always.” She ran a hand through her hair and stretched her legs out front. “Plus, I want you to be happy and I don’t want to see you hurt. And that will not happen if you run after Nicola Sheen like a lovesick puppy. At best, she’ll declare undying love and call off her wedding — and that would be awkward. At worst, she’ll stare at you oddly and walk away, and then you’ll examine what you did wrong for the next year. I would like to stop this pattern of behaviour. I’m suggesting you don’t follow your heart blindly up a dead end and perhaps think about things before you act. Okay?”

I considered Holly’s words as the air sagged in front of me, now silent save for the carol singers across the slab of grass who were singing ‘Once In Royal David’s City’. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, elevated after Holly’s outburst. When did I start to annoy her so much? As far as I was aware, we got on great, although the obsessive trait had been brought up before not just by Holly, but also by my mum and other friends. So maybe she had a point.

I put out a hand in Holly’s direction and gave her a weak smile. “I won’t do anything stupid, I promise,” I said.

She raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes — I’m going to be adult about this. We’ll go to Melanie and Nicola’s wedding, and I’ll clap and cheer in all the right places. I won’t return to being 16 again.” I pursed my lips to underline my intention.

Holly’s shoulders slumped and she exhaled. “Okay, that’s good to know.” Then she put her arm around me and I leaned into her. “No stalking Melanie and Nicola on social media either.”

I nodded my head firmly. “I promise.”

But even I knew I was lying.

MONDAY DECEMBER 5TH



The following Monday arrived and I had no dates set up for this week. Holly had dragged me out around town on Saturday and had banned the topic of Melanie Taylor and Nicola Sheen from our vocabulary, which had been quite a trial. It was a good job she couldn't read my thoughts.

However, being busy meant I had no time to obsess, and we'd even managed to have a fun night out on the scene, slugging back far too much mulled wine as we got into the Christmas spirit. Hence yesterday had been taken up with lying on the sofa, eating crisps and watching re-runs of *Orange Is The New Black*.

Also, yesterday I'd only spent around an hour checking Melanie Taylor's Facebook account to see pictures of her with Nicola. Two months' worth of photos, it turned out. Melanie and Nicola on a river boat on the Thames, having a sunset dinner, posing in front of phone boxes. There was even one of them kissing in the street, both wearing thick coats, eyes closed. They looked like they were in love. I cursed myself for unfollowing Melanie months earlier when her updates had got too annoying.

Today I came into work early, fired up and ready to take on the week — but my first port of call was a cup of coffee.

Sal walked in just as I'd finished grinding beans and gave me a grin. "Morning, No. 1 Lesbian — good weekend?"

I nodded. “It was okay.”

She put a hand on her hip. “And how was Serena?”

“Sienna,” I corrected, slotting the ground coffee into the machine and pressing the button.

Sal clicked her fingers together. “Right, Sienna.” She paused and cocked her head. “But I’m guessing from the look on your face, it didn’t go as well as you might have hoped.”

I laughed. “It didn’t — but that’s not Sienna’s fault. It’s mine. I fell asleep halfway through the date. On the loo.” I held Sal’s gaze as the words sunk in.

She took a moment to reply. “How do you fall asleep on the loo?” she finally asked, grabbing a cup from the cupboard and starting on her own coffee as mine came to an end.

I waved my hand to bat the comment away. “It’s a long story, and one I have consigned to the part of my brain marked ‘Dumb things I have done in my time on Earth, folder two’.”

Sal smirked. “Folder two? You’re planning on a collection?”

“Judging from the first 27 years, I’d say it was highly likely.”

I grabbed some bread from the communal bag and slotted them into the toaster, just as I heard my phone go in the office. My eyes widened. “Gotta grab this, expecting a call,” I told Sal, picking up my coffee and brushing past her at speed.

“That’s what I like to see, eager staff!” Sal called after me.

I got to my desk and banged down my coffee, just getting to the call before it rang off. I needn’t have run, though — it wasn’t the client I was expecting, it was Holly.

“Hey,” I said into my phone. “You missing me already? We only saw each other an hour ago.”

“Ha ha,” she replied. “Just calling to remind you about those tickets.”

“Tickets?” I searched my mind for what she might be referring to.

“For the Dixie Chicks gig? You said you were going to get them, remember? Anyway, they go on sale today at 10am, and I’m not going to be anywhere near a computer, so don’t forget. This is your one-hour warning call.”

I nodded. “Dixie Chicks, goddit.”

And that’s when I noticed the burning smell, right before the building’s fire alarm started screeching in my ear.

“What’s that noise?” Holly asked.

“Who left this toast unattended?” asked Maureen, our office manager. She folded her arms in the kitchen doorway and scoured the office looking for the culprit.

Bugger. “I gotta go,” I told Holly. “I think I just set the office on fire.”

I hit the red button on my phone and made my way sheepishly to the kitchen to fess up to Maureen. She already had the offending, blackened toast on the kitchen counter and was just putting on her high-vis fire warden jacket as I arrived. No matter what Maureen claimed, I think she secretly took pleasure in such episodes — any excuse to don the high-vis and have her authority ratcheted to the next level. If Maureen hadn’t been a prefect at school, they’d missed a trick.

“Sorry — it was me. I got a phone call and rushed to take it.” I bit my lip and gave Maureen my best ‘sorry’ face.

In return, she gave me a withering look — Maureen and I tolerated each other, rather than took pleasure in each other’s existence. Her look told me this was no more than she expected.

“Tell that to the fire team when they turn up on a wild goose chase,” she said, tutting. She rolled her eyes for good measure, then pushed past me and began shouting at the office to pack up and get out.

I made my way back into the scrum, grabbed my coffee, bag and coat, then joined the throng now exiting the office via the stairs. It wasn’t just our office either — it was the whole building. A slight pang of guilt zapped

through me, but then I was standing on the cold winter pavement outside our building, chatting to our finance team about their weekend. Fire alarms weren't unusual in our building, so most people took them in their stride. If there ever was an *actual* fire, it would be a shock to the system.

Ten minutes later, the giant red fire engines skidded round the corner, bringing the central London traffic to a halt. There were two of them, which seemed overkill for two pieces of toast. However, as our purchase ledger whizz Simon pointed out, they didn't know that — they just thought a building was on fire.

I winced as he said it.

The trucks parked up and a bunch of burly-looking firefighters jumped down from their trucks, their over-sized gear looking out of place on a normal city street. They walked towards Maureen who was practising her best official face, and then to my horror, she pointed towards me, before beckoning me over. I put my head down and crimson embarrassment leaked into my cheeks as I came face to face with no less than four firefighters, three men and one... Nicola Sheen. I blinked rapidly, my heartbeat thudding in my chest.

Not even in my wildest dreams had Nicola Sheen been a lesbian *and* a firefighter.

“This is the culprit,” Maureen told them, her pudgy finger pointed in my direction as if she was about to send me to the Tower for treason.

I smiled at the group. “Sorry — I usually watch my toast like a hawk,” I lied.

“Try to do so in future,” said Nicola, all business-like, as if attending a fire caused by your ex was an everyday occurrence. “Toasters account for a large amount of our call-outs, which is a lot of wasted time.”

I nodded and furrowed my brow.

Nicola still wasn't smiling.

“Will do,” I said.

“We’ll go inside to do our check, then you can go back in,” said the tallest of the male firefighters, nodding towards one of his colleagues who followed him in. Maureen began chatting to the other man, which left me and Nicola standing in the sharp December cold, wind needling my face as I tried to remain calm.

“We really must stop meeting like this,” I said.

Finally, a semblance of a smile on Nicola’s red lips. “We really must. Ten years of nothing, and then twice in a couple of days.” She paused. “But then, you always did know how to make an impact on people, didn’t you?”

I gulped down air, probably looking like a manic seagull. Nicola Sheen had just told me I’d made an impact on her.

Shut the front door.

“You never said you were a firefighter when I saw you the other night.” I rubbed my hands together in a bid to keep them busy.

“We didn’t really swap much more than pleasantries, did we? I think Melanie was just freaked out we knew each other.” Nicola’s fire helmet was pulled down, nearly obscuring her eyes, but I could see they were watching me closely. “She wasn’t the only one who was surprised, though — you were the last person I expected to bump into.”

“I hope it was a pleasant surprise.” My tone was light, not giving away the fact I so desperately wanted her to be pleased. *Please be pleased.*

“Of course.” She was rubbing her thumb and index finger together nervously. “It was lovely to see you. A shock, but lovely.”

There was silence for a few moments as we assessed each other. Up close and without Melanie’s prying glare, I could study Nicola’s face properly — and she still held a certain something. Sure, she looked older, but age sat well with her — she seemed comfortable in her own skin. What’s more, she still possessed deep, knowing eyes and full, rounded lips. Yep, those lips were still appealing. I was looking at them when she spoke.

“We should get together anyway, catch up,” she said. “Me and Melanie,

you and whoever. Are you seeing anyone?”

“Nobody special,” I said. “And it would be great to catch up.” I gave Nicola my widest smile.

In response, she took off her hat and ruffled her fair hair, which was shoulder-length but currently tied in a ponytail.

“Cool. I’ll see if I can work something out in between organising the wedding and working. If Melanie can’t make it, it’ll just have to be you and me, like old times.”

Which old times was she referring to? The one in the library, where we’d shared that kiss that changed my life? Just thinking about it made me want to do it all again, right there on the pavement before I’d even had my morning coffee. I felt a rush of desire spreading like fire through my body, which was ironic, seeing as Nicola was meant to put fires out, not start them. But she never had where I was concerned.

Oh Nicola Sheen, what do you do to me? Even after all these years.

“I would love that,” I replied. *And I would love to kiss you again, feel you pressed against me.*

“And next time—” Nicola said, stroking my arm with her right hand.

I jolted slightly at her touch. “Yes?”

“—Next time, maybe opt for porridge?” And then she gave me a wink.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say Nicola Sheen was flirting with me.

“I’ll do that,” I said before giggling like a teenager. Which in that moment, I was.

Nicola’s colleague interrupted us — he was sporting a bushy moustache which was either a hangover from Movember or an ill-advised fashion statement.

“We can take one rig back to the station now and the other can follow — you okay with that, boss?”

“Yep, sounds like a plan.”

I opened my eyes wider. Nicola was the boss. A fire *chief*. How

incredibly sexy.

“Good to see you,” Nicola said. “But next time, let’s do it without a fire in tow?” She raised a delicious eyebrow in my direction.

“We can certainly try,” I replied.

Nicola turned to her colleague and they strode back towards their bright red vehicle. I watched her retreating figure all the way, before she turned around and jogged back to me, fishing her phone from her pocket.

“Should we... exchange numbers or something? So we can get in touch?” She waved her phone in the air in front of me.

I nodded, fishing in my bag for mine. “Sure, good idea.”

“You know, you’re not supposed to grab personal items when there’s a fire alarm,” she added.

“When you’re the firestarter, I think different rules apply.”

She held me with her gaze as I took the phone from her hands and began to punch in my number. Only a highly-trained eye would be able to tell my hands were shaking slightly. It only took a few seconds, and when I looked back up, her gaze was still on me, all-encompassing, total.

I wanted to tip-toe across the thread that was drawing us back together, to try and unravel what this all meant. Did Nicola turning up here mean anything? Or was it just pure coincidence? Whatever, Nicola’s intense stare told me she was trying to figure it out too.

Neither one of us spoke.

Then Nicola broke the silence. “It’s good to see you again, Victoria.”

Victoria. Nobody called me that apart from my mum. And of course, Nicola. She’d once told me she loved the name and to shorten it would be a crime, so Victoria it was. When it came out of my mum’s mouth, I hated it. But when it came out of her mouth — it still made me wilt. It had back then, and it did now. She was smiling at me again now, but I couldn’t read her expression. Did Nicola have any regrets? I would love to have known.

I pressed the green button so that Nicola had my number, then when the

call connected, I handed back her phone.

She gave me a small salute. “See you soon.”

Then she sprinted back to her vehicle, cracked the engine and ploughed back into the London morning traffic.

I watched her go and managed not to wave in a pathetic fashion.

I tried not to believe in fate and destiny, but sometimes, it had a way of making you sit up and take notice.



“NICOLA SHEEN IS A FIREFIGHTER? You’re kidding me!”

Holly was cooking dinner for us — fish tacos, which was one of my favourites from her repertoire. She was hunched over the frying pan as usual, her long, lean frame dealing with life from a high vantage point.

I drummed my fingers on the kitchen counter as I grinned at her. “I was as surprised as you when she jumped off the fire engine, believe me.” I paused. “Meanwhile, Maureen was less than pleased with me.”

Holly cleared her throat. “I can’t say I blame her.” She moved the cod around the pan, before adding the seasoning mix. “So I take it you were cool, calm and collected and didn’t blush like a school girl?” She didn’t look over to see my reaction.

“I was as a matter of fact, cool as a cucumber. She told me off, we had a chat about how I should eat porridge and then she went on her way. End of story.” Holly didn’t need to know all the facts, she’d just disapprove. She’s not so hot on fate or destiny.

Holly turned her head. “Really? You didn’t ask her if she still loves you like you love her?”

I wafted a hand nonchalantly through the air. “Nope. I was the picture of maturity. Well, as mature as you can be after you’ve burnt toast and managed to evacuate your building.”

Holly glanced my way as she cooked, and I could see she was wondering whether to believe me, and also how far she should probe.

“Well good, if that’s the case,” she said, slotting the tacos in the hot oven. “I’m proud of you.” She turned and looked me in the eye, a hint of something I couldn’t quite place held in her gaze. “Maybe you were listening to me the other day.” She paused. “Although, I can’t see how you managed to contain yourself. Especially if she was in her fire gear — you’re gaga for a woman in uniform at the best of times.”

I rummaged in the cutlery drawer to set the table. “Who isn’t? Don’t tell me you wouldn’t be interested if your first love strode out of a fire truck and into your life?”

Holly tilted her head and grinned. “I guess it would have a certain *je ne sais quoi*.” She paused. “A hot firefighter turning up at my work would have been very welcome today. A little light relief from the stresses of modern life.”

“Who was it who was lecturing me on love the other day? Perhaps you need to start a little fire at your work and see who turns up.”

“If it’s Nicola Sheen, that would be *way* too complex,” she said, laughing. “Besides, I heard a rumour she’s engaged.”

I swiped at Holly with a tea towel. “Ha ha — you know what I mean. You need to be ready for love when it comes along and that might be tomorrow. Romance and self-help books make me open to it.” I pointed to my chest. “When love comes knocking, I’m going to have the flat ship-shape, I’ll have flossed and my hair will be perfect. I’m going to be ready.”

Holly turned off the pan, lifted the fish on to a plate and squeezed lime juice over the top. “I’ll be perfectly ready, thanks.” She didn’t look up. “And I won’t be the one searching through my pile of exes for someone to love.” She retrieved the taco shells and carried the tomatoes, lettuce and guacamole to our small dining table, pushed up against the left wall of our lounge.

I grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and followed her to the table.

“But I’m not going to argue with you now — not after I’ve cooked this lovely dinner. In the meantime, while you’re dusting off and updating your Nicola Sheen fantasies, what’s in store for the rest of this week? Any more dates in the pipeline?” Holly bit into her taco and the crunch may well have been heard in Yorkshire.

“I do. Tomorrow I have Jenny, an Australian web designer. And then on Thursday, I have a woman called Spanish_Vixen89. I’m holding out high hopes for her.”

Holly nodded, swallowing her food before replying. “She sounds like she might be a sultry Mediterranean lady. Or she sounds like she might be 89.”

“I’ve seen her picture, so I’m assuming she was born in 1989.”

“And if she turns out to be 89?”

“Then she’s looking really good and it makes a fantastic story to tell. Plus, don’t be so ageist — she might be absolutely lovely.” I crunched into my tacos and savoured the flavours — fish, lime, coriander, avocado and spices — they were delicious. Holly was going to make someone a perfect wife. “So you see, I’m getting on with life and I am not at all focused on Nicola Sheen who is marrying Melanie Taylor. In fact, I couldn’t be happier for them.”

Holly nodded her head slowly. “If you say it enough times, you might actually believe it.”

I stuck out my tongue at her.

“So, I have a question.” Holly was holding up one finger to demonstrate that fact.

“Shoot,” I replied, licking my bottom lip to rescue some stray guacamole.

“What happens if you hit it off with both Jenny *and* Spanish Vixen? How will you choose?”

I chewed my mouthful and wrinkled my nose. “I’ll worry about that when it happens. If it does, it would be a miracle.”

Holly laughed. “And did you get the Dixie Chicks tickets in all the

excitement you had at work?” Her face told me she had absolutely zero faith I’d remembered to do it.

I nodded. “I did — two tickets booked. You shall go to the ball.”

Holly gave me a dazzling grin, showing off her seriously perfect teeth. “This is going to be the best Christmas run-up ever — Dixie Chicks playing so close to my birthday. I cannot wait!”

TUESDAY DECEMBER 6TH



I wasn't messing Holly around — I was still on a quest for a Christmas girlfriend. And to prove it, tonight I was turning my attention to Jenny, who was not from the block, but rather from West London.

Jenny was a web designer in a corporate bank, but apart from that, she fitted the Aussie label to a tee. She had smooth, treacle-toned skin that went on for days, freckles across her nose and shoulder-length fair hair that was conditioned to within an inch of its life — I didn't spot one solitary split end. Her sentences still went up at the end even though she'd lived in London for three years, and she had a habit of shortening words, Aussie style. Afternoon became arvo, ambulance became ambo. It was an endearing quality that made me smile.

We met near Liverpool Street at a pop-up food park — one of those London peculiarities that people from outside the city would scoff at. A disused car park, it was now stuffed with food trucks, drinks stands and punters, with hundreds of multi-coloured Christmas lights strung all around, along with an abundance of metal umbrella heaters to ward off the cold. We stood near a burrito van with our mugs of mulled cider, our breath writing messages in the air around us. The speakers were blaring out a procession of Christmas hits, currently a personal favourite, The Pogues And Kirsty MacColl's 'Fairytale Of New York'. I sung the last chorus out loud, swaying

my cider back and forth.

“You’ve got a good voice,” Jenny said.

I smiled modestly. “Thanks.” Ten points to Jenny.

“Have you been on many dates through the app?” She shivered as she spoke, which I found cute. I’ve no idea why she was shivering though as she appeared to be dressed in what I can only describe as a duvet — her coat honestly seemed to be 100-tog all the way around.

“A few,” I said. “But this is definitely the most Christmassy one yet. I mean, Santa statues, Christmas tunes and fake snow. You could almost forget you were in a car park in London and believe you were in Lapland, couldn’t you?”

Jenny laughed. “Very nearly.” She paused, looking around. “I still love this though, you know? The Christmas lights, the cold, the snow — even if it is fake. That’s what drew me to your ad — the Christmas theme.”

I smiled. “I’m glad. Christmas has always been my favourite time of year, hands down.” An image of my dad in a Santa hat popped into my head. I pushed it away.

“I love Christmas in Oz too, with the barbies on the beach in your shorts and thongs,” Jenny added. “But Christmas as depicted in all the films and songs is cold, so it’s great to experience it. When I go back to Oz, I plan to buy some fake snow.”

“Do you have plans to move back soon?”

She nodded. “Not imminent, but I only have a five-year visa. So it’s going to be in the next couple of years.” She looked me dead in the eye. “Unless I find a gorgeous English wife to persuade me otherwise, of course. I’m open to offers.”

Jenny gave me a lazy smile, and then before I could think of an appropriate riposte, she kissed me. Her lips were moist and she tasted of alcoholic apples and cinnamon.

When she pulled away a few seconds later, I opened my eyes, surprise

radiating from them. I'd only had one drink but the car park spun with possibility. I grinned. "That's what I like about Aussies — never shy about coming forward."

She licked her lips, then dropped her gaze to my lips once more before replying. "I always figure if you find someone you like, you shouldn't leave it ambiguous, or wait till you're both too drunk to remember. You should let them know straight off the bat — no messing. And I like you, you're cute. Plus, you're very English, and I *love* English."

My smile grew wider. "Is that right?" I replied. "Well I couldn't be more English if I tried, so you're in luck!" I skipped over my dad's Spanish roots for the purpose of story-telling for tonight. My mum was from Croydon, so I was sure that tipped the balance.

I poured the contents of my mug down my throat and held it up. "You want some more?" I asked.

Jenny smirked at me before pressing her lips to mine once more. I could get used to this.

After a few seconds she pulled back, her breath still on my face, her eyelids fluttering wildly.

"Yes, please," she replied.

I'd never heard a woman purr before, but there was a first time for everything.



AFTER DRINKS and an incredible burrito from the food truck of the moment, we'd decamped to the outdoor pop-up disco nextdoor, bumping and grinding in our coats and hats, breath circling above us, mulled cider cooling in our mugs. The air was rich with the smell of hot, sugary drinks and pine ferns, and we were on a magical Christmas journey that ended with a Tube back to Jenny's place.

We re-emerged to street level just after 10.30pm, the night air holding an extra chill now. Jenny's house was only five minutes' walk away, but it wasn't until we got inside that I realised how much she was living the Aussie London dream, sharing the house with nine other people.

Our magical Christmas date bubble burst with a loud bang when we walked into the lounge and found a slew of bodies on the sofas and floor watching *The Big Bang Theory*. The room smelt of cheap deodorant and beer.

"Hey everyone — this is Tori." Jenny twirled me around as if she'd just bought me in a shop.

There was a general murmur of hello from the group.

"Okay, see ya later!"

Jenny took my hand once more and led me into the kitchen, which reminded me of student days gone by. The counters were stacked with dirty dishes, the sink full too, and overhead, an old-fashioned washing line was full of someone's off-white underwear. I wasn't sure the kitchen was the best place to be drying laundry.

Jenny, however, took it all in her stride. "Hazards of living with so many people!"

She smiled, handed me a glass of water and led me up two flights of stairs to her room, which was compact to say the least. Squeezed into the space was her unmade double bed shoved against a wall, an Ikea wardrobe and a small desk which was overflowing with empty water bottles and jewellery — rings, necklaces and bracelets. Plus, lying on the small slice of floor running down the right of her double bed was a pink sleeping bag, scrunched up and lying on top of a yoga mat.

I pointed towards it. "You expecting company?"

She nodded. "Yeah — my friend Edie is staying at the moment. She's over from Sydney for a month, but we've got too many people in the lounge so she's taking my floor." Jenny paused, then kissed me again. Her lips were dry. "Don't worry though," she added. "Edie knows the score, so she won't

disturb us. If I bring someone back, she knows to give me some space.”

Thump — another blow to my ego. I was just another in a long line of Jenny hook-ups. Even Edie was in on the secret, and she’d been here less than a month. I’d fallen for Jenny’s lines and now here I was, about to have sex with her. Or I could leave. *Should I leave?* Then again, Jenny was attractive and I’d always been taught never to look a gift horse in the mouth. I wasn’t about to start now.

It turned out that Jenny was a one-woman sexual whirlwind — she hadn’t waited to kiss me, and she didn’t stand on ceremony in the bedroom either. Within minutes, my shirt was off and she was sucking my breasts between her teeth, her hands roaming my back. This was a well-rehearsed routine. Another five minutes and I was naked, lying flat on my back on her bed, Jenny looming above me. Her hair fell on to my breasts and all this without shedding a single stitch of clothing. Jenny was *such* a top.

And then she tried to fuck me, only she kept hitting the target, then missing.

Honestly, she *kept* missing. It took me back to my early years, almost making me feel nostalgic. *Almost*.

“Ow!” I said, jumping as her fingers stabbed me for the third time. We’d drunk a few ciders so I wasn’t expecting finesse, but this was something else.

“Sorry!” she mumbled.

After the fourth time of asking, I reached down.

“Try this,” I said, guiding her fingers in.

She grinned lazily at me.

However, once she got her bearings, there was no let up from the steam train that was Jenny. She was on a mission to make me come and I was down with that. After her initial fumbling, Jenny remembered what to do and had me sliding to a climax precisely 14 minutes after I’d first entered her bedroom. I know, because Jenny’s bedside alarm clock told me so.

Before I could get my breath back, Jenny was naked and on top of me,

grinding into me. She leaned forward, her breasts falling on to mine, covering my neck with kisses. And then she began to nip at my neck. And then suck on it, hard, with her teeth.

I flinched. Was she trying to give me a hickey? Had I time-travelled back to my teens?

I pushed her off and she looked surprised, her mouth hanging open, her eyes still hungry.

“You not into that?” she asked in a slurred drawl.

I shook my head. “Not so much.”

She threw back her head and chuckled. “Okay, we can just cut straight to the chase,” she replied, lowering her mouth back to my neck and then my ear, this time giving me feather-light kisses. “And if you hurry, you can still get the last Tube home.”

How’s that for a bucket of cold water on my libido?

Still, Jenny’s perky breasts and flat stomach went some way to reigniting my desire. I cupped her arse, then slid up and into her — she was so ready. I slid my tongue into her welcoming mouth and began a rhythm with my fingers — I was feeling something of a stud as Jenny moaned above me, her wetness sliding down my hand.

Then she sat up, threw her head back, and began to chant while riding me. When I say chant, it was more like shouting. She was *really* bellowing out the words for everyone to hear. I was thankful we were on the second floor. If she had the room next to the lounge, I’m sure half of them would have been joining us by now. As it was, they were all probably used to this sideshow.

“Oh! Yes!” Jenny shouted, levering herself up and down.

There was only me and her in the room, but it felt like we had an audience.

“Deeper! I love it! Fuck! Me! Harder!” And then she became erratic, bouncing up and down on me now with a staccato rhythm. With every movement of her body, another word spurted out of her mouth.

“I! Love! Having! Sex! With! Women!”

Oh. My. God. She really had just said that. Who the hell was this woman?
I narrowed my eyes. *Focus.*

My concentration clearly paid dividends, because within minutes Jenny’s muscles were spasming and her insides clutching my fingers, then Jenny was arching her back and crying out. Up high, with her breasts bouncing, she was just the sort of woman I went for. Eventually, she grew tired and lay down beside me, her head lolling lazily in my direction, a half-smile on her face.

“You’re okay, you know that?” she said.

I couldn’t think of anything to say.

Just then, there was a knock at Jenny’s door.

“Who is it?” she said.

“Edie!” a voice replied.

“Open!” Jenny shouted back.

What? With us lying naked and uncovered, in a cloud of sex? Was she fucking crazy?

I sat up, scrabbling to grab the duvet from the bottom of the bed, when in walked Jenny’s room-mate, Edie. She looked like she’d just rocked up off an Aussie beach, all blonde tangled hair and brown limbs.

She smiled at us as if this was an everyday occurrence — it crossed my mind it might be.

“Just getting that black top, Jen, sorry!” Her voice was sing-song and didn’t carry an ounce of apology. She rummaged in Jenny’s wardrobe, before finding the top and holding it up. “Ta-da!” she said, before backing out of the room. “Please,” she said, shutting the door with a grin. “Get back to whatever it was you were doing.”

Jenny took her at her word, and before I had a chance to speak, she was straddling me again, pushing my hand back inside her. The woman was insatiable. And slightly unhinged. Jenny began to grind herself up and down on top of me.

How long did I have before she started screaming again?

I glanced at the clock: 10.58.

Jenny was right.

If we hurried, I would be able to catch the Tube home.

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 7TH



Holly was leaning against the kitchen counter and grinning at my story. “So are you seeing her again?”

I rolled my eyes. “Absolutely. I mean, who could resist the lesbian bucking bronco? She nearly broke my bloody hand.” I massaged my knuckles and flexed my hand as I said it, but even I had to laugh at the comedy of it all.

“It’s a great story to tell, you have to admit,” Holly replied, smiling.

“Hmmm,” I replied. “Maybe in a month or so. But for now, it’s still a little too raw.” I paused. “Mind you, it was definitely a first — whispering the Tube times in my ear just after I came. She was original, I’ll give her that.”

Holly let out a bark of laughter this time. “Perhaps you were the early shift.”

“Reassuring, thanks.”

“Go back, just for me,” she said, pumping her fists up and down in excitement. “Just to see what she’s got in store for date two. You don’t know — maybe she’ll invite her flatmate to join in.” Holly shot me a wink.

I laughed, then shook my head. “It crossed my mind that’s what was going to happen at the time — that this was a set-up. And what could I have done at that point? I was naked and weak — I’d just *come*.”

Holly shrugged. “You could have thanked the lesbian goddesses and

embraced the moment,” she said. “You really have picked them so far, though. Perhaps you need some help with your vetting process.”

I ran my tongue along my top lip. “Perhaps you’re right.”

Holly ripped the top off a breakfast yoghurt and licked it clean. “Anyway, I have some news.” She was suddenly bashful. “Spurred on by your actions, I have a date tonight too — she’s five years younger than me and she likes badminton. So if all else fails, I’ve got a new badminton partner.”

“That’s the spirit,” I replied. “Reach for the stars and you might land in Milton Keynes.”

Holly waved her yoghurt spoon at me. “Shuddup.”

“What’s this woman’s name?”

Holly blushed. “You don’t want to know.”

“I do,” I said, interest piqued. “What is it?”

Holly shook her head. “It’s bizarre.”

I furrowed my brow and shook my head. “What’s she called?”

Holly took a deep breath. “Her name’s Ivy.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re joking. Holly and Ivy?”

Holly started to laugh now, nodding. “It’s ridiculous, I know.”

“Or fated. You’d make the front page of the papers if you got married. Especially if you did it on Christmas Day.” I clapped my hands with glee.

Holly finished up her yoghurt and chucked the carton in the bin. “Yes, thank you, but she’s probably going to hate me on sight. Or she’s doing it for a laugh.” She paused. “But anyway, back to you — when are you going out with Spanish Vixen lady?”

I sipped my coffee. “Tomorrow — I have a night off tonight. And if you’re going to be out with Ivy, I can do what I like, can’t I? I might lounge around here naked, sipping champagne and eating sushi.” As soon as I said it, I had a vision of Nicola Sheen lounging on the sofa beside me, dressed in her full uniform, begging me to strip it off. My cheeks coloured and I crossed my legs as my clit twitched into life.

Holly fixed me with an intense stare. “Nakedness *and* champagne? Maybe I should call off my date and stay in,” she said.

“You can’t stand Ivy up. Ivy of all people,” I said, giving her a wink.

Holly shook her head, bent down and kissed me on the cheek. Her head stayed near mine for a couple of seconds longer than I expected, and the look she gave me sent a shiver down my spine.

The kind of shiver normally reserved for Nicola Sheen.

The kind of shiver I didn’t normally associate with Holly.

A question mark hung in my mind and I saw the same one reflected back in Holly’s face. It was all too much to process before I’d even had a coffee.

“Have a good day,” I said, my voice sketchy.

She held my gaze. “You too.”

Her shoes squeaked as she twisted on the kitchen floor, as though about to say something, but then checked herself. Instead, Holly disappeared out the door.

I had no idea what had just happened, but I was slightly breathless.



I DIDN’T OPT for the nakedness in the end — it always sounds more glamorous than the reality. Instead, I watched a soppy Christmas film, heated a pizza and drank the end of a lovely red we had leftover from the weekend, followed by two mince pies with cream. I toasted my dad as I ate them, and hoped that wherever he was, they celebrated Christmas too.

It was good to have some space, good to have some time to myself. And whenever my mind wandered, it always seemed to stray back to the same topic: Nicola Sheen. Who certainly wasn’t the teenage dreamboat I recalled, but she still had something. She had charisma, she had my memories, she had me. And she had Melanie Taylor.

I picked up my phone and scrolled through to Nicola’s number, staring at

it, willing her to ring. But why would she? She was engaged, after all. Yet there had definitely been something the other day — something in her eyes. Something that told me she was curious, just like I'd been. Where might things have gone if circumstances had been different? If we'd kissed in my bedroom all those years ago, for instance, and not in the library? She might not have run so quickly, that's for sure.

I threw my phone down on the sofa and went to make a cup of tea, grabbing a couple of biscuits from the barrel on my way back. It was lovely to just sit and relax and not have to be on a first date. First dates were draining — especially when they involved sex.

When I sat back down, I had a text — was it Holly making sure I was decent? No, it was from Nicola Sheen.

'Hi, I'm in your area tomorrow pm. Fancy a coffee & a catch-up? Nicola.'

A coffee and a catch-up. What did that mean? Was coffee code for something else? Was it wrong to hope that it was? I scanned my social calendar, but remembered I had a date with Spanish_Vixen89 tomorrow night. Damn. Should I cancel? No, I probably shouldn't.

Besides, Nicola Sheen was engaged.

I texted back to tell her I had plans tomorrow night, but she told me this was an afternoon coffee date, so I agreed.

Tomorrow, I was having coffee with the woman who altered the course of my life, followed by drinks with a Spanish Vixen.

Tomorrow seemed monumental already.

THURSDAY DECEMBER 8TH



Nicola turned up puffed and dishevelled from bridal shopping and in need of a pick-me-up. We'd arranged to meet at a coffee shop round the corner from my work and Nicola's face spelled tiredness: her eyes were shaded grey, her skin dry, her nose runny. She needed an energy boost, along with a plate of superfoods and some quality concealer. However, as I really didn't know her that well, I decided to keep that to myself.

We sat down with our lattes.

"You okay?" I asked, even though it was plain she wasn't.

She gave me a pained smile. "It's just been a weird day, and it's not something I can really speak to Melanie about. Wedding dress shopping is freaking me out. Reminding me of the first time round." She took a sip of her coffee and recoiled — it was too hot.

I stared at her. "First time round?" What the hell was she talking about?

She pursed her lips and nodded. "I keep forgetting we haven't seen each other in a while."

I shook my head. "Quite a long while."

"I suppose it is." She paused. "I was married before. To a man. I was young, I got pregnant, he proposed, it seemed the right thing to do." She shrugged. "One of those things, but it's freaked me out a bit today."

I managed to stop my mouth from dropping open — this was a lot to take

in. “You’ve been married before and you have a child?”

She nodded again, looking wary.

“I can see why wedding shopping might be odd for you then.” I sipped my latte, trying to make sense of my jumbled emotions. “So when did you... switch sides? Is Melanie your first?” I was going to break down and sob on the table if she said yes.

Nicola shook her head. “No, she’s not.” She paused. “When we were friends, there was something there, didn’t you think? That was my first inkling, anyway.”

She was even a little bit hesitant when she said it — she wasn’t sure if I remembered. She had absolutely *no idea* just how much I remembered.

I remembered all of it. Every single little detail.

“I mean, have you ever thought about us since then? I have. When we kissed in the library... I was just, too scared. Too scared to contemplate it. So I went for the easier option.”

If I’d been worried we’d be stuck for small talk, it turned out I needn’t have been concerned. Nicola Sheen didn’t do small talk. My head was spinning just trying to keep up.

“The easier option was getting pregnant?” I raised an eyebrow as I said it.

She grimaced. “No, that bit I didn’t plan. But it seems like I get pregnant at the drop of a hat, so that’s one of the upsides of switching teams. I don’t need to worry about that any more.” She didn’t look me in the eye.

“As soon as we kissed, I knew I was gay,” I said. “No boy had ever made me feel like that.” Apparently I didn’t do small talk today either. I stared at the table, not daring to look up. Her gaze was already scorching the side of my face. “So yes, I’ve thought about you since, which is why I was so surprised when you turned up the other night. And that you were marrying Melanie.”

She gazed at me and bit her lip. “I know. Which is why I thought we should meet up. Because of how we left things.”

“Badly?” *So badly, I wanted to curl up on the library floor and never move again?* Did she know my whole world shifted, and then she just whipped the rug from underneath me and walked away without a single look back?

I picked up the small pink packet of sugar lounging in my saucer, folded the top, then put it down again. All the while, I avoided Nicola’s gaze. If she wanted me to just consign our kiss to history and not acknowledge what it was, I couldn’t. Our kiss made me realise I was a lesbian. Our kiss meant something. Still, it upset me how much it still meant. Maybe Holly had a point — maybe I did cling on to things.

When I eventually risked looking at Nicola, her face was hesitant. “I had no choice but to leave — my parents were adamant.” She sighed and fidgeted with her spoon. “And then after I left and had the miscarriage, I went to sixth form and met Callum. He was lovely. But I got pregnant again within a year, he proposed and I said yes.” She shrugged. “But it was never going to work, because, well...”

“You’re gay?” I finally glanced in her direction to see her answer.

She nodded. “Yes, because I’m gay. Callum was pretty good about it all really, considering. We still see each other because of Heath, but that’s it.”

“And you met Melanie online?”

She nodded. “I had a couple of girlfriends before her — being a firefighter is a help, women throw themselves at you.”

I cleared my throat. “I bet.”

“But Melanie, she was just... different. And I’m ready to put down some roots. And I want the stability for Heath too — a loving home with two parents.”

If Nicola was thinking she’d have a stable home with Melanie involved, I didn’t want to be the one to break it to her that she might not be the perfect person to pick.

“How old’s Heath?” I said, changing the subject.

“Six — I’ll show you a picture.” She fished her iPhone out of her bag and pulled up a photo of a gap-toothed boy with both thumbs up.

“He looks like you.” And he did — the same almond eyes, the same mouth.

She smiled. “Everyone says that.” She drank some more coffee.

I cleared my throat and she looked up.

“What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

Nicola crossed her legs and regarded me. “You were going to say something, so please, say it.”

I rolled my thoughts around my head. Was honesty always the best policy? Not in my experience.

“It’s just... don’t you think you’re rushing into it a bit with Melanie? You haven’t known each other that long, and there’s Heath to consider.”

Nicola smiled. “And now you’re sounding like my mum whose response was exactly that.” She looked me in the eye. “But Melanie asked, and sometimes, if something feels right, you just have to take the leap and take a chance. I’m a big believer in that. I took a chance on Callum, but it didn’t work. I’m going to give me and Melanie my best shot.”

It didn’t sound like the ideal premise for a marriage.

“Have you set a date yet?” I was keeping my voice calm despite the fact my insides were jangling.

“New Year’s Eve,” she said, before holding up her hands. “And I know what you’re going to say — it’s too quick. But when you find the right person, why wait?”

The bullet entered my heart with a direct hit. I felt winded, like I was suddenly stranded on a peninsular, with the wind whipping up and the rain closing in. New Year’s Eve? That was less than a month away.

“That is quick. Are you sure you’re not pregnant again?”

She gave me a look, and now it really was just like old times.

“Can you even get a place to get married at such short notice?”

She waved a hand. “It’s not going to be a big do. We’re doing registry office and then back to Melanie’s parents’ house for the reception.” She shrugged. “We’ve both done the big do before, so this will be smaller.”

I tried to hold Nicola’s gaze.

However, she dropped hers to the table, before taking a deep breath. “Melanie, though — she’s great, right?”

She wanted validation of Melanie from me. I searched my brain for something to say.

“She’s definitely a one-off,” I said.

Nicola smiled. “A one-off. I like that.” She paused and placed her hand on my arm. “And you’re invited to the wedding, of course.”

I jumped at the contact — where Nicola Sheen was concerned, I was still 16.

She squeezed. “And of course, you’re welcome to bring a plus one. Did you say you were seeing someone?” She turned to me and her gaze fell from my eyes, to my lips, then back up again.

My stomach dropped. I shook my head reluctantly. “Not really. I’m dating, but nobody special.” I didn’t take my eyes off her the whole time, and she didn’t budge either.

A warning bell rang in my head, and I was pretty sure I wasn’t misreading the signals.

Nicola Sheen might be marrying Melanie Taylor, but right there, she wanted to kiss me.

She licked her lips again, and my breath caught in my throat.

I checked my watch. I still had another two hours till I had to meet my date.

“Do you fancy another coffee?”

She flicked her almond eyes back up. “Love one,” she replied, a smile playing on her lips.



MY DATE with Spanish Vixen that evening wasn't going to be easy. I'd only left Nicola Sheen an hour ago and my emotions were exhausted after the extended workout she'd given them — first loves will do that to you. Plus, Jenny was still a fresh, slightly queasy memory.

I don't know how players do it. I'd only slept with one woman this week and gone for drinks with another, and already I was a multi-tasking failure. As every lesbian knows, keeping one woman happy is hard enough, let alone two or three.

Nicola and I had finished three cups of coffee before she left to meet Melanie for dinner in town, hence I now had a caffeine headache hanging on my brain. The topics had got progressively lighter with each coffee, but I was still stunned she was planning to get married this month, even if her body language was telling me she wasn't ready. This was a new side to Nicola, and one I wasn't particularly in love with.

Logically, I supposed there would be a lot of sides to Nicola that wouldn't exactly thrill me in the present day, but I was still stuck on Nicola Sheen, circa High School. She was a hard habit to break.

I had two friends who'd got married in the past year because they thought it was 'time' and they wanted their life to run to the schedule they'd set in their heads. "I have to be married by the time I'm 28, and my first baby is due at 31," one had told me. When I'd asked them about true love and finding their soulmate, they'd looked at me like I was speaking a language they'd never heard of. "That's all very lovely, Tori," the other had said, shaking her head. "But I live in the *real* world, on *real* time schedules. If you want your life to run to order, you have to look at what you've got, decide if you can live with it and then act or make a change."

Sometimes, my friends depressed me more than I could put into words.

Spanish Vixen and I were meeting in Covent Garden at one of those bars

that promise to do American diner food really well, but normally leave you with nothing more than a sad taste in your mouth. Still, they had a happy hour, so all was not lost. My heels clip-clopped across the cobbles as I made my way across Covent Garden's main square. The market stalls were just packing up as I passed them, and the scent of anticipation and roasted chestnuts coated the air. To my right, a unicyclist was juggling knives and telling the crowd a story of the last time he did this and how he nearly died.

I scanned the bar as I went in, but couldn't see any sign of my date — at least, nobody who matched her profile picture of dark Latin looks, long shiny hair and a smile that radiated confidence.

Nicola Sheen had left me reeling with her revelations: she was a divorcee and a mum already, and on top of that, she remembered our kiss. Plus, from her body language, she wanted to relive it just as much as I did. However, I was starting to have doubts about my feelings towards Nicola. What else didn't I know about her? If I thought about myself aged 16 to now, I guessed the answer would be quite a lot.

I didn't have much time to dwell on my thoughts, though, as my date arrived bang on time. She was shorter than me, only by a couple of inches, but she was way more glossy, with yards of white teeth shining out from olive skin. She took my hand and shook it firmly, but her eyes avoided direct contact. Perhaps she was shy.

“Nice to meet you Vixen — I'm Tori.” I still wore my best smile. “Can I get you a drink? I might be Christmassy and have a mulled wine.”

She sat on the stool beside me, fighting with it to get comfortable. “I don't do red wine — stains the teeth.” She smoothed down her black skirt and crossed her shapely legs. “I'll have a white wine, though.”

I ordered her a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and a Malbec for me. I knew drinking wine on an empty stomach was a bad idea, but I'd deal with that later.

Vixen's real name turned out to be Max, which was the name of our dog

when I was growing up, so slightly off-putting. When I asked her what she did, she told me sales, but then asked about my work. I filled her in on my marketing job and she smiled in all the right places, but there was something about Max that just wasn't quite right. Was she already in a relationship? One of those women who just liked to come out on dates to remind themselves they still had it? I couldn't put my finger on it.

It wasn't until the second glass of wine that I found out exactly what wasn't quite right with Max, when she produced a green folder and spread some papers out across our table.

“What's this?” I asked.

And then Max came alive. “This,” she said, wafting a hand across the papers, “is the key to your future. This is my bullet-proof insurance scheme.” She grinned at me and flicked her hand right, then left. “I weighed up bringing this out on the date, but I figured I couldn't let this one slide because I want to share this opportunity with everyone I meet. And I've got a good feeling about you — about *us*.”

I was confused. “Sorry, you've lost me.”

Max shook her head. “Do you currently have insurance for yourself and your job?”

“What?”

“What happens if you lose your job? The economy's very uncertain, do you have savings put aside to pay your rent or your mortgage?”

I held up a palm to stop her in her tracks. It didn't work. Max was on a roll and nobody was going to stop her. Our date was just a stage and I was the audience.

“What about if you get a terminal illness and need 24-hour care — you can't rely on the NHS any more,” she continued.

“Max!” I almost shouted. Okay, maybe I shouted a little. The man at the next table turned to me and frowned. I ignored him. “Are you honestly trying to sell me insurance on a blind date? Is this what you use this app for?”

She leaned over and put a hand on my arm. “I’m not trying to sell to you. I’m trying to save you so much heartache in your future. Think of me as your fairy godmother looking out for *you*. I’m on your side, which you’ll see when you look at our stunning terms and conditions,” she said, lifting up one of the forms.

I stood up, shaking my head and gathering my coat. I was close to laughing out loud at the situation. I mean, I’d heard about the perils of online dating, but honestly? So far, I was a walking encyclopedia of how not to do it. Perhaps I *should* let Holly choose my dates from now on.

Max frowned up at me. “You’re going?” she said. “But I don’t think you understand — you can’t afford to walk away from me. This deal is too good to be true!”

Now I did allow myself a little laugh. “It’s a risk I’m willing to take,” I told her, putting a hand on my hip. “Tell me, are you even a lesbian or is this just a way of approaching new clients?” I shrugged my coat on, staring at Max.

Her face stayed calm, not reacting to my imminent departure at all. She looked me in the eye, stood up and gave me the fakest of fake smiles. “I’m 100 per cent lesbian, sweetheart. And if you buy a policy from me and stick around, I’ll prove it to you and give you the best orgasm of your life, guaranteed. What do you say?” She winked at me before holding up the form again, this time along with a pen.

I wondered how many times Max had used that line, and more to the point, how many times it’d worked. I’d *love* to have known.

She was slick, I had to hand it to her. It was almost a shame I wasn’t going to experience *all* that Max had to offer.

Almost, but not quite.



I WAS SO glad to be home after the day I'd had — emotional trauma and hilarity of the highest order. I made myself a cup of tea and flicked through the dating app, but I didn't have the energy or the heart to arrange another date. Maybe celibacy was an appealing option after all.

I'd had a text from Jenny today, asking if I fancied meeting up again.

I hadn't replied.

The conversation with Holly yesterday kept playing in my mind and I smiled. Holly always managed to cheer me up, whatever happened.

Just at that moment my phone lit up — I looked down and saw I had a text from Nicola.

At 10.30 at night.

She was thinking about me as she was going to bed. Was she in bed already? Was she naked? Was she thinking about me naked? I felt a rush between my legs as I picked up my phone and swiped.

'Hey — trying the bridal shopping thing again tomorrow. Fancy another coffee after? Really enjoyed catching up today. x'

She'd sent me a kiss — this was a new development.

'Sure, I'd love to. Tomorrow after work?'

But even as I clicked send, I had a tight feeling knotting in my stomach, telling me this was the wrong thing to do. In the distance a red flag was being waved, but I couldn't stop myself. I wanted to see Nicola again. I wanted to hear more words drop from her lips, telling me how much she'd thought about me over the years. I wanted her to say she'd loved me too, just like I'd loved her back then.

Once she said that, I could have closure and move on.

FRIDAY DECEMBER 9TH



The next day, I woke up in a happy mood, despite last night's disastrous date. I chalked it up to experience and set about grabbing Friday by the scruff of its neck and kissing it into submission. I even managed to get a seat on the Tube, which proves if you think positively, positive things happen for you. At least, that's what my self-help books told me.

The morning rattled by with a succession of back-to-back meetings with colleagues and clients. I ate lunch in the staffroom and checked my phone, but I hadn't had a text from Nicola about where and when we were meeting that afternoon. I decided to leave the details up to her, play it cool, not be the chaser. I wasn't going to get caught up in this, I'd promised Holly and I was serious. But another quick coffee to discuss her bridal outfit choices wouldn't hurt. Was Nicola going for a full-on white bridal gown or was she going to opt for a stylish suit? Or none of the above?

Sal and I had a final meeting of the day with a new client in Soho. The company were a new start-up business dealing in uber-stylish (read, expensive) kids clothing, and they wanted to boost their internet presence and search engine optimisation (SEO) ranking. In short, they were just the sort of job I loved, because they were always so amazed when what we did worked for them.

People who've never had any experience of the digital space often think

that marketing and SEO is made-up mumbo-jumbo — right up until the moment when their sales shoot up and they're left with their jaws hanging open. Sal and I knew exactly what we were doing, we presented well and the clients seemed happy. Now all we had to do was get back to the office, deliver the goods and wait for them to send us the thank you email. It normally happened within a week of the campaign going live.

Sal had to dash straight off from the meeting to pick up her kids, leaving me to walk back to the office through the afternoon hubbub of a festive Friday in Soho. The pavements were already scratched from the previous night and the air was so thick with cold it almost rattled, but my grey woollen scarf was protecting me — it had been a birthday present from Holly last year. Of all the people in my life, Holly was the one who always got my presents right.

I stared in the posh French bakery and marvelled at their cakes and tarts, but I was brought to standstill in the next shop window. A bridal shop, filled with flowing white lacy gowns. And there, standing in the middle of the display was Nicola Sheen, with, I assumed, the shop owner or assistant. Nicola was dressed casually in jeans and a black leather jacket. Her fair hair shone, her face perfectly made-up, and she was wearing biker boots and a thick brown watch. In short, she looked like a dyke dream. Before I knew what I was doing, I knocked on the window.

She turned when she heard and a grin spread across her face as she beckoned me in with her hand, the shop assistant smiling beside her.

I went to go in, then stopped. Was this a good idea, helping to choose the bridal gown of my first love? My brain didn't take long to answer.

No, it wasn't. I ran it through a few of my brain filters, and categorically, they all agreed this was a bad idea. But I went in anyway — how could I not when Nicola Sheen was dressed in leather? I knew the rules to this game, but sometimes, rules were made to be broken.

“Perfect timing!” As I walked through the door, Nicola walked round the

woman and enveloped me in a bear hug like we were long-lost friends reuniting for the first time. I caught a waft of her perfume — Calvin Klein? — as well as cigarettes. Did Nicola smoke? I had no idea. In fact, there was so much I didn't know about her.

“Perfect timing for?” She let me go, but her hand was still hanging loose around my waist.

“Telling me what you think about the dress. You remember I was having trouble?”

I nodded.

She swept her hair out of her face and I caught a glimpse of the 16-year-old I'd been in love with all those years ago. Still the same expression of daring, still the same vulnerability that had drawn me into her all that time ago, and was threatening to do so again.

“So what do you think?”

I shook my head. “About what?”

“Coming and telling me whether or not I look like a meringue in these dresses? I mean, Sophie is brilliant, but I could use someone who knows me.”

I was just about to take issue with how much I really knew her, but Nicola wasn't waiting for an answer — she was already off down the shop with Sophie in hot pursuit. I followed cautiously, until we got to the dressing room end, a semi-circle with three over-sized changing rooms and comfy pink sofas for guests to sit on. I sat down on one and Nicola went into the middle changing room, before poking her head out of the curtain.

“This first one, I'm not so sure about, so be honest, I don't mind.”

I nodded. “Honesty, got it.” Even though I was pretty sure that was exactly what no bride *ever* wanted.

The tinkle of the shop door took Sophie away, and then it was just me and Nicola in a sea of white and lace. My life couldn't get much more surreal if it tried.

While I was waiting in this artificial web of happiness, my phone vibrated

in my bag. It was a text from Holly asking if I fancied a Friday night beer. I would definitely be in need of a beer after this escapade, so I texted her straight back to say yes.

When I looked up, Nicola was standing in front of me in an off-the-shoulder fishtail gown, looking every inch the bride. She looked at me for a reaction, but I couldn't speak. Seeing that much of her skin was having a strange effect on my vocal chords, causing them to knot together and my breath to quicken. I tried again but no sound came out.

"You don't like it?" She wrinkled her brow, then walked over to the mirror and regarded herself left, then right. "It's a bit too... Essex d'you think? A bit too bling?"

I shook my head. "No, you look gorgeous. Really. But maybe something more classic would be better?" I hoped this was a safe thing to say. How Nicola looked was beside the point. She was standing in a wedding dress with only me as the audience and this was messing with my head more than I cared to consider. Seeing her in front of me dressed to marry someone else pierced my soul. She'd already cut me open once, and now she was doing it again.

Nicola was oblivious. "You're right, but I thought I'd try this one — I don't hate it as much as I thought I would."

My mind was playing images of Nicola walking down the aisle in the dress, but instead of Melanie waiting at the end, it was me. I shook my head and blinked.

"Let me show you the next one — this is my favourite." Nicola disappeared behind the curtain again and I exhaled loudly.

Sweat was dripping down my back and I'm sure my chest was glowing red under my coat, being battered as it was by my pounding heart.

I could do this. *Breathe.*

Within a minute, Nicola's head popped out again and she looked around before settling on me. "Where's Sophie?"

“She had another customer,” I said.

“Right.” Nicola gave me a pained smile. “Would you mind giving me a hand with the zip on this one? Sophie did it last time.”

I returned her smile right back. “Sure, no problem,” I said.

Fuckety fuck.

I left my bag where it was — I figured it was safe in this environment, bridal shops not being known for their smash and grab raids.

But when I got that close to Nicola Sheen’s bare back, I was back in High School, back on my bed. Her honeyed skin was smooth and so inviting. I wanted to bend down and kiss it, trail my tongue up that back, then spin her around and... I closed my eyes to stop my mind creating any more thoughts and it half worked. When I reopened them, Nicola had her head turned and was staring at me.

“You okay?” she asked.

I went to speak but no sound came out again. My mouth was gluey, all sense of time and place woozy.

I nodded.

Her eyes dropped to my lips, then back up to my eyes, then she turned quickly.

A blush crept into my cheeks, then slid down my neck and on to my chest. I cleared my throat and kicked into action, removing my gloves and stuffing them in my coat pockets. Then I stood with my hands poised, and eventually, pulled the two sides of the dress together with my left hand and began tugging the zip up with my right. Of course, the action meant I was now in direct contact with Nicola Sheen, my bare fingers on her naked back, but I was pushing that thought to the back of my mind.

I was helping her into her wedding dress. I was a friend helping out and I was going to do my job right.

It only took a few more seconds, and the dress fitted her perfectly — the waist, the arms, the length, everything. It was an off-the-shoulder number,

satin and lace, with an elegant, short train. It was understated but undoubtedly classy, exactly what Nicola wanted. Her strong, elegant shoulders stood firm, and when she posed in front of the changing room mirror, she couldn't help but break into a grin. She looked absolutely beautiful, and I told her so, standing to her right.

I stared at both our reflections in the mirror and caught her eye. "It's like it was made for you."

She fluttered her eyelids before fixing me with a reflected gaze. "I know." Her eyes teared up and her face clouded with sadness.

I panicked. "Hey," I said, putting a hand on the top of either shoulder. "No crying."

She turned slowly, shaking her head and leaned her head on my shoulder, my arm going round her in a painfully awkward embrace. Could she hear my heart thumping in my chest? I hoped not.

"I'm sorry — it just reminds me of before, all the time I've wasted. All the time I could have been living the life I should have been leading, instead of being miserable with boyfriends and pretending to be something I'm not."

I patted her back awkwardly — I got what she was saying, but it still didn't make the situation any less odd. All I wanted to do was agree with her, tell her that yes, you did make the wrong decision, you did walk away from me and the best thing that could have happened to you. And now you're standing in a wedding dress marrying someone else? Pick me!

But I didn't say any of that, although the way my chest was churning, she might have picked up on the body language. Instead, I gently held her at arm's length and looked her in the eye.

"We've all got what-ifs, you know," I said. "I've been out with some really unsuitable women, and my last girlfriend, I broke her heart. So if you think being gay stops you from making bad decisions, you're wrong."

She smiled at that.

A tear rolled down her cheek and I wiped it away with my finger.

She followed my finger as I removed it, then fixed me with her almond eyes again. *Those eyes.*

“I walked away from you,” she whispered. “What would have happened if I hadn’t walked away from you?”

My mind was like one of those kaleidoscope toys I used to play with as a child, whirling round and round. I didn’t want to answer because I didn’t know what the answer was. I knew what the make-believe answer was, but...

It happened before I could stop it. At least that’s what I told myself afterwards.

No sooner had those words tumbled from her mouth than she was moving towards me, her mouth now centimetres from mine. She checked my eyes, then my mouth, then pressed her lips to mine.

Her lips were exactly as I remembered them — without a word, they whispered sweet nothings to me. Her kiss was slow, soft and sensual as she caressed my lips with a surety of touch. Nicola’s lips were silky smooth and she was pitch perfect. I was locked into Nicola’s world, and she to mine. I was helpless.

My eyes were closed, my body in a state of frenzy, even though I was standing perfectly still. But Nicola Sheen was kissing me like her life depended on it, so I wasn’t about to stop her in her tracks. This had been my fantasy for years.

Apart from the bit where she’s standing in a wedding dress, about to marry someone else, but life’s never perfect, is it?

I was sinking, but her kiss was keeping me afloat. She tasted of sparkle and promise.

“How you getting on in there?” a voice asked. It was Sophie.

We both jolted and pulled away from each other, Nicola wiping her mouth before straightening herself up in front of the mirror.

“Really good — I really like this one,” she said, not missing a beat. “And I think Victoria likes it too, don’t you?”

I nodded. “Really lovely,” I said, my voice croaky.

Nicola took another huge breath, then pulled back the curtain and strode out into the shop where Sophie was making positive noises.

“I think this is the one.” Nicola was nodding at herself in the huge mirror while I was still standing in the changing room. I was scared to go out there. Wouldn’t Sophie know, wouldn’t everyone know? Weren’t we lit up with guilt for all to see?

“You look gorgeous, that dress is spot-on,” said another voice. I walked out with as much poise as I could muster, and smiled at the other customer who was now joining in the dress approval ritual.

Nicola twirled in the big changing room, soaking up the attention, not ever catching my eye.

My mouth was still on fire, I could still feel her tongue inside me.

She was playing the part perfectly, which I found disconcerting to say the least. But then, she always was far more theatrical than me, able to style things out.

But now, having just shared that kiss, I could see her whole life was one big act, with Nicola Sheen lurching from one scene to the next. Who was the real Nicola? I had no idea. All I knew was, I needed some air, to get out of there sharpish. Kissing my first love had thrown up a tornado of emotions.

“Nicola, I’ve got to go — got to get back to work.” I walked over to the pink sofa and picked up my bag, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand as I did. It didn’t stop my mouth burning. “That’s definitely the one, though.” I pointed towards the dress she was wearing. “You look absolutely stunning.”

Nicola turned to me, but her face was hard to read. Was she sad I was leaving? I had no idea, because I could see she was torn — torn between playing the part of the excited bride, and the reality of what had just happened in the changing room. But with an audience watching her, there was only one way this was going to go. Her eyes held mine for a fraction of a second, before she regarded herself in the mirror again and cracked one of her

most choreographed smiles yet.

“I think you’re right — I think we have a winner.”

“Great,” I said. “I’ll see you soon.”

Nicola’s panicked gaze honed in on me as I walked over and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

She closed her eyes and took a sharp intake of breath before stroking my arm. “See you soon,” she said.

I trembled to my core, but still managed to smile at Sophie and walk casually out of the shop. Even though every bone in my body wanted to sprint out of there at 100mph.



HOLLY WAS SAT at her usual table with a few of her workmates when I walked in. The bar was jam-packed as I knew it would be on a Friday night after work, but that was perfect as it took my mind off what had just happened.

“Hey!” Holly got up and pulled me into a hug. “One of my all-time favourite people — let me get you a drink!” She disappeared to the bar and reappeared in record time with a piping hot mulled wine for me. “You okay? You look weird.” Her face was flushed and she was peering at me up close.

I shook my head and smiled. “I’m fine — just been a long day. But this,” I said, holding up the wine, “is just what the doctor ordered.”

Holly grinned. “Just call me Doctor Holly!”

Holly shuffled her work colleagues around the table so I could squeeze in. I knew them all pretty well with Holly being the team leader, and they were a friendly bunch. I was glad of their warmth tonight as this was exactly what I needed — to be cocooned and shielded from the mad world outside these walls. In this pub, with these people, I was safe from Nicola Sheen and everything she represented.

“So how was Ivy the other night?” I asked Holly. “You said it was okay

on text, but I want the juicy details. Was she creepy? Stained green?”

She smiled at me, but it was in black and white. “She wasn’t creepy or green. It’s a bit early to tell if we’re going to exchange rings and get married any time soon, but you know, it was an okay first date.”

“Did you kiss?”

Holly went all coy. “A goodnight kiss — nothing major. But we’re going out again tomorrow night, so who knows?” She took a sip of her beer, and looked away briefly. “How about you?”

I shook my head and laughed. “Spanish Vixen was yet another of my disaster dates that I’m thinking about starting a blog about. Perhaps a book too, then a mini-series. I think it’d go down well. A bit like her.”

Holly raised an eyebrow. “What happened this time?”

“Let’s see,” I said, spreading my hands. “She tried to sell me life insurance, and then if I bought it — and only if I bought it — she promised me the best orgasm of my life.”

Holly nearly spat her drink out. “That’s a unique sell,” she laughed.

“It’s only a matter of time before she’s on *The Apprentice*,” I replied, exhaling. After what had just happened in the bridal shop, thinking about Max was light relief.

“You’ve got her number, right?” Holly was smiling her lopsided smile. “Just in case I have a life insurance emergency.”

“On speed dial, of course.”

We both smiled at each other.

“And any more dates in the pipeline?”

I shook my head. “I’m a bit dated out, to tell you the truth.”

Holly frowned. “But you’re on a schedule — you’ve got to get a girlfriend by Christmas.”

I shrugged. “Yeah well, that might have seemed like a good idea initially, but now I’m not so sure. I’m exhausted and not getting anywhere fast, so I might give it a break for a bit. See where life takes me and stop chasing my

own tail. I could do with some peace and quiet.”

“This is a change of pace,” Holly replied. “I thought this was do or die, nobody moves until this project is complete?”

“It was, but now I’m a bit over it. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn’t, it’s not the end of the world. I’m cool with it.”

Holly frowned. “Well I’m not okay with that. You’re going to get a girlfriend by Christmas. It’s my personal mission.”

I took another sip of my mulled wine and gave her a look. “Have you been drinking already?”

She giggled slightly. “Only a couple.” Then she put her arm around me and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

The world always felt like a safer, warmer place with Holly’s arm around me and I was glad that with the likes of Nicola, Jenny and Max in the world, it was Holly I came home to, Holly who was always there to talk.

I could rely on Holly in ways I could never dream of with anybody else in my life.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 10TH



The following afternoon found me lying on the sofa in the lounge, watching our Christmas tree lights blink on and off, listening to the trains rattle by our window. Sometimes, the noise of the trains drove me insane, but at other times, like today, it was soothing and comforting, providing an order to my day. And I needed order today, because yesterday had been studded with disorder.

I'd kissed Nicola Sheen while she was trying on her wedding dress. Or had she kissed me? However it happened, I didn't come out of it covered in anything resembling glory. But it was a one-off — she was marrying Melanie, so I had to let it go. It was just stupid, pre-wedding jitters. After all, this kind of thing happened with brides and grooms all over the world. It's what stag and hen parties were created for.

I got up and stood at the window, staring into a train below our window, stuck at a signal. Our flat was close enough that you could see people's faces, make out the newspaper they were reading. But you never knew what they were thinking, whether they were looking at you, whether or not they could make out the turmoil embedded into my Saturday. To them, I probably just looked like a normal young woman without a care in the world.

My phone beeped and I grabbed it.

It was a text from Nicola. Okay, so yesterday could be slotted neatly into

the pile marked ‘pre-wedding nerves’. But today? I didn’t know why she was texting me again today. Okay, not 100 per cent true — I had an inkling, but the omens weren’t good. I clicked to find out.

‘Working today, but wondered if you fancied meeting after work? A quick chat would be good.’

Nicola’s texts were always short, sharp and vague. A meet-up. A quick chat. Only things never went quite according to Nicola’s plans, did they? I knew I should say no, of course I did. We’d kissed yesterday and she was getting married in three weeks.

My plans today had involved going to the gym, then relaxing after my messy week. Nicola hadn’t featured. But then again, I was only going to sit and stew thinking about what had happened, so perhaps meeting up and writing it off would be a good thing? The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. We could talk about it like adults, and put a full stop under it once and for all.

I texted back after I’d made myself a cup of coffee and was sure of my actions. Nicola passed by the flat on her way home, so I gave her my address and told her to stop by after work.

I sat down on the sofa, but couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that was sat right beside me.



BY THE TIME Nicola knocked on the door an hour late at 8pm, I’d managed to work myself up into something of a frenzy. I’d spent the afternoon punching bags and lifting weights in the gym, but it didn’t seem to have popped my energy bubble much. At 7.30pm, when Nicola still hadn’t shown, I’d decided alcohol was the answer and had poured myself a large gin and tonic. It had taken the edge off my self-infused frazzle, but only the outer corners. The nerve centre was still strapped around my emotions and was ready to explode

at any time.

I opened the door to a flustered looking Nicola. “Hi,” she said. “I’m so sorry I’m late — paperwork at the station and a bit of a staff issue. I couldn’t get away.”

My earlier steely resolve melted as she fixed me with her sad eyes and I waved her apology away as if none of it mattered. She was dressed in jeans and a black Fire Dept shirt that accentuated her breasts, and I tried my hardest not to stare for too long. Not quite a full fire uniform, but a hint of one.

“No problem, come in.” I stood aside and breathed in Nicola’s scent as she walked past me. I could still detect what had drawn me to her all those years ago. Promise.

I led her through the hallway and into the lounge. “Can I get you a drink?”

Nicola took in the lounge. “Wow, I’d forgotten how much you like Christmas. It looks like Santa’s grotto in here.”

I smiled. “Only comes round once a year.”

“Does your dad still go crazy for it too?” she asked.

I dropped my eyes to the floor and inhaled. “He did.” I paused. “But he died seven years ago.”

Nicola’s hand covered her mouth. “Shit — I’m so sorry. I know how close you were.” She took a step towards me, but I waved her away.

“You weren’t to know — we’ve been out of each other’s lives for a long time.” I fixed her with my gaze, letting the words sink in. “Drink?”

Nicola licked her lips. “Beer would be great.”

I took one of Holly’s from the fridge, knowing she wouldn’t thank me for that. Holly was a very generous person, but not when it came to Nicola Sheen.

We sat at opposite ends of the sofa and eyed each other cautiously.

Nicola picked at her beer label before speaking. “So, thanks for agreeing to see me.”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I?”

The comment hung in the air above us, lit like a neon sign.

We both knew the answer.

Nicola shrugged. “Because the other day wasn’t your typical dress fitting.” A train rattled by outside the window and Nicola turned to watch. “Very handy for trains here,” she said, still looking out the window. She turned back to me and our eyes met.

I felt a rush between my legs. *Those eyes.*

She shifted across the sofa so she was sat next to me to emphasise her point. “I just wanted to set things straight. Yesterday was just... nostalgia. It was a mistake, it was my fault and I didn’t want you to get the wrong end of the stick.” She went to touch my arm, then thought better of it. “It’s just been weird seeing you again after all this time, knowing what I felt about you back then, but never acting. It’s been a little confusing.”

The room swayed around me and I had to put out a hand to steady myself. What she’d felt about me? A small ball of vomit worked its way up my windpipe, but I swallowed it down, wincing.

“What do you mean, how you felt?” I paused. “How did you feel back then?”

Nicola looked up into the air and sighed. Then she gave a wry laugh, before focusing her gaze back on me. “Scared. Confused. Horny. In love.” She said all of those things and never took her eyes off me for a second. “I couldn’t put a name to any of it back then, but looking back, that’s what it was.”

“In love?” I could hardly believe my ears. She’d felt it too. Deep down, I knew she had.

She nodded, and took my hand. “Looking back, yes.”

Her thumb moved slowly across my palm.

I breathed in sharply.

Nicola Sheen had been in love with me, and I had been in love with

Nicola Sheen.

It was the sweetest and cruellest blow of them all.

And now it was too late.

I shook my head and gave a rueful smile. “But you ran. You just *ran*.” I reached for her hand.

We both stared at her hand in mine. What might have happened? What might have become of us if we’d taken the path less travelled?

That was then, and back then, Nicola had chosen path B and run like the wind. Cut to today and we were at another junction. Which way were things going to go this time?

Her mouth closing in on mine told me the answer. Within seconds, her hot, firm body was pressing into mine and my pent up energy suddenly had somewhere to go. Then Nicola’s tongue was back inside my mouth, but unlike yesterday’s slow, sensual probing, this time, there was raw urgency about it. This was ten years of emotion and what-ifs pressing into me, asking questions that couldn’t possibly be answered.

My body was responding to everything Nicola was doing — pressing, grinding, wanting. I’d gone into cruise control, my moral compass covered with a blanket, my mind gone fishing. This felt wrong, but oh so right. When Nicola Sheen’s hand worked its way under my top and cupped my breast, I let out a groan of sexual frustration that was raw and unpolished. I was collapsing into her right there.

Encouraged, she undid the button on my trousers and slipped her hand inside.

I stopped breathing.

I couldn’t let this happen — not this way. I wanted to sleep with Nicola Sheen more than she would ever know, but not like this, not a quickie on my sofa. And not when she was engaged to my friend. It was so tempting, but...

Her fingers were *so close*, and it took every ounce of self-control I had to grab her arm and pull away, even though my pelvis betrayed me and pushed

forward.

She stopped and opened her eyes.

We froze in time, suspended together.

Another train rattled by outside, and to my left, I saw our Christmas tree lights watching, blinking in disbelief.

“I can’t,” I whispered. I didn’t mean it, but it couldn’t be any other way. “Not like this.”

She crinkled her eyes, pain radiating from her. “I thought—”

I shook my head. “—Not like this,” I repeated. “I can’t do this with you now. You’re not available.”

She pulled her hand away and sat back on the sofa, breathing out in one long stream that I thought might never end.

We sat in silence for a few more seconds before Nicola sat forward and took a slug of her beer.

“This didn’t go as I planned,” she said, still breathing rapidly. She put down her beer.

“No?”

She shook her head and twisted to look at me. “No. My intention was to come over here and smooth things over. Not take it up a notch.” She exhaled again before rubbing her hands together. “Like I said, nostalgia.”

She turned and took another swig of her beer before jumping up, smoothing herself down and tucking herself in. “I better be going if I want to stay engaged,” she said. She gave me a thin-lipped smile, but her gaze didn’t falter.

“And is that what you want?” I had to know. I had no idea if Nicola Sheen was what I wanted, but I had to know whether or not she wanted me.

Nicola blinked and bit her lip, before nodding slowly.

“Absolutely,” she said, looking away. “I’m marrying Melanie. I just — I wanted to apologise and then... this.” Her gaze bounced around the room before settling back on me. “I’m sorry for yesterday, for today, for back then

— for it all.” She picked up her rucksack. “See you, Victoria.”

But she didn’t move.

I stood up. “Yeah, see you.”

We stared.

And stared.

Nicola went to say something, then shook her head.

“I’ve got to go,” she said. But her eyes told a different story as they dropped to my lips.

But this time, she did turn around and walk away.

Where Nicola Sheen was concerned, normal service had been resumed.



I WAS STOOD at the kitchen counter trying to put my thoughts in order when I heard Holly’s key in the door.

Shit. Nicola had only just left, and my emotions were strewn across the floor. I was too disoriented by everything that had happened, and I wasn’t sure I could explain it to Holly even if I tried.

Holly was frowning when she came into the lounge. She took one look at me and began shaking her head. “I was hoping that just bumping into Nicola on the stairs was a coincidence. Perhaps she knows someone else in the block, perhaps her sister lives here? But I know that look. You did it, didn’t you? You just fulfilled your teenage fantasy and had sex with your childhood sweetheart.”

I said nothing — it was all I could do to hang on to the kitchen counter and not collapse in a heap.

“Why do this? Why complicate your life?” Holly plucked a beer from the fridge and sat on the sofa. “Are you coming to sit down or are you going to just stand there?” She sounded hurt, wounded.

“Not if you’re just going to lecture me. It’s really not what I need right

now.”

A gamut of emotions passed across Holly’s face before she settled on something between concerned friend and pissed off. “I’ll try not to. I’ll try to keep an open mind.” She paused, then held up three fingers in a Girl Guide salute. “I promise.”

Promise is what had got me into this mess in the first place.

I walked over and slumped on to the sofa, falling into Holly who had no choice but to acquiesce. She might still be boiling mad at me, but when push came to shove, I was still her best friend.

“So what happened?” Holly began stroking my hair. “And just so you know, this is not in the roadmap for getting a girlfriend by Christmas. The caveat I wasn’t aware I needed to point out was that the girl in question had to be single, and not engaged to be married.” I heard her take a swig of her beer and I burrowed my head deeper into her shoulder.

“I know,” I mumbled. “But we didn’t have sex. We nearly did, but we didn’t.”

Holly’s body went taut. “You didn’t?” She was holding her breath.

I pushed myself into a sitting position and ground the heels of both my hands into my eyes. When I refocused, my vision still wasn’t totally clear.

I shook my head. “Nope.”

Her hand rubbed my back as she exhaled. “Well that’s good. That’s really good. But what was she doing here?”

I turned to Holly and explained what happened the day before in the bridal shop.

She was silent the whole way through, her face turning a shade of grey when I relayed the kissing part.

“It was kinda left up in the air so she texted and asked to come over.” I shrugged. “It seemed the right thing to do, to draw a line under it.”

“And how did that plan go?” Despite her tone, Holly’s face remained blank.

Guilt rose up in me, threatening to drown me. “Not so well,” I said, shaking my head.

Holly’s face softened. “Did you really think it would go any other way? You kissed her yesterday, there was unfinished business, she comes over to your flat where you have some privacy...” Holly held out her hands, palms upturned. “It’s textbook 101 seduction technique.”

“I was not seduced,” I pouted.

Holly smiled, shaking her head. “No you weren’t,” she said. “But how did you leave it?”

Now it was my turn to shrug. “We kissed, but we’re done — I know that’s as far as it can go. And that’s not just because she’s getting married, it’s also because we’re different people now.” I shook my head again. “Just sometimes I forget that, and she’s still Nicola Sheen who I loved. So please don’t be angry with me — I can’t deal with it tonight.”

Holly paused. “I’m not angry, I’m just looking out for you. I don’t trust Nicola as far as I can throw her. Never have.”

She pulled me into a hug and I let her.

Then I remembered Holly was supposed to be on a date tonight.

“Hang on — what are you doing home anyway?” I sat up again. “What happened to your date?”

Now it was Holly’s turn to sigh. “She didn’t show. No warning, nothing. So this dating game? It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” She swigged her beer.

My heart broke for Holly now — she was golden, she didn’t deserve that. “I’m sorry about your date, and not just because she was called Ivy.” I reached for Holly’s hand and squeezed it.

Holly looked into my eyes and shrugged. “It’s okay,” she said. “She was hardly my soulmate.”

SUNDAY DECEMBER 11TH



Sunday morning dawned and if there was ever a day I needed a distraction, it was today. As I lay on my bed and tried to clamber over the traffic clogging up my mind, I tried to identify what I was feeling. Confused, disappointed, and like I wanted to get in a time machine and erase the last few days.

I could still feel Nicola's hand on me, nearly in me.

It would have been so easy.

However, this Nicola Sheen wasn't the one I'd been in love with. She had a child. She was divorced. And she was engaged, yet thought it fine to come on to me three weeks before her wedding.

So yes, while yesterday had been the culmination of a dream, I had a feeling it might also serve as a reminder that you should never go back. It was a motto I lived by when it came to bad customer service in every other area of my life, so why didn't I apply it to my love life?

Ten minutes later, Holly burst into my room just as I was opening the next Advent calendar door and popping a chocolate Christmas pudding into my mouth. There was something very decadent about eating chocolate so early in the morning.

"Get up — we're going out," she announced.

"We are?" I asked, through a mouthful of chocolate.

Holly swept her dark hair from her eyes and nodded. “Yep — executive decision. You’ve been stupid and I’ve been stood up within a week, which is a new record even for me. So we’re going out to do something fun to take our minds off it. Something Christmassy, guaranteed to put a smile on your face.”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me up, marching me down the hallway and into the bathroom. “Get in the shower and get clean — we’re leaving in half an hour and I’ve booked us an hour of ice-skating at Somerset House.”

I did as I was told.

Forty minutes later, we were sat on a Tube, clutching cups of hot coffee, eyes wide open. Holly’s knee was jiggling beside me — she always had a lot of nervous energy fizzing around her system and this was the usual out.

“Excited?” she asked, slapping my leg. “Ice, Christmas tunes, skating and mulled wine — this has to be right up there in your Christmas must-dos, doesn’t it?”

I smiled, despite myself. “It is. I was going to buy some ice-skating tickets for me and a date if things went well. However, I don’t seem to have been able to limp to that stage quite yet, so this is perfect. I get to do it with my best friend instead.”

Holly smiled at me and took my hand in hers. “Today we’re each other’s date, okay? And let’s face it, we’ve both already gone one better than our last — I’m single and you showed up. We’re winning at life already!”

I laughed. I had to agree.

Somerset House was an old Tudor palace on the Thames, a building that never failed to impress. During the winter its large courtyard became a Christmas grotto with its ice rink as the central play. As soon as I saw it strung with festive lights and pumping out ‘Merry Christmas Everyone’ through the surrounding speakers, happy seasonal endorphins flooded my body.

Maybe Holly was right, maybe this was the perfect thing to take my mind off my problems.

There was only five minutes till we were on the ice, so we exchanged our shoes for skates, then edged out slowly on to the freshly polished ice, currently a creamy, unblemished square all ready to be signed by us. Most people didn't need a second invitation once the klaxon blasted, apart from the ten per cent who'd forgotten how to skate since their childhood and were now doomed to spend the next hour gingerly crawling around the rink's edges, or flat on their bum.

Just as I thought that, I heard the first thump of the day, and turned to see a man in his 40s flailing on the ice.

"That's gotta hurt," Holly said.

We skated off side by side around the rink, pushing off from the left and then the right, just as my instructor had taught me all those years ago.

"How you feeling?" Holly asked as we were nearly cut up by one of the ice marshals on a mission.

"Surreal." I grabbed Holly's arm as I wobbled.

"Okay?"

I nodded. "Just getting my balance." I paused. "I'm okay. I feel a bit guilty and annoyed with myself and her. However you paint this, it hardly makes her the catch of the century."

We skated on in silence for a few more seconds. "And did I tell you the other thing?"

Holly didn't turn to me. "There's more?"

"She's got a kid and she still lives with her parents."

"Whoa!" Holly slowed her skates and coasted into the hoardings, and I followed.

"A child? How did she get a child?"

"Did you miss that class at school?"

Holly gave me a look.

"She was married before." I said. "To a man."

Holly spluttered. "She's already been married? I mean, to a man is neither

here nor there, but this is her second wedding?” She whistled through her teeth. “She clearly loves getting married.”

“Apparently.”

We were silent for a moment as the mass of skaters shuffled and sailed past us in clockwise order, a blur of smiles, furrowed brows and woolly hats.

Then, as Mariah Carey’s ‘All I Want For Christmas Is You’ began to pump through the speakers, Holly took my hand and dragged me back into the throng. “We haven’t come here to stand on the sidelines and process — we’ve come to skate!”

I screamed as Holly’s yank nearly put me on the ice, but I styled it out. Within seconds, we were gliding and the steady concentration the skating required really was proving just the distraction I needed.

That is, until five minutes later when I was clattered from behind, a skater clearly losing their balance and sliding into the back of me, leaving me nowhere to go but down. My bum hit the ice with a deadening thud that reverberated up my body. Damn, the ice was cold.

I immediately went to spring back up, but my skates weren’t being so obliging and I fell again. Crack. Ouch. A hand came into view which I presumed was Holly’s, so I took it gratefully and pulled myself up to a standing position, arms outstretched to secure my balance.

“Thanks, Holly,” I said until my eyes fell on my saviour.

It was Nicola Sheen.

I turned around and saw Holly was helping Melanie to her feet, Melanie wiping down the back of her jeans which were now wet through.

“What are you doing here?” I was whispering for no good reason.

“Same as you — skating.” Nicola’s tone was deadpan, her expression vanilla. She didn’t seem freaked at all that we were meeting the day after we nearly had sex, and that pissed me off royally. Did none of this mean anything to her?

“Really? You never mentioned it last night.” If she was stalking me, I

wasn't amused.

Nicola baulked and my insides flared red.

"It never really came up, did it?" she said. Now her tone was gritty, like this was all my fault.

Thankfully, Holly butted in. "Great to see you guys, but now Melanie's in one piece, we're going to get in some more skating." She offered her hand to me while fixing me with a solid stare. "Shall we?"

I glanced at Nicola, then at Melanie, before taking Holly's hand. I was grateful to her for offering an easy escape, although still piqued at Nicola's casual brush-off. I wasn't sure how we were meant to act with each other now either, but hostile was not the first option that sprang to mind.

Holly's grip was like a vice as we skated off, faster than before. I didn't like to point out to her that no matter how fast we went, we'd still just be going round and round in a circle.

The ice rink was suddenly a metaphor for life.

"I cannot believe they're here too," I said, glancing at Holly.

"I can't believe you were talking to her. And that she helped you up first before her own fiancée. She's got some nerve."

Holly tightened her grip again and I narrowly missed crashing into a stranded child.

"Hey, slow down," I said. "You're hurting my hand and I don't like going this fast."

"I just wanted to get away from them — I was trying to do you a favour."

I squeezed her hand and pulled her back — I needed to make her see things from my perspective.

Holly reluctantly slowed.

"I appreciate that, but you have to let me deal with this my way. This is my mess, my situation, not yours."

"I just don't want her treating you like shit, like always." Holly's face softened. "You don't deserve that."

I saw something in her eyes then, but I couldn't quite place it. Protection? Chivalry? Love? A merry-go-round of terms whizzed in my brain, but I brushed them aside and pulled her gently into the hoardings. I couldn't deal with anything else on top of the fact that Nicola was here right now.

"Nice of you to say, but racing around an ice rink isn't going to affect that either way. Just relax and let's try to enjoy this, like you said." Just as the words came out of my mouth, Nicola and Melanie stuttered past us, Melanie grimacing, Nicola looking less than pleased.

"We can definitely skate better than them," Holly said.

"Very true." My mind flicked back through my Nicola album and landed on a memory from my youth — Nicola and I skating around our local ice rink, arm in arm. It was romantic back then, and now Nicola was trying to be romantic with Melanie. The morning after she'd come round to seduce me. Anger bubbled up my body.

"I'm going back in." I skated off, not waiting for Holly and not looking back. I was trapped and angry and not in the right space to be on an ice rink, that was for sure. I scanned the area. Where were they? I glided past three teenage boys in a line holding hands, sure to topple backwards at any moment. Then a small child skating backwards without a care in the world. Then a young couple holding hands, skating together, in love.

And then I saw them. Melanie had found her centre of balance and her body language was far better than it had been a few minutes earlier — she was getting the hang of it, but still grasping Nicola's arm. She wobbled slightly and Nicola put an arm around her waist. Then she leaned in and said something, and they both laughed.

And that's when I realised — they were one of the happy couples too. So what that we'd snogged in the last 24 hours? It wasn't impacting on their day. That made me even more angry.

They were in my sights now, but I wasn't really sure of my plan. I wanted to disturb their happiness, get my own back. How dare Nicola be smiling and

laughing. What about me? What about my happiness and my Christmas girlfriend quest? Nicola showing up had completely blown that out of the water, thrown me off my game. If she hadn't shown up, I'd surely have bagged a girlfriend by now, would have carried on dating.

But she'd proved a distraction.

Now I was going to be a distraction right back.

I revved forward, going left to avoid a woman in a red ski jacket, then right to skate around a weeping child on the floor, an ice marshal in attendance. They were so close, with their backs to me, still laughing. I could just clip the back of Nicola's heels and skate off like nothing happened, right? And once she went down, Melanie was sure to follow.

I was five feet away, ready to strike when I felt an arm on mine — Holly. She pushed me left, but in the process went right into the back of Nicola and Melanie. There was a yelp as they fell forward, a crack as all their bodies struck the ice, Holly on top of them, me gawping at the sight. I changed the direction of my skates and swooped in to help Holly.

Nicola was still on the floor, struggling to get up. "Did you do that on purpose? There was plenty of room around, why would you do that?"

Holly gripped my arm and clambered to her feet, wincing and holding her right knee. "Of course it wasn't on purpose — I was pushed and went into the back of you. I'm not an idiot."

"Could have fooled me," Nicola snapped, her expression souring by the second.

An ice marshal skated in to help Nicola up, then Melanie. When he was satisfied nobody needed hospital treatment, he skated off to his next casualties.

"I'm an idiot?" Holly said, wrinkling her forehead. "You really want to get into idiocy stakes right now? Because I think you'd win hands down, don't you?"

Oh shit. Please don't say anything. Please don't let this all blow up in my

face now. Not when it's over. Not when I'm just coming to terms with it. Not when this isn't even what I want anymore.

I glanced at Holly who was grinding her teeth.

Nicola opened her mouth, went to say something, then closed it. She looked from me to Melanie, then back to Holly, then at the floor.

“What are you talking about?” Melanie asked Holly.

“Why don't you ask your fiancée,” Holly said, her tone as hard as the ice we were standing on.

I couldn't take any more — this was all getting far too close to the truth and if it came out, there's no way Melanie would ever forgive me. I couldn't let that happen. I grabbed Holly's arm and squeezed it in an attempt to get her to shut up.

This wasn't really letting me sort out my own mess, now was it?

Melanie turned to Nicola. “What's she talking about, babe?”

Nicola shrugged in response. “I've no idea. I know she's your friend, but she seems a bit unhinged.” Just then, a tall man in a blue jacket grabbed Melanie's arm as he went by, nearly taking her down. Nicola saved her, giving the guy a mouthful in the process.

“Unhinged? Holly is not unhinged. Holly is my best friend and looking out for me.” I pointed at Nicola. “Something you've never done in your entire life.” I was dimly aware we were getting stares on the ice now, but it was too late.

“Come on,” I said, tugging Holly's arm. I was so over this. “Let's get out of here — I think I've had about as much drama as I can take.”

“Hang on,” Melanie said, grabbing my arm. “Why would Nicola be looking out for you?” Her tone was sharp.

“Maybe that's something you should ask Nicola,” Holly said, taking my arm.

Her grip was firm, stopping me from saying anything else. As my skates slid me away to the safety of the ice hut, I risked a glance backwards, but

Nicola wasn't looking my way. Instead, Melanie was remonstrating with her, her words hitting Nicola with machine gun rapidity.

Nicola could do nothing else but stand there and take it.



WE WERE SITTING in the plaza at Covent Garden sipping mulled wine, our breath freezing in front of our faces. I'd been looking forward to my après-skate drink in the ice rink bar, but Holly had rightly pointed out it was probably best to get as far away from there as possible. So we'd made the five-minute walk to Covent Garden, and now we were sat at the end of the covered market, giant baubles hanging from its ceiling in a riot of festive colour, to our right a magician holding court in the midst of a bulging weekend crowd.

"So what's next today — are we going to try to bump into any more of your exes to spice up our Sunday?"

I didn't think Holly could ladle any more sarcasm on to that comment if she tried — it was almost drowned in it. She was smirking at me, but there was exasperation in her eyes too.

"I thought mulled wine, followed by more mulled wine," I said, taking a sip and smiling as it warmed my insides. "What was Nicola like today? Playing the dutiful girlfriend and fiancée. Made my blood boil."

"I could tell," Holly said. "That's why I jumped in when I saw you about to take her out from behind."

"That really worked."

"At least I broke the speed you were going — I took most of that hit, so I'll be billing you when my knee swells to the size of a football, which it feels like it might have already." Holly leaned over and rubbed her knee through her jeans, which were slightly ripped.

"Sorry," I replied. "But you do have further to fall."

The magician in the black suit showed the crowd his empty hand, then shook his arm and produced an orange silk handkerchief followed by a mass of coloured beads. Muted applause.

“You know you have to walk away now, don’t you? Leave Nicola to sort this out — no more meeting up just the two of you. I think I could tell you where that would end.”

I said nothing, just continued to stare at the magician who was now tapping a black box with a white-tipped wand.

A bit of magic in my life would go down rather well right about now.

“Tori?”

I turned to Holly and sighed. “I know.” I was resigned. “I know all that, but it’s hard to walk away when there’s a row of what-ifs hanging over the outcome. What if we’d got together at 16? What if her getting together with Melanie was just so that we could meet again?”

“What if she’s a cheat with a child and no home?”

“I know,” I replied.

“She’s not the same person she was at school. Or maybe she is, and that’s the point.”

“I know.” I was getting agitated, even though I agreed with what Holly was saying. I absolutely did, it was just my feelings hadn’t quite caught up with my brain. “But sometimes, it’s difficult to walk away from someone even if they’re unsuitable and emotionally all over the place. Do you get what I mean?” My eyes bore into Holly — I wanted her to understand.

She looked away and took a deep breath. “You don’t know everything about me, Tori. You think you do, but you don’t.”

MONDAY DECEMBER 12TH



The following day at work and I was feeling guilty about yesterday and my temporary bout of insanity. It hadn't been fair to Holly or to Nicola. However, my attention was temporarily diverted by the toaster being on fire. Again. This time it wasn't my fault though.

I held my breath as the fire engine drew up, but Nicola wasn't on board. I couldn't decide if I was relieved or disappointed. Whichever, I knew I needed to see her again, to really sort things out — we needed proper closure, yesterday had made that clear. I couldn't turn into Tonya Harding every time I saw her with Melanie.

So at lunchtime, having asked one of the firefighters which station they were deployed from, I hopped on a bus and was there within 15 minutes — she'd worked just around the corner all this time. It would be funny if I could locate my sense of humour.

The station looked deserted apart from two fire engines, which were gleaming on the forecourt. I walked in and spotted a man in uniform bending over some equipment. When I asked about Nicola, he looked me up and down, then pointed towards an office tucked away on the right-hand side.

She was the boss, so of course she had her own office.

I walked over, took a deep breath, smoothed down my coat and knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

I did as I was told.

Nicola’s face fell when she saw me. “Victoria.” She tapped a pen on her desk and fidgeted in her chair. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought I should come and sort things out.” I paused. “Can I have a seat?”

She motioned to the free one on the other side of her desk. “Please.” She tugged at her shirt collar and cleared her throat. “How are you?” Her eyes searched mine.

I screwed up my face. “Not brilliant.” I decided to take the bull by the horns — I didn’t have much time, so small talk wasn’t on the cards.

Besides, Nicola hated small talk.

“I wasn’t really sure what to do after the other night. And then we saw each other skating yesterday... I don’t want that to happen again.” My throat was clogging up with emotion, but my voice was coming out clean and clear. Decisive, almost.

“Me neither,” Nicola replied, not looking me in the eye now. “Saturday was a mistake. And yesterday at the ice rink didn’t help. Tell Holly thanks for mowing me down.”

I didn’t move my gaze from hers. “She wasn’t to blame.” It was a statement, not one to be messed with. “Anyway, I can’t stay long, I’ve got a meeting in an hour. I just want to know we’re okay, seeing as we will be bumping into each other again. The lesbian scene isn’t that big, no matter what anyone tells you.” I was relying on Nicola for a solid answer.

She shrugged, which wasn’t the best response for the current situation. “We’re going to have to be, aren’t we? I can’t walk away from Melanie. She’s good for me. I’m not going to mess this one up too.”

I frowned. “You shouldn’t marry someone because you think you owe them something.”

“I know.” Nicola paused, before fixing me with those eyes again. “But

we're solid. She's dependable."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. And me and you... the other night — it was like we were just picking up where we left off. It's too hard. I've always had feelings for you, but they mess with my head."

I gulped and tears needled the back of my eyes. Every time she said something like that, it took me back to teenage Nicola. The one I'd been in love with.

There was a knock on the door and it opened swiftly. A man with red hair walked in, but stopped when he saw me. "Sorry guv, didn't realise you had company."

"Can you give me five and I'll be with you?" she told him, holding up her hand.

If the man noticed Nicola's watery eyes, he gave nothing away.

"Sure," he said, smiling at me as he backed out of the office.

Nicola stood up and walked around the desk, leaning on it in front of me before taking my hands in hers. "I have to go — I've got a briefing to do."

A tear trickled down my cheek. I didn't know why. I hadn't come here to pursue anything with Nicola, but I didn't want this moment to end. I was fighting with my teenage self and my normally rational present self.

"I don't want this to be the end of us — even as friends." I paused, searching my mind for something to say. Nicola's hands were hot around mine. "Do you still love country music?"

She nodded.

"Then come to the Dixie Chicks with me." Even as I said it, I knew it was wrong. But it was out of my mouth before I could control what I was saying.

She furrowed her brow. "You've got tickets? They sold out in minutes." She paused. "Remember when we were meant to go to that concert all those years ago?"

I nodded, putting an image of Holly out of my mind, even though every

fibre of my being was screaming at me to take the offer back. But I wasn't operating via normal me — I was operating via 16-year-old me. "I do. But we never got there that time, did we?"

Nicola narrowed her eyes. "Things got in the way."

"Boys got in the way."

She nodded, then cast her eyes to the ground, before returning them back up to me. "I'd love to come with you." She paused, before tilting her head. "You give off very mixed signals, you know that?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything else.

"I've got to go. Drop me a text with the details?"

I nodded and got up, already cursing myself as I left. Why had I said that? I was so going to hell.



IT WAS NOW LESS than two weeks to Christmas, and I was no closer to getting a girlfriend. If anything, my plan for a Christmas girlfriend had shaken up my world and thrown a whole load of trouble my way in the past couple of weeks. On top of that, I'd promised the Dixie Chicks tickets to Nicola in a moment of stupidity, and now I was regretting that enormously. My stomach lurched as I thought about breaking the news to Holly. It could wait. I decided to go to bed as I'd probably done enough damage in the world for one day.

I brushed my teeth, spitting out blood as I did — it represented the world I was living in. Messy. When I got into bed, sighing with relief as the covers soothed my skin, I stared at the ceiling and thought about my dad. He was probably looking down at me and shaking his head right now. Christmas was meant to be all about lightness and giving, but I knew that with the Dixie Chicks tickets, I'd taken the giving a step too far. I had to make that right before Holly found out.

“What would you do, Dad?” I asked out loud, before stilling my breathing and waiting for an answer.

Nothing came.

Perhaps my dad was too busy stringing up Christmas lights and drinking mulled wine with the angels — sounded about right.

But I knew he wouldn't be happy with what was going on. I needed to just walk away from Nicola completely, no good could come of it. And then Holly would be happy too.

Holly. *Oh god, the tickets.*

I pulled the covers up over my head and willed sleep to take me away.

Perhaps everything would seem a lot clearer in the morning.

TUESDAY DECEMBER 13TH



*H*olly and I were meeting in the drinks department at Selfridges to buy some overly expensive alcohol for our annual Christmas soirée, usually held the weekend before Christmas. Holly always had a party around that time to celebrate her birthday, which fell on Christmas Day — hence her festive name.

Last year we'd bought some fancy type of eggnog, specially imported from the USA and it was demolished within the hour. This year there was just as much festive bling on offer, with specially made sloe gin, Christmas-spiced rum and festive fizz, along with swag like specially printed Christmas glasses and cocktail shakers. In truth, I wanted to buy the whole shop, but I knew Holly wouldn't go for that, being far more practical and prudent than me.

Holly arrived ten minutes late, giving me a hug and complaining about the Tube. I shook it off — Holly was ten minutes late wherever she went, it was her ritual. She was dressed in a smart grey suit with those slip-on shoes with tassels that were so in vogue right now — with her height, Holly never needed to add heels. She'd had her hair cut recently and it hung down over her eyes, short at the back. As usual, Holly looked like she'd been expressly delivered from a catwalk show to come shopping with her vertically challenged friend. It was a role I was well used to playing.

“Have you found anything?” Holly rubbed her hands together, her green eyes twinkling. “I’m surprised you haven’t bought the shop yet.”

“I only *thought* about buying the whole shop, there’s a world of difference.”

Holly chuckled, before picking up a bottle of Smirnoff Gold. “This would be a good talking point.” She shook the spirit and the gold leaf danced around the liquid.

“Bit noughties,” I said. “What about this?” I held up a bottle of bright blue liquid, which had a reindeer head fixed around its cap so that when poured, it looked as though Rudolph was vomiting up your drink.

Holly screwed up her face. “I don’t think so — blue drinks are never good news.”

But within five minutes we’d struck gold: mince pie liqueur. “Mix it with rum to make mince pie martinis,” Holly read from the label. “That’ll do nicely.”

We bought three bottles before heading off to the Selfridges’ Christmas department to buy a new ornament for the flat — also now one of our Christmas traditions.

The department was vast, stacked floor to ceiling with shiny Christmas objects and decorations, all vying to be the one to adorn your home. Honestly, I could have happily moved in there for the festive period, pretending I was in the movie *Elf* or similar. This Christmas department represented a world where everything was simple, and the biggest decision you had to make was whether or not to eat a candy cane or a mince pie for breakfast.

After 20 minutes breathing in the filtered essence of pine cone, we settled on an uber contemporary snow-covered branch as our new ornament, replete with a red-breasted robin. It was going to look great on our lounge wall.

Next up on the list was family shopping. I always bought my mum a selection of treats from the Selfridges’ food hall, along with something

woollen. This year, Holly chose to follow suit. We bagged our mothers identical grey cashmere jumpers and hoped they'd never meet wearing them, along with a selection of nuts, chocolates and weird cheese.

Which just left buying for each other so we agreed to meet in the champagne bar in an hour — we had to have bought our presents by then. We called this our annual Christmas dash — you could pre-plan, but you could not pre-buy.

I knew where I was headed: bags. Holly needed a new one that fitted her laptop as well as her daily life — she'd been telling me so for weeks now. I'd done my research, which meant I found the perfect bag within 20 minutes and had it gift-wrapped on the spot. I was pleased with my choice. The bag was cherry-red leather with tassels to match Holly's shoes, had a wealth of pockets and leather so smooth, you could fall asleep on it.



HOLLY WAS WAITING in the champagne bar with a grin on her face when I arrived, two glasses of fresh bubbles on the table along with a bowl of green olives. Most of the other tables were full of shoppers relaxing after spending their cash too, drinking wine and champagne, as well as eating some of the bar's tapas offerings.

“All done?” Holly asked. She smiled and it lit up her whole face — she looked extra-gorgeous tonight.

I stashed the presents under the table, dropping my handbag on to the back of the chair.

“Yep and you're going to love what I bought you,” I said.

“I don't doubt it.” Holly sipped her drink, before rubbing her hands together. “So I was thinking, tonight could be the start of our Christmas extravaganza.”

I tilted my head. “Our Christmas what?”

Holly scratched her forehead and stretched her legs out so they snaked down the side of my chair. “If your Christmas girlfriend quest is really over, then maybe we should just throw ourselves into Christmas, just the two of us and our plans. What do you think?”

Guilt crept up my face. Turns out guilt was coloured red.

“What’s the matter?” Holly narrowed her eyes. “This is right up your street, but you’re not jumping up and down.” She paused, then sat back in her chair. “You feeling okay?”

I licked my lips before shaking my head. “I’m fine, just need some food — this champagne has gone straight to my stomach. The Christmas extravaganza sounds perfect. But what does it involve?”

Holly grinned and was engaged once more. “Tonight, we do dinner under the twinkly Christmas lights. Then tomorrow we watch a Christmas movie, your choice, and I’ll pretend to be amazed when you choose *Elf*. Then there’s the party, Dixie Chicks, my birthday — we’re all set really!”

My face fell. Dixie Chicks.

I put my finger in the air and pursed my lips, then took a large gulp of my champagne. Then another. It was nearly all gone.

“We better get you some food sharpish if this is your drinking mood,” Holly said with a smile.

“About the Dixie Chicks.”

Holly’s face formed a question mark. “What about them?” She withdrew her legs and sat up. “You did get the tickets, right?”

I nodded. “I did.” More nodding. “But I might have promised them to somebody else.”

Holly looked confused and rightly so.

“What?” She looked like she wanted to scrub out her ears, like she couldn’t possibly have heard right.

Only, she had.

I downed the rest of my drink and grimaced. I really was a terrible

person.

“The thing is, I saw Nicola yesterday. And things were fraught. I know she loves country music, and it just came out. I wanted to make her feel better, make the situation better, so it just slipped out. I’m so sorry. But I can take it back, and we can still go. I’ve been meaning to. I just haven’t had the time.”

Holly didn’t say anything. She just breathed deep gulps of air, then stood up, shaking her head. Her jacket was on before any words spilled from her mouth.

“Nicola. I might have known Nicola Sheen would be involved somewhere. You just can’t help yourself, can you? Tori Hammond, whirlwind central. Do you just like drama? Because if you do, you’re doing a stellar job.”

It was like she’d punched me in the face, and frankly, I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had. Holly was being horrible to me, and while I knew I deserved it, it didn’t make it hurt any less. This was Holly. We were more than just friends. We were a unit. We were... I couldn’t find the words to say what we were.

“Holly.” I stood up and put my hand on her arm.

She threw it off abruptly. “Don’t try to brush this one off, Tor, it’s not going to work. You know how much I wanted to go to the Dixie Chicks — *you know*. Yet you still did this. Incredible. Well, I hope you really enjoy those tickets. I hope they play all the hits, and I hope you don’t feel one ounce of guilt when they play our song — the one we always sing.” She picked up all her bags and brushed past me. “I’m going home. I suggest you don’t do the same for a while as I don’t want to look at your face any longer than I have to tonight. Call your girlfriend, I’m sure she’ll come and meet you.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I said, but Holly was already out the door and heading down the stairs to ground level.

I sat back down and ordered another glass of champagne, tapping the bag with Holly's present.

She'd calm down eventually. She always did.

"It'll all be fine," I said out loud to nobody.

But this time, I wasn't sure it would be. This time, I'd overstepped the mark and what made it worse was I could have covered it up and never told her. But it just slipped out. Now everything was ruined and it was all my fault. If they were giving out gold medals for bad friends, I was about to take the title by some distance.

I stared at my fresh glass of champagne, at the bubbles fizzing to the top, but I couldn't embrace their jollity.

My mood was sinking so fast, I feared I might fall through the floor at any moment.

THURSDAY DECEMBER 15TH



I arrived home from work exhausted from the week so far. I'd texted Nicola to tell her the Dixie Chicks tickets were off after my disastrous shopping trip with Holly, but she hadn't texted me back. I guessed my friendship with Nicola wasn't going to go anywhere fast now, but after the turmoil of the previous couple of weeks, I was fine with that.

I didn't know what I'd been thinking in Nicola's office that day — not much, apart from wanting to please younger me. But my current life was far more important than my past, and I was going to try to be a better person. Now I just had to tell Holly and let her know that our friendship meant the world to me. That she meant the world to me. But that all hinged on her being happy to talk to me, and that might be the trickier sell.

I'd also spoken to my mum the previous evening and told her the whole sorry tale. She was now coming into town on Saturday and meeting me for lunch on the pretext of some Christmas shopping. She hadn't said much in response apart from dropping in the odd sympathetic platitude, but I expected she was coming to tell me much the same as Holly had on Tuesday. Ever since then, Holly had been courteously polite to me when we'd crossed paths in the morning, but tonight was the first time we'd be home together since Dixie-gate.

I picked up the post from the mailbox in the reception area and got the lift

to the fifth floor, punching the button and waiting for it to move. There was a bank statement for Holly, some junk mail from a catalogue for me, plus a handwritten envelope addressed to both of us. I was intrigued.

I ripped open the hand-written envelope just as the lift doors sprung open. I hitched my bag up my shoulder, unlocked our front door and threw my keys down on the shelf in the hallway — they scratched the wall as they landed. Damn. Dropping my bag, I pulled the contents of the envelope free and stopped still, blinking rapidly as I read.

‘Melanie Taylor and Nicola Sheen are pleased to announce their marriage and would love you to be there to celebrate their special day on Saturday, December 31st...’

I stopped and stared.

So she was going ahead with it — that was a good thing. She was engaged after all, and the logical thing for people to do when they were engaged was to get married.

Nicola Sheen was getting married.

I’d known that all along. And I didn’t have an ‘It Should Have Been Me’ feeling about it.

The feeling washing through my bones was 10 per cent betrayal but 90 per cent relief. Nicola Sheen was in the past and that’s where she should have stayed all along. Still, my movements were heavy as I put the invite on top of my keys and turned away from it. Then I hung up my coat, went through to my bedroom and collapsed on the bed.

Ten minutes later, I heard the front door slam, which shook me from my stasis. I heaved my body upwards, peeled the clothes from my body, applied more soothing, comforting homeware of tracksuit bottoms and my favourite yellow T-shirt, and then headed into the lounge. The invite was no longer on the shelf as I passed.

When Holly heard me shuffle into the lounge, she turned and walked over, stopping just before she got to me.

“You okay?” she asked.

I nodded, but bit my lip. “I’m fine.”

“I saw the invite.”

I gave her a weak smile. “Really, I’m fine.”

But she gave me a hug anyway, because that’s what friends do, and I let her. Sure, we were still fighting, but some things trumped fights.

After a few moments, I untangled myself from Holly, walked over to the fridge and pulled out one of her beers. “Want one?”

She nodded.

I uncapped two and handed her one.

“You’re drinking beer?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I’ve decided to be a different version of me from today, one who puts myself and my friends first. And maybe Tori 2.0 drinks beer, who knows?” I took a swig and tasted the familiar bitter taste. I couldn’t quite keep the wince from my face. “I might get used to it.”

We both sat on either end of the sofa, a train rattling by as we did so.

“Have you heard from Nicola?” Holly held up the invite.

I shook my head. “She’s been very silent this week. Now I know why — other things to do.” I puffed out my cheeks and blew out a long breath. “I don’t know why I feel a teensy bit betrayed, but I do.” I drank some more beer. “I’m more relieved than anything else, but my teenage self is a bit sad. It’s always nice to be the chosen one, even if it was never going to work in the end.”

Holly looked away before answering. “Very true.” She paused. “But you’re always the chosen one with me. Even though sometimes you really don’t deserve it.”

I grimaced. “I know. I’m sorry about everything, I really am. I’ve told Nicola she’s not going now, and I hope we can go to the concert as planned. It’s what I always wanted. They were always your tickets.”

Holly spluttered. “Not what you said on Tuesday.” Her tone was

disbelieving, then her face sagged. “Giving those tickets away like you did really hurt.”

Holly’s words cut me to the core. Never in a million years had I meant to hurt Holly. But I had. She’d ripped down my defences and exposed me for the terrible friend I was. I wanted to make it better, make Holly see it was one mistake and that our friendship was way stronger. It had to be, I couldn’t cope without it.

I took her hand in mine before speaking. “I don’t know what else to say apart from sorry again — you’ve no idea how sorry I am. Hurting you was the last thing I wanted to do.” I hoped Holly believed me, but I had a feeling it might take more than mere words.

“I know you are,” she said, shaking her head and dropping my hand.

A cool breeze of my own making washed over me.

“But you’re so infuriating. You just do things and don’t think about the consequences. I know spontaneity is all the rage these days, but sometimes, so is a calm, measured approach to life.”

I sighed. “I know. But you do that much better than me. It’s not my strong point.”

“I’m not sure how long that excuse is going to wash, Tori.”

I frowned. I didn’t like the sound of that. “What do you mean?” My voice was quiet.

“I mean you have to grow up and get real. Saying you’re no good at something is not an excuse to then make the same mistake again and again. If you’re no good at something, work at getting better at it. Especially if the consequence of not doing so is hurting the people closest to you.”

I let the words settle on my skin and seep into my bloodstream before replying. “I promise I’ll try. I know giving the tickets to Nicola was a mistake. I knew it as soon as it came out of my mouth. But once it was out there, it was done.” I shrugged.

“And then what happened?”

“Sorry?”

“Then what happened?” Holly sat forward, looking at me.

“I don’t get you.”

She laughed softly. “I think that’s the point I’m trying to make.”

Her words were slightly barbed, but she was smiling. At least that was something.

Holly shook her head again. “I’m saying that after you made the mistake — and you knew it was a mistake — you did nothing. You hid. You hoped that someone else would come along and sort your mess out for you. But guess what? Nobody did. Your mistakes are for you to deal with.

“You did the same with Nicola. You never put a stop to it, even though you knew it was going nowhere. You did it with Amy too — she was the one who called it off. Everybody else has the same issues to deal with, and they do. You need to start dealing with your life rather than running away from it.”

I said nothing, just looked around the room. I knew I deserved this, but it didn’t make it any easier to take.

But Holly wasn’t finished. “Running away creates drama and you love drama. But you don’t need it, that’s what you don’t realise. You’re fine as you are. You can be the star of your own life, you don’t need other people to define you. It was the same with your Christmas girlfriend quest. You couldn’t just date like everyone else, you had to have a theme, a deadline — more drama.”

I glanced over at Holly, taking in her words. Was she right? Did I court drama wherever I went? My life had certainly always had its fair share. Maybe she had a point. Maybe I did do it to myself.

“You should come out for lunch with my mum on Saturday,” I said glumly.

Holly looked at me quizzically. “I should?”

I nodded. “Yep. She’s given me this speech before too, or similar. You

could tell me in stereo.”

Holly smiled. “No, we’ll just tag-team. I’ll do today, she can do Saturday.”

I gave her a weak smile. “You make me sound like such a moron. An emotionally defunct moron.” I put my head in my hands. “Am I that bad?”

Holly was silent for a few seconds too long.

I burrowed my head deeper.

“You’re just you, Tori, I know you and I love you.” She paused, as I looked up. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t make better choices and make a change. See what I mean?”

I sighed and nodded. It was nothing I hadn’t heard before. And maybe now I was reaching my late 20s, the cuteness factor was wearing off somewhat. But Holly still loved me, that was something at least.

“I do,” I said. “And I will totally try. You have my word. Is that good enough?” I searched Holly’s face for an answer. She waited a few seconds before replying.

“It is if you mean it,” she said.

I bit my lip again. “I really do.”

“Then I’ll look forward to Tori 2.0. She sounds like an interesting, sassy woman.” Then she smiled at me, a proper full face smile this time, and when she did, I realised how much Holly’s approval meant to me.

I stared at the train that was passing by the window, waiting for the noise to die down before replying.

“So am I forgiven?”

Holly shook her head, then smiled. “You’re forgiven. You’re an idiot, but you’re forgiven.

I smiled back. “I was going to give the tickets to you all along, honest. Nicola doesn’t deserve them — you do.”

She waved her hand. “Let’s leave Nicola out of this from now on, shall we? We’re going to the Dixie Chicks, just like we planned. Our Christmas

extravaganza is back on. What do you say?"

A wave of warmth washed over me as I held up my beer for her to clink.
"Here's to us and our Christmas extravaganza."

"Here's to it," Holly replied, tapping her beer bottle to mine.

She held my gaze and my stomach did a backflip.

Honestly, my emotions were all over the place this Christmas.

FRIDAY DECEMBER 16TH



I opened two days of my Advent calendar and ate the chocolate for breakfast, then made my way to the office. The weather had turned grey and exceedingly damp. This morning, the heavens had opened and as I'd walked from the Tube, water was racing along the gutters, the torrential downpour slapping the concrete like a scorned lover. I'd run the gauntlet of trying not to get in the way of a giant wave from a passing car, and I'd just about managed it.

Now, I was in my office kitchen, grinding beans for my first coffee of the day. Surprisingly, I'd slept fine last night, but my dreams knew something was up. In it, I'd been walking up the aisle on my wedding day when I woke up, sweating and confused. I was pretty sure the woman waiting for me was Nicola Sheen, but I couldn't be certain — she seemed taller than her from the back. Now, a couple of hours later, I still had that odd, wary feeling you get when you have a dream that's far too close to real life. I preferred my dreams to be abstract and bizarre rather than based in reality — like that dream where I'd married Kristen Stewart. After that one, I'd been smiling for the whole day.

Sal walked into the kitchen looking exactly as I felt — tired and like she wanted to still be asleep.

“Morning No. 1,” she said. “No arson plans today?”

I shook my head with a smile. “None this morning, but maybe later if I’m bored.”

Sal laughed and slotted two slices of bread into the toaster before opening the fridge to grab the butter.

“Make sure you watch the toast, though,” I said. “That toaster is dodgy, mark my words.”

“A bad workman always blames his tools,” Sal replied.

I finished making my coffee and raised an eyebrow at her. “Just make sure you watch it.”

I walked through to my desk and opened my emails — only 35 new messages overnight, not too daunting. I smiled at a picture of Holly and me from last summer that I had as my screen saver — it was just after we’d done a skydive and we had our arms around each other, grinning into the camera. It always made me smile, plus it reminded me I was capable of anything if I put my mind to it. Outside, the rain was still skating off the dark grey roof tiles and a crunch of thunder made me turn my head, quickly followed by a shard of lightning.

I was on my third sip of coffee when I smelt the smoke, and just raising the mug to my mouth when Sal ran past me the other way. Too late — the fire alarm was already blaring.

“Sorry!” Sal was standing in the kitchen doorway, her face clenched. “Looks like we’re going to have to evacuate again. I promise to buy a new toaster today.” She caught my eye and gave me a tight-lipped smile.

There was a collective grumble as people winced at the noise of the fire alarm, then gathered their coats and bags before trooping down the stairs, brollies in hand. On the pavement outside the water jumped up, hitting calves and shins, while windscreen wipers worked overtime as we huddled in the doorway of the local supermarket.

Everyone else was willing the fire department to get here quick and sort this out, but I wasn’t one of them. I wanted to be nowhere near the fire

engines when they arrived.

“Not you this time,” office manager Maureen said to me.

“Apparently not,” I replied, fixing her with a death stare. Possibly a slight over-reaction on my part, but Maureen should know when to shut up. It wasn’t one of her qualities.

Five minutes later and the fire engines turned up. Nicola Sheen and her colleagues got out, fire gear on and ready to tackle the toaster again. She looked around, searching out Maureen. When her eyes spied the high-vis jacket, Nicola began walking towards us.

“Here we go.” Maureen let out a sigh and stepped into the rain, umbrella up. I’ve no idea why, but I followed her.

When Nicola saw me next to Maureen, she stopped. I could see the battle of professional versus personal playing out in her mind, but eventually professional won the day. She came to a halt inches from me, her face giving nothing away.

“Morning, Maureen,” she said, as if this was just any other day. Nicola’s vision was set to tunnel mode, and Maureen was the only person at the end.

“Nicola,” Maureen replied. “I’m so sorry, it’s our damn toaster again.”

“It’s pretty bad when you’re on first-name terms with me.” Nicola glanced at me. “You again?”

Was that a smirk on her face? If it was, I really wanted to wipe it off. “No, actually,” I said. “Believe me, you’re the last person I wanted to see this morning.” I paused. “How are the wedding plans?”

Nicola flinched, but then regained her composure, turning her focus back to Maureen.

“You’re getting married?” Maureen said. “How wonderful! When’s the happy day?”

“Less than two weeks, isn’t it, Nicola?” I closed my eyes as I said it. Why couldn’t I just shut my mouth?

Maureen looked from me, to Nicola, and back. “You two know each

other?”

“Old school friends.” Nicola kicked a stone on the pavement as she said it.

Another crunch of thunder interrupted our joyous conversation. I moved as central as I could get under my umbrella, whereas Nicola just stood and stared, water cascading off her shiny helmet, her uniform seemingly making her indifferent to the weather conditions.

“Let’s try to get this over with as quickly as possible, shall we?” Nicola said, glancing at me again.

I presumed she was talking about the fire alarm.

“Right you are,” Maureen replied.

Nicola turned on her heel and Maureen scuttled after her, disappearing into the building without a single look back towards me. The wind had picked up now and the rain was slanting horizontally into my body, my umbrella not much help at all.

I ran towards the building and took shelter in the reception area, along with the other fire marshals from the other floors. My umbrella dripped silently at my side and the air was filled with the scent of wet tarmac and gently steaming bodies, damp and bothered from the inconvenience. Sal was nowhere to be seen — was she hiding under her desk eating the offending toast?

When Nicola and Maureen came back down the stairs five minutes later, Maureen was clutching a clipboard and nodding to Nicola, who was being followed by a colleague I recognised from their previous visit.

Maureen rolled her eyes as she passed me. “Off to round up the troops,” she said. The other fire wardens slipped off to do the same, and with Nicola’s work colleague out the door as well, it was just me and her. However, this morning, even in her uniform, Nicola did not spell desire. Rather, she spelled Trouble with a capital T.

“I hope the wedding goes well.” My voice was flat.

Nicola scrunched up her face. “Really?”

I gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Really.”

She smiled grimly. “I’m sorry about everything. I was just confused and got a bit nostalgic. But I’m marrying Melanie. I can’t let her down.”

“A great basis for a marriage,” I said.

“I’ve heard of worse,” Nicola replied, folding her arms across her chest. “Anyway, you and me, we’d never have worked. Not with Holly in the picture.” Nicola fixed me with her eyes as she said it.

“What’s Holly got to do with anything?” I was genuinely perplexed.

She angled her head. “Really, Tori? It was always there at school, you know that. But now? You two should just bite the bullet and get it over with.”

I shook my head. “Stop trying to deflect the situation. Me and Holly are friends, that’s all. You’re the one who kissed me—”

“—And you pushed me away? I don’t think so.”

We both stood glaring at each other, daring the other to take it further.

Nicola blinked first. “Face it, Tori. We had unfinished business. Now it’s finished. You can get on with your life and I can get on with mine. Although I’ve taken you off the wedding list. I assume you’re not coming?”

My hand was on the move before I could stop it. I reached out and slapped Nicola across the face. That was for my present self, as well as my 16-year-old self. The sound as my palm connected with her cheek echoed around the building’s reception, and I heard a gasp behind us. I gasped internally too — far from being satisfying, I just felt a bit sick.

We both turned to see Maureen standing there, jaw hanging open, along with half the rest of the building behind her. I wasn’t sure how long they’d been standing there, but I was pretty sure they’d seen me slapping Nicola, the first time I’d ever done such a thing in my whole life. I stared down at my hand, which was shaking, and then up at Nicola who was clutching her cheek.

I still couldn’t believe I’d just done that.

After a few moments, she puffed out her cheeks and shook herself down. “I’ll take that as a no then,” she said.

With that, she whipped around and signed Maureen’s admin sheet. “I’ll be sending one of my officers round next week to check all your devices so you’d better get new ones. Otherwise, I’ll be issuing a fine. Clear?”

Maureen nodded meekly, then Nicola walked out of the door and out of my life. Again. But this time, I had a feeling it was for good. I felt the cloak of closure settle on my shoulders, and it fitted perfectly.

Once she’d gone, the rest of the office workers began streaming up the stairs, leaving me standing, shell-shocked.

Maureen made her way over to me, concern etched on her face. “Everything okay?”

I exhaled loudly. “It will be,” I said, giving her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “And don’t worry, I only slap people I’m really mad at.” My hand was still stinging.

“Remind me not to get on the wrong side of you in the future, then,” she replied.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 17TH



I met my mum just after one o'clock under the Swiss cuckoo clock in Leicester Square, which wasn't the best place to meet someone on the penultimate Saturday before Christmas. Half of London was there, prowling around, looking for wildly inappropriate goods to spend their money on. I hated rushed Christmas shopping, so was glad I'd got all of mine out of the way already.

My mum was a mass of floaty material and beads as always — I often joked this must be the learned dress code in professor school. Her hair was shoulder-length and she'd dyed it recently so it was the colour of honey. She was wearing her comfortable shopping shoes from Marks & Spencer and was already clutching at least three shopping bags, as I knew she would be. My mum was an early riser and she liked to hit the shops as soon as possible to beat the crowds. "If you don't get there till lunchtime, you've lost already," she always said. Which was the main reason why we rarely went shopping together.

"Alright, kiddo." She gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek. "I would hug you, but I'll save that till we're sitting down and I can drop these bags." As she said it, a tourist ran past and almost knocked Mum over. "Shall we get out of here before I get trampled?"

I took one of her bags before indicating over my shoulder and she

followed me. Within five minutes, we were in Soho and in one of my favourite restaurants, which did a fabulous set lunch for prices that didn't break the bank.

"Lunch is on me," I said, pulling out my chair.

"I knew I had a daughter for a reason." Mum gave me the promised hug, which nearly knocked the wind out of me before slotting herself and her shopping into and under the chair.

We ordered from a very smiley waiter, and once the wine had been poured, we relaxed.

"So you are coming home next week?" Mum took one of the bits of French bread and smothered it with butter.

"Course. Unless I get a better offer."

Mum spluttered. "Charming. You're going to leave me with your gran and Aunt Ellen? That shows a huge lack of Christmas spirit, if you don't mind me saying. Especially from one who loves Christmas so much."

I smiled. "I'm joking — you know I wouldn't miss it. How is Gran?"

"Gran is great — the usual. And Ellen's back and itching to go away again already, so no change there either."

My mum's mother was faring well, still strong and independent at the age of 75. Her older sister Ellen was also giving old age two fingers at every opportunity, having just returned from a safari in South Africa. I loved spending time with both of them and hoped I was as funny and healthy at their age. Plus, they were both huge red wine fans, so we spent a large chunk of Christmas Day trying new bottles — hence they tended to be a little boozy. Which was exactly the way my gran planned it, so she could then clean up at poker in the evening. She always seemed to miraculously sober up at that point.

"So what better offer are you waiting for?" Mum asked, as the food was brought to the table. French classic beef bourguignon for her, coq au vin for me.

I shook my head. “I was joking — I’ll be there.”

Mum chewed her mouthful before replying. “Nothing to do with Nicola Sheen?”

I cast my eyes down. “No. We ran into each other yesterday and that is done and dusted.” I relayed the story to Mum and she clicked her tongue in response, an annoying habit I knew well. It meant she had more to say, but she was holding back for now.

“And what did Holly have to say?”

“I didn’t see her last night — she was out with work people.”

“What’s she doing for Christmas?” Mum took a sip of her wine, but kept her eyes focused on me.

“The usual,” I replied. “Some time with her dad, some time with her mum and nobody’s happy. Always makes me value our Christmases even more when I hear about hers.”

Mum chewed slowly. “She should come to ours — the more the merrier.”

“I’m sure she’d jump at the chance,” I said, waving my knife in the air. “But you know, family politics.”

“Well, the offer’s there if she changes her mind.” Mum raised an eyebrow, then carried on eating.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Hmmm?”

“That,” I said, mimicking her movement. “The eyebrow raise, the ‘wait and see’ look.”

Mum shrugged. “I’ve no idea what you’re on about.” She ate some more food and put her fork down. “So tell me about some of these dates you went on. They sound like a hoot. Especially the one where you fell asleep on the loo.”



AFTER THE DIXIE CHICKS tickets and all the grief I'd put her through, I knew I owed Holly big time. So I texted to say I'd meet her at home that night. After I left my mum with our Christmas plans ringing in my ears, I stopped off at Marks & Spencer and bought one of their meal deals, ready to grovel to Holly. And if that didn't work, I bought extra chocolate and wine for added back-up. After all, one bottle of wine was never enough in these situations.

When I got home, the flat was dark and quiet — Holly wasn't home yet. I switched the Christmas tree lights to a cool mood setting, then flicked on the others before adding some candles to the mix. Then I selected a chilled playlist on Spotify and set all the food out ready on the counter. I wanted Holly to know I'd made an effort, even if actually cooking the food was a little beyond my skillset.

The next thing I knew, Holly was gently shaking me awake — wine at lunchtime always made me sleepy.

“Hey,” she said, her hand on my shoulder. “Are you trying to burn the place down? Because I really don't think we need Nicola Sheen coming over again this evening, do you?”

I rubbed my eyes and sat up. “Agreed, we definitely don't want that.” I yawned and stretched both arms above my head, my groan timed with a train rumbling by outside. “I must have fallen asleep.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Holly replied. She looked around. “Is this all for me?”

I nodded. “I was trying to make it...” The word romantic popped into my head, but that didn't seem right. Or did it? “Relaxing.” Definitely a better choice of word.

“I'm honoured.” Holly paused. “Let me dump my bags and I'll be right out.”

I stood up, brushing myself down in an attempt to shake the sleep from my system. I checked my watch — I'd been out for nearly an hour. Shit, I really could have burned the place down. Note to self: must take steps to try

not to become a serial arsonist.

I put the oven on and was piercing film lids when Holly reappeared. She was wearing jeans and a distressed black T-shirt that sat just so on her body as if she'd been dressed by Tyra Banks. That's what comes of being so tall — clothes just work on you. For Holly, the biggest gripe was women's tops being too short and not covering her stomach. As she often pointed out, crop tops were never a good look on anyone, let alone accidental versions.

“So you're cooking me dinner to apologise for being a crap friend, is that right?” Holly was leaning against the counter and grinning at me. “And when I say cooking, I mean it in the loosest sense of the word,” she added.

I glanced at her, my knife poised above a container of tenderstem broccoli. “Hey, nothing screams ‘I'm sorry!’ like an M&S meal deal. Fact.” I waved the knife around. “Look it up on the internet, it'll totally say so.”

Holly crossed her arms, an amused smile playing on her lips. “So what's for dinner, MasterChef?”

“Well,” I said, tapping the black plastic containers. “For mains, we've got duck breast fillets with soy, honey and ginger, and I bought some chips as an extra side.”

“An extra side? You're really pushing the boat out.” Holly paused. “And what's for dessert? Have you ordered burlesque dancers followed by high-class escorts and cocaine?”

I clicked my fingers together. “Damn, I knew there was something I forgot — gimme two ticks and I'll go order the cocaine.”

Holly laughed as I put the food in the oven.

“Should take about 20 minutes,” I said. “Beer to start?”

“Beer would be perfect.” She paused. “Did you buy those too?”

“No, you did.” I passed her a beer and we sat on the sofa, facing each other.

“So you're keeping up this beer drinking thing then?”

I nodded, taking a swig. “See, I didn't even wince then, did I?” There was

jubilant in my voice.

“You did not,” Holly replied. “Well done, I think?” She paused. “How’s your mum?”

I nodded. “Really good. Excited about Christmas and she’s got me *even more* excited about it now, too.”

Holly pulled a face. “Glad someone is — we’re rapidly approaching one of the most anti-climactic weeks of my year. Christmas and my birthday in one, and every year my parents choose to celebrate it by arguing. Happy holidays!” Holly bent a leg up on the sofa and hugged it to her chest.

I wanted to make it all better for her, but knew I couldn’t.

“My mum invited you to ours — you’ve done it before, remember? Maybe you should do it this year too? Reclaim Christmas and your birthday and make them your own.”

Holly gave me a tepid smile. “A nice plan, but I don’t think I’d ever hear the end of it if I did that, and then I’d just have to deal with warring parents on the phone rather than in my face.”

“But wouldn’t that be better?”

Holly shrugged. “They’d find a way to ruin it, whatever.”

“Just think about it — for me?” I pulled my extra-special pout, the one Holly could never turn down.

She put up her hand to shield her face. “Not the pout!” she said. “Save me from the pout!” She paused. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “But staying serious for a minute, I do want to say sorry again — about everything. I was an idiot and we’re worth so much more than any love interest in my life. We’ve been through so much together, and that matters.” A train rumbled past and I waited before continuing.

“So tonight is my very humble and really not quite grand enough way of starting to say sorry. But this is only the beginning. For a start, I’m paying for the Dixie Chicks tickets, taking you out to dinner beforehand, and will also buy you another night out, all expenses paid. You deserve it.”

Holly's face registered surprise, then she curled her mouth up into a smile that reached her eyes. I hoped I was fulfilling my part of the bargain, of taking responsibility for my mistakes.

"To us," I said, holding up my bottle. "Whatever life throws at us, let's always stay friends and have each other's back, no matter what."

Holly raised her beer bottle back towards mine. "To us," she said, fixing me with her gaze. "I've always had your back, and I always will."

My stomach dropped as she looked into my eyes. I recognised the feeling in the pit of my stomach, but it wasn't a feeling I was used to having with Holly.

Excitement. Attraction. Desire.

I opened my eyes wide as the shock of the revelation jolted my heart, but I managed to control my breathing and style it out. However, when I gazed at Holly's face, I was pretty sure I saw just what I was feeling reflected right back at me.

Holy batshit. Was this what Nicola had meant when she'd said we could never have a relationship with Holly around? And was this what all my mum's raised eyebrows and unspoken questions had been about too? Did Holly like me *like that*? It was far too many questions for my brain to cope with. As I stared at Holly, my clit twitched and I closed my eyes.

Then I shot up from the sofa, ignoring the static in the air and the fluttering in my chest. If I was about to have a heart attack, this was not the best time for it. I'd thought tonight, of all nights, was going to be complication-free, but apparently not.

"I'm just going to check the dinner." I scooted over to the oven, avoiding looking at Holly for fear I might blurt something out or give something away — what, I wasn't quite sure.

"You only just put it in."

She was right, of course.

"Yeah, but I was just thinking that perhaps I should have seasoned the

duck.”

When I turned, my gaze fell on Holly and my vision went blurry. It was as if I'd been seeing her one way my whole life, and now, someone had flipped a switch and Holly was a femme fatale. In grey furry slippers. Her short, dark hair flopped adorably on to her forehead, a lot less fussy than it would have been had we been going out tonight. Her T-shirt now clung to all the right places and I blushed as my gaze stopped momentarily on Holly's breasts before looking away quickly.

“Do you think I should season the duck?” I opened the cupboard to look for seasoning. Then I looked back to Holly. “What does seasoning mean, exactly? I've never known that, it always seems a bit general, doesn't it?” I was babbling, which was strangely reassuring. It meant I was reacting as I normally did when I liked someone.

But now Holly was putting down her beer and walking over to me, and I wasn't sure I could take such close proximity now that the cat was out of the bag and my heart was telling me its deepest, darkest secrets. I might implode if she came within three feet of me.

When I'd thought about getting together with Nicola, there had always been something holding me back, always been a missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle. Something beyond the fact she was a relative stranger with personal baggage galore.

Standing here in front of Holly, there were no questions, no what-ifs. The puzzle was complete and everything slotted into place. I knew everything there was to know about Holly and I liked it all. I'd been so busy running around and creating drama, I hadn't stopped to see what was right in front of me. And what was right in front of me was so much more than an image on a dating app. Holly was a 3D person and she was everything I was looking for.

However, the prospect of acting on that piece of the puzzle was absolutely terrifying, because what if it went wrong? I risked losing everything. Our friendship, my home, my security — and my love for Holly.

Because I did love her, I always had as a friend. But turning it into something more? That was too much to comprehend.

“What do you mean, what’s seasoning?” Holly asked.

What was she talking about? My mind drew a blank. Seasoning? I’d been hit with a startling new revelation in my life, and Holly was talking about seasoning?

But no, hang on, I’d been talking about seasoning, hadn’t I? The rest had been an internal dialogue with just me participating. Right, I remembered now. Seasoning.

I blinked.

Holly furrowed her brow. “You okay? You’re acting very strangely.”

The heat from her body was leaping on to mine and I felt dizzy. Weak. I had to focus.

“Fine,” I said. I buried my head back inside the cupboard so she couldn’t see the panic written in pink highlighter on my face or the fear currently lodged squarely in my chest and throat. What if I vomited all over her? I really shouldn’t have had that tiramisu dessert with my mum at lunchtime.

“So which seasoning did you say?” My head was still in the cupboard. “I’ve got Cajun, nutmeg, coriander, mixed herbs.” I twisted the small pots of herbs to read their labels.

Holly touched my arm lightly. “Tori, come out of the cupboard.”

But her touch on my arm made me leap into the air. In doing so, I managed to knock a couple of the pots of herbs from the shelf, and they bounced off the kitchen counter and on to the floor. Luckily, they were made of plastic so they didn’t smash. I turned to pick them up, but Holly was already on her haunches.

I dropped down to the floor myself to help her out, as one of the herbs had flipped open and a mass of dried oregano was now littering the kitchen floor.

Holly grabbed the dustpan and brush from the under-sink cupboard and as

she bent back down, we came face to face with each other. And when I looked at her, something changed. My brain flipped to romance mode, and everywhere I looked, my vision was misted and objects airbrushed. It was as if my mind had just installed a photo editor and was trying out every happy filter possible. Right now, my whole world was set to Sunshine and Yellow Glow.

I stared at Holly.

She stared at me.

I dropped my gaze to the spilled herbs, but when I looked back up, she hadn't taken her eyes off me. My heart rate revved like a motorcycle engine and blood zipped around my veins. Was I about to pass out or about to kiss my best friend of a million years? I couldn't be certain which way this one was going to go.

But it turned out that Holly was sure, so the passing out option was bypassed.

Before I could react, Holly's lips were pressing into mine, soft, firm and beery. She didn't try to rush, she just let her lips linger and caress, stroking across mine, taking her time. The effects of her kiss shot through my body with utmost force, causing my fingers and toes to curl, holding on for dear life. It was sublime and it was happening to me. *With Holly.*

I sunk into the kiss with my best friend, and magic pulsed in the air around us. The trains wound down, light increased and there was a ringing in my ears, but it was a happy sound. Our lips slipped over each other like they'd been made to measure, whispering a secret to each other they'd been bursting to tell. But the secret was out now, and there was no way of putting it back.

I've no way of knowing how long we kissed, but eventually Holly gently pulled away. She held me by the top of my arm, a smile playing on her lips. She went to say something, her eyes locked on mine, but then she just pressed her lips back on to mine lightly before pulling back again.

When I opened my eyes, the world felt brighter, shinier, more defined. I'd kissed a lot of women before, but I'd never been kissed like Holly had just kissed me. This was so much more than just a kiss.

"Your lips feel pretty good," she said before kissing me again.

"So do yours." I reapplied my lips to hers and I felt it right where I was meant to.

This shit was getting real, but I wasn't scared. Rather, I wanted to clutch our possibilities, because right now, they seemed limitless. Especially when my lips were on hers and nothing seemed impossible.

I only stopped kissing when we nearly toppled over, both of us still down on our haunches, the herbs still on the floor.

When I looked at Holly, I was stuck for words. None of them seemed adequate for what had just happened.

"So this is... interesting," I said finally. "Kissing — we don't normally do that."

Holly smiled, then shook her head. "No, we don't."

"And when we do, we do it squatting on our kitchen floor."

Holly laughed. "It's a first for me. For you too?"

I rubbed a hand up and down her arm. "Yep. I'm a kitchen floor kissing virgin."

I stood upright and offered a hand to Holly.

She took it, hauled herself upright and cracked her head on the open cupboard door. Hard. She was immediately back down on the floor again.

"Shit, that sounded like it hurt. You okay?" I was on my knees beside Holly, who was sat on the kitchen floor, clutching her head and swearing under her breath. "Holly?"

She groaned in response and I stroked her arm.

"Can you see if it's bleeding?" She was still trying to catch her breath.

I peeled her hand away, noticing for the first time how long and slender her fingers were. Which of course then sent a shudder down my entire body,

and I had to blink to remember what I was doing: looking at Holly's head and checking she wasn't bleeding to death.

"I can't see any blood," I said. "But let's get you up and over to the couch."

She nodded slowly and made it to the sofa where she laid out, wincing. I brought her a bag of frozen peas and she held it against her head. Then I sat at the bottom of the sofa with her feet touching me, assessing her body, the body of my future lover I had no doubt.

I'd never slept with anyone so much taller than me. Holly's body was slim and went on for days, and I shuddered again as I imagined touching her for the first time, holding her breasts, kissing her neck. I blinked.

I must stop having amorous thoughts while the object of my affection might be concussed.

"How you feeling?"

Holly peeked out from under the frozen peas. "I'll live," she said. "But I'm more than a little upset that when I finally get to kiss you — and believe me, that's something I've been wanting to do for weeks now — I then nearly knock myself out and end up like this."

She'd been wanting to kiss me for weeks? This was news. But when I looked at Holly, holding her head, I decided to revisit that later.

"You don't need to worry," I said. "Just relax for now till you feel better. This is you and me, there's no hurry. We've got all the time in the world." I got up and walked over to Holly, and her eyes sparkled like diamonds. I leaned down and kissed her slowly, cupping her face and slipping my tongue inside her mouth.

She groaned lightly.

I didn't stop for a couple of minutes. I put all my effort into it, everything I was feeling in that moment. Right there, Holly and I were connected in a way I could never have imagined the day before. It's funny what life throws at you, isn't it? When I pulled back, my head was spinning, and Holly was

looking at me like I'd just given her the world.

“Fucking hell, Tori. Where did you learn to kiss like that?”

My cheeks reddened. “I teach it at the Lesbian Skills Centre, didn't I tell you? That's where I've secretly been going most weeks, not actually spin class as I've been telling you. It was a top secret mission.”

Holly grinned, then remembered she was in pain and frowned.

“You okay?” I dropped to my knees by her side. “Should I get you a headache pill or something?”

Holly stared at me, her pupils large. “I'm only thinking about one thing right now, but that might make my head explode.” She grinned at me. “Let's just see how we go with dinner and wine, and then we'll take it from there, okay?”

I nodded, then pushed myself upright before swooping to kiss Holly one more time. “And can I just say, this is one of the few times I'll be able to say I leaned down and kissed you, so I'm taking advantage of it.”

Holly beamed at me. “I've told you before — when you're this tall, you have to spend half your life horizontal just so your partner can have a fair crack at kissing you. It's something I've learned to live with.”

And then Holly winked at me.

I went weak at the knees.

Literally.



DINNER WAS A SURPRISING SUCCESS — even without the seasoning. Turns out, these ready-made dishes already have all the seasoning they need. Holly also told me over dinner that seasoning meant salt and pepper.

“Why don't they just say that then?”

She wasn't able to give me a satisfactory reply.

We ate the duck at the dining table with Holly gingerly touching her head

every few minutes.

“It feels like there should be a dent in my skull.”

I confirmed there was no dent, nor was there a torrent of blood pouring down her face. She eventually believed me and began to relax. However, I understood her dilemma. After our unexpected snogging, relaxing over a good meal and acting normally wasn't as easy as it sounded. Tonight was turning out to be anything but normal.

My senses were still dialled up to the maximum setting, so every time Holly moved, spoke or even glanced at me, I was preparing for her to say something profound, something life altering. Something that would make my heart soar, or make my heart sink. Like that it had all been a mistake, and we should just eat this dinner, forget it ever happened and move on.

But she didn't.

Instead, she chatted about how she was dreading Christmas, how good the food was, how weird her head felt.

“You might be concussed. I listened to a podcast the other day about it. If you feel sick, that's a key sign.”

Holly gave me a look. “Why were you listening to a podcast on concussion? Did you have a premonition?”

I returned her look.

“Or you could have poisoned me with your food. You're not exactly famed for your culinary skills.”

“I'm serious. Dizziness, sickness, it's all part of it. So no more wine for you.”

I topped up my glass, though.

Holly pouted. “I'd say tonight needs a little bit more wine, don't you?”

She had a point — I didn't want to tackle this without a little Dutch courage either. I topped up her glass.

We finished off with chocolate mousse, and then Holly beckoned me over.

I got up and arrived at her beckoning finger, and she pulled me into her lap.

“Now, where were we before the cupboard almost killed me?”

I gulped and shifted my gaze to Holly’s mouth, taking in her smooth skin, her proud nose. I’d only ever been this close before when she was carrying me home drunk in our younger years — and we’d never even kissed then.

But now, I kissed her, and it felt like I’d been doing it all my life. Holly’s mouth fitted mine perfectly, and her tongue when it slipped between my lips made my mind leap forward and think about what it might be like when it slipped between my other lips. And then my mind blanked out because it simply couldn’t take the heat.

I pulled back and Holly stared at me.

“What did you stop for?” She was breathing heavily, her hand on my waist.

“Is it strange this feels both really weird, but also really right?” My breasts were sitting just below Holly’s face and her attention wandered. I cupped her chin and made her look at me. “To my face, sweetheart,” I said.

Holly stuck her tongue out at me.

I smiled. “I mean, kissing you — it feels amazing. But I’m a little shy about getting undressed in front of you. I’ve known you for years.” I sighed and leaned my head back.

Holly gave me a squeeze. “It’s only in your head it feels weird,” she said. “Did you think it was going to be weird to kiss me?”

I thought about it. “A little.”

“And was it?”

I shook my head. “Not one bit.” I kissed her again to prove my point. “Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “Still fine.”

Holly grinned at me. “So don’t you think the rest will follow suit? That it will just be fine?”

I bit my lip. “I suppose so. Should we get drunk just to make sure?”

Holly laughed. “No we shouldn’t. I’d like to remember the first time I see you naked, the first time we have sex, wouldn’t you?”

Boom! My whole body flushed with longing, and I was sure Holly would be able to hear the rush of my libido.

Holly frowned. “That okay to say? You’re not one of those women who wants to wait till the fourth date are you?”

I grinned down at her. “Do I strike you as one of those women?”

“I hope not,” Holly said. She pulled me in for another kiss, and this time, her hand kneaded my right breast.

And this time, I didn’t stop to question it. This time, I just wanted more.

As if reading my mind, within moments, her fingers were undoing my shirt buttons, and her hand slipped inside, her thumb grazing my nipple.

I stopped breathing. If this was what was to come, I might die tonight, but I was going to die happy. I pulled back and stared down at Holly.

Without another word, she eased back my shirt and unclipped my bra.

We were both focused on my breasts now — Holly on them, me on Holly on them.

“I knew it,” Holly said, kissing my left breast with utmost care.

At her touch, my clit swelled and I could feel myself getting wet — it was almost too much to bear. “What?” My voice was barely audible.

“Your breasts — they’re amazing in clothes, but up close, they’re mind-blowing.”

I pulled her head closer to them, wanting to feel all of her mouth on me.

My breathing was ragged even before she took my nipple into her mouth, working it with her tongue. But afterwards? Then, my breath began to unravel through my body with every nip and suck. I might as well have been naked already, and that thought only drove me higher.

Holly had me just where she wanted me and just where I wanted her.

I leaned my head back. “Hols?”

No answer.

“Babe?”

She snapped her head back, her eyes intense. “Did you just call me babe?” A smile played on her lips.

“Er, yeah.”

She grinned now. “You can definitely do that again.” She reached up and pulled me down towards her, this time plunging her tongue into my mouth with raw need.

I felt a rush between my legs and the way Holly shifted underneath me, I knew she felt it too.

“You wanna—” I began

“—Yes,” she said, shifting me off her lap. Then she was on her feet and dragging me towards the hallway, her chest heaving, her T-shirt low on her breasts.

But once she was in the hallway, she stopped abruptly before turning to me. “Your place or mine?”

I gave her what I hoped was a seductive smile and I think it worked as she didn’t stop for an answer, kicking open the door to her room with her foot.

“Fuck it — we’ll try my bed, then yours.” Then Holly tugged me into her room, taking charge.

Within seconds, my loosened bra and shirt were on the floor and she was standing and staring, shaking her head slowly.

“What?” I was suddenly shy, standing there half-naked.

But Holly just shook her head. “Nothing. You’re just so... perfect. And your breasts are a work of art.” She reached out and trailed a hand across them like I was a fragile masterpiece, price tag unimaginable. “Seriously, Tori.”

I couldn’t imagine a time when I felt more wanted, more sure. And I wanted this so badly too. I couldn’t wait. I leaned forward and kissed Holly and then we were clinging to each other, steadying each other for what was to

come.

Hunger radiated from Holly's stare as she began kissing my stomach, my sides, my breasts, my neck, a whirlwind of teeth, lips and tongue all over my skin. My entire body was alive and ready. Then Holly backed me into the bed and we tumbled on to it, me pulling off her T-shirt, and then her bra.

Seeing Holly like this for the first time felt anything but weird — it felt like this should be us, like this was totally right. She was so long and beautiful, like perfection with no end. I licked her small but perfectly formed breasts one at a time before turning to her nipples, my tongue circling velvet.

Holly groaned and squirmed beside me.

Inside, my body hummed like it never had before.

And then Holly was on top of me, shaking off my jeans and pants, followed by her own. We were pulled together with an unstoppable force, and Holly's hands were everywhere, hardly giving me time to breathe. Just as I got over one sensation, another was lined up to crash over me. I could sense I was about to be overwhelmed and I welcomed it. There was nothing I wanted more.

And then Holly's hand was between my legs, her thigh pressing, pushing, wanting.

My breathing quickened. "Please," I begged. "I need to feel you inside me." My eyelids flickered open and I shared a brief moment with Holly. There was such tenderness in her gaze, she took my breath away.

And then she complied with my wishes, slipping one finger, then another inside me slowly, deliberately, never losing eye contact, raining kisses down on me.

My mind flipped into automatic pilot as the sheer bliss of the moment overtook me — Holly inside me, all around me, pressing me down, forcing me higher. Desire circled us like a hawk, going faster and faster, racing around the moment and leaving me dizzy.

Holly pulled me closer and I thrust my body into her, wanting more,

knowing I could take everything she had to give.

She gave it to me.

We rocked together, never missing a beat, our rhythm our own and already a smash hit. I was filled to the brim, with yearning cascading from me, and I never wanted it to stop.

A couple more minutes and I was gripping her fingers, my body shaking, kissing her mouth, my body simply craving more. Then Holly brought her other hand into play, showing manual dexterity of the highest order. She brought a whole new meaning to the term 'being good with your hands'.

My orgasm started in my groin, then ripped through my body, exploding every muscle, pleasure throbbing through my being as Holly never let up, the maestro orchestrating the show. I was floored by her passion, sucker-punched by her lust. She sucked me into her vortex and I wanted to carry on spinning forever, never leave her, always be with her.

Moments later, I stilled her arm and she lay down beside me, kissing, stroking, loving, still inside me.

I didn't have any words. There was nothing to say. I just kissed her lips through the midst of my sex haze and hoped that I conveyed everything in that one movement.

I think she understood — she smiled, at least.

And then I kissed her again, and again, my lips and tongue not being able to get enough. I was soon working out that Holly was addictive, and I needed another fix. With a yearning to know what she felt like that was almost deafening, I got behind Holly, sliding between her legs, capturing her as my own. I had one thing on my mind and one thing alone — to give Holly an earth-shattering orgasm, one she'd remember for the rest of her life.

This was important — this was how we started.

As I moved inside her, she elicited a guttural groan that made the corners of my mouth turn upwards. She was slick with desire, offering herself up for me and I was lost in her body, in her world. She was a new terrain to

navigate, but every corner was soft, smooth and sign-posted just for me. I snagged her neck then licked her back as I built a rhythm just for her, her name stamped right through it.

Within minutes, she was thrusting back into me, crying out my name at full volume, shuddering with desire. I took a snapshot with my mental camera of the first orgasm I ever gave Holly, my new love, the first of many to come.

Leaving her no time to recover, I rolled her over and licked my way down her stomach, my hair trailing across Holly's skin behind me. Then I went lower, tasting her lips, creating patterns with my tongue.

She cried out and thrust her hips.

I smiled and pulled her closer, pressing into her with my tongue before sucking her pulsing clit into my mouth.

Holly's moans swirled around my head and I felt invincible. When I slipped my fingers back in and spun my tongue around her clit, her body went into a state of frenzy. We were two people, but right then, we were one. I spun, flicked, spun, flicked. Holly came hard, gripping me, her orgasm rattling through her like one of the trains outside the window. When she was done, I crawled back up her long, slim body, placing kisses all the way up before lying on top of her and kissing the side of her neck.

We stared at each for a few moments, eyes locked, breathing rapid. We didn't say anything, but slow smiles spread across both our faces. Our first time had been divine, and the night was still young.

We lay panting in each other's arms, luxuriating in our post-orgasmic state. Then we sealed round one with a kiss.

We knew there would be plenty more to come.

SUNDAY DECEMBER 18TH



What had happened with Holly and I had come from left field, from a galaxy far, far away — but it just went to show that sometimes, straying into new orbits could be a very good thing. As I awoke the next morning with the winter sun streaming in through Holly’s window, I couldn’t have been happier. The air on this new planet tasted extra-sweet.

I stared at Holly, sleeping beside me, her hair sticking up at all angles. I was almost scared to touch her for fear of her vanishing as I woke up, all this just a dream. But it wasn’t a dream, I knew that.

This was the gold-plated version of reality I’d been waiting for all along. This reality slotted into my life perfectly, like it had been specially commissioned. This new version of my life had a certain sheen, a solidity I wanted to show off to everyone.

I kissed Holly’s cheek and she stirred, eventually opening an eye and looking up at me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey yourself.”

“Been awake long?” She rolled on to her back, yawning and stretching like a cat.

“Not really.”

I scooted over the bed and into Holly’s waiting arms, giving her a kiss

before I settled on to her shoulder. “Morning, by the way.”

Her hand found my arse and she gave it a squeeze. “Good morning to you.”

I could hear the low thud of her heartbeat through her chest, and it was reassuring. A train rattled by outside the window.

“It’s weird hearing the trains — I’m not used to it in my room,” I said.

Holly kissed the top of my head. “Get used to it,” she replied. “I plan on having you in my bed often.”

I raised my head and gave her a lazy smile. “You do, huh?”

She gave a slight nod. “I do.” She paused. “It’s taken long enough already, so you owe me some time back.”

Taken long enough? How long had Holly wanted me?

I rolled on top of her and she groaned as our bodies pressed together, naked flesh on naked flesh. Was there a better feeling in the world, especially with a new lover?

“How do you work that one out?” I asked.

“The time back thing?”

I nodded.

“Well,” she said, her hands stroking up and down both sides of my body.

I wriggled and squealed.

“I did not know how ticklish you were, this is a new thing,” Holly said. “Anyway, yes, time.” She paused — she was choosing her words carefully. “Let’s just say, you’ve come to my attention of late.”

I gave her a look. “What does that mean?”

Holly thought for a moment, opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Whatever it is, spit it out,” I said.

“I’m thinking.”

“And we’re friends. I’m not some random you picked up on the street.” I wanted Holly to trust me. I kissed her to show how much I meant it. When I drew back, Holly looked dazed.

“You see, you ask me a question, then you do that. It’s distracting.”

“Sorry,” I smiled, kissing her lightly again.

She cleared her throat. “Okay,” she began. “You’ve always been attractive to me, but I never really thought of acting on it — we were friends, that’s how things were.”

I nodded. “I know, same here.”

She smiled at that. “But then,” she continued, wrapping her arms tighter around my back. “When you started on this crazy dating scheme, I started to get jealous of your dates. And then Nicola Sheen turned up and I wanted to punch her. That’s not normal.”

“You’ve always wanted to punch Nicola Sheen.”

“True,” Holly replied. “But I realised my jealousy had a motive, and I didn’t want you ending up with her, even though you seemed hell bent on that scenario for quite a while.”

“I was processing,” I said, guilt bubbling up my body.

“Sure you were.” Holly paused, giving me a peck on the lips before drawing back. “Then I went out on that date to try to take my mind off it, but it didn’t work. I just kept thinking about you.”

“But you arranged a second date.”

Holly blushed. “I lied. There was no second date. I made it up.”

I widened my eyes, feeling stupidly grateful that she’d lied. I didn’t want there to be anyone else, especially not so recently. I wanted Holly and her affections all to myself.

“We all do stupid things.” Holly raised an eyebrow at me.

She had a point, so I shut up. If I was feeling like that about her date, she must have been feeling wretched about Nicola Sheen.

“But once I knew why I was behaving like I was, I then had to work up the courage to act on it. There was a lot to think about.” Holly grinned. “Luckily, the spilled herbs were the catalyst. I don’t think I’m ever going to look at a pot of oregano in the same way ever again.”

I brushed a strand of Holly's hair out of her eyes and kissed her. "Me neither," I said.

A few seconds passed.

"What about you?" she asked.

"Me?"

"Yeah — did you think about me like that?"

My breathing stilled. I had to think about how to answer this one — I didn't want to say the wrong thing, but I wanted to be honest.

"I'm a little slow on the uptake," I began.

"Judging on last night's performance, I disagree," Holly said, pressing her leg between mine.

I groaned. "What were you saying about distraction?"

"Right, yes," she said, not moving her leg.

I kissed her shoulder, then held her gaze. "You're gorgeous — that much everyone knows. You're tall, dark and handsome, but like you say, we were friends." I stopped to kiss her before continuing, wanting to wipe away the hesitation on her face.

"I don't know when that shifted exactly, but I'm glad it did. And I'm glad I knocked over the herbs. And I'm more than glad you kissed me, then fucked me like you did last night."

At last, Holly smiled back at me. "I can do it again now if you like."

I smiled back. "I was hoping you would." Another kiss.

She licked her lips. "So no regrets? You haven't woken up wanting to run back to your own bed?"

I shook my head. If she thought I was having any regrets about what we'd just shared, she was a mad woman. Last night had been one of the most intoxicating of my life and I wasn't about to walk away from that in a hurry.

"Only if you're coming with me," I replied.

MONDAY DECEMBER 19TH



The following Monday I was in town shopping after work. Holly was out with clients tonight, so we were having a night apart. Ever since Saturday, we hadn't spent much of our spare time out of bed, let alone apart. I let a slow, sultry smile invade my face as I strolled through the perfume department at Selfridges, running the gauntlet of the perfume sprayers.

I got on to the escalator and rode up to the Christmas department. I was still amazed Holly and I had happened, still newly thrilled every time I thought about it. I never expected to end up in bed with my best friend, but now it had happened, it seemed like the most obvious thing in the world. Why had nobody else pointed this out before?

That very morning, I'd taken myself off the dating app I was on, as had Holly. That was another plus point of dating your best friend — there was an inherent trust already there. When Holly told me she was deleting her profile, I had no question she was going to do just that. Not simply say that for my benefit and then do nothing of the sort, as I'd known plenty of others do before. This, too, was something I was going to have to get used to — being able to trust my girlfriend completely.

To celebrate us getting together, I'd decided we needed a new Christmas ornament. Something romantic, something that would put a bookmark in the story of our lives to say this was the Christmas where everything changed.

The year when I set out to get a girlfriend for Christmas, but it didn't exactly turn out as I expected.

The Christmas department was pumping out its usual pine cone aroma, and everywhere you looked, there was fake snow, tinsel, shiny displays and candy canes galore. To my right, a full-size Santa welcomed me in with a broad smile, and to my left, a mini winter-wonderland had been constructed, replete with a snow-covered steam train winding its way through the white-frosted hills.

After 15 minutes of browsing and singing along to Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas' and Elton John's 'Step Into Christmas', I stumbled on exactly what I was looking for — a knitted Christmas pudding with the words 'Our First Christmas' embroidered on it. It was understated and cute, and not too brash to scare Holly off. I was pretty sure it would take more than a single decoration, but I still had to tread carefully. I'd never been Holly's girlfriend before, after all.

I was walking over to the cash desk when I spotted her out of the corner of my eye. Melanie Taylor. I changed the direction I was walking and veered left, behind a giant Christmas tree. I wasn't up to dealing with Melanie yet, I didn't want anything to break into my happy Holly bubble.

However, when Melanie appeared at my side ten seconds later, it appeared she was not having similar thoughts. I tried to give her a fake smile, but it probably came off as a grimace.

Melanie's face didn't alter, despite mine going through a gamut of emotions.

"Tori," she said, her eyes steely. Did she know? If this was going to be a showdown, please don't let it be here. I did not want one of my all-time favourite places scarred with the memory of a Melanie Taylor meltdown. I'd seen them before.

"Hey," I replied, putting far too much forced jollity into my voice. I picked up a nearby wind-up Santa just for something to hold on to. I was

expecting a bumpy ride from here on in.

“How are you?” I winced, waiting for the answer.

Melanie scowled at me. “I’m okay, considering.”

I swallowed down. “Considering?” There was a lightness to my tone — I didn’t want to reveal anything I didn’t need to, so if I could get away with keeping this superficial and fluffy, that was my intention.

“Really?” Melanie’s tone, however, had turned scratchy. “You’re going to go the innocent route? If I was going to act on what I’ve been thinking about you over the past few days, I should be kicking your head in right now.”

Panic alarms whirred in my head and tension seized my body. Melanie was considering beating me up in the Selfridges’ Christmas department? I didn’t know much, but I was fairly sure that contravened some sacred bond, some rich pot of Christmas spirit that needed to be tended and stirred regularly. Melanie was planning to contaminate the pot and knee me in the face in the process. I always said she was a bit bonkers. I gripped the wind-up Santa and turned its key nervously.

Melanie took a step towards me.

I wound the key even tighter and took two steps backwards.

“I knew there was something up between you two the first time I saw you together at that restaurant where you were eating that pitiful meal for one.”

I could smell Melanie’s breath on my face, and it had more than a whiff of crazy. I cast my mind back to that fateful evening that seemed so long ago now, with so much happening in the interim.

“You two were all ‘we’re just old friends from school’.” She put the final part in air quotes with her fingers, before shaking her head. “When did that change? When did you sleep with my fiancée? And were you planning on telling me before the wedding or after?”

My mouth fell open and all my blood rushed to my cheeks. “We didn’t sleep together.”

I put down the wind-up Santa on the display unit next to me and he immediately began walking, shaking some small maracas as a tinny rendition of ‘Jingle Bells’ blared out of the top of his head. I blushed redder still, and we both watched in horror as Santa made it to the end of the first verse before toppling off the edge of the unit. I picked it up and set it back down again, and Santa immediately resumed where he’d left off, shaking and singing for all he was worth.

Melanie shot a hand out and laid Santa on his back, but his legs kept kicking, his maracas kept shaking. She picked up a nearby Christmas cushion and suffocated Santa. The tune became a mumble and Melanie turned her gaze back on me.

“Why are you lying?”

I shook my head vigorously. “I didn’t... We didn’t. We stopped before anything happened.”

Melanie let out a sharp bark of laughter. “And that’s meant to make me feel better?”

I had to admit, it probably didn’t. I was culpable, there was no denying it, but I wanted to right my mistakes. If Holly had taught me anything, it was that.

“I’m sorry, I never meant for anything to happen — it just did.” I paused, running a hand through my hair, trying to package my wrongdoing into something palatable. “But we didn’t sleep together.” I bit my lip. “When did she tell you?”

“She didn’t — you just did.”

Ah.

“I went through her phone and put two and two together. I confronted her, but she claimed it was nothing. But I’m not sticking around for that. I’ve already had one failed marriage, I don’t need my second starting off on the wrong foot.”

I was confused. “Wait — so you’re not getting married now?”

Melanie shook her head. “Nope. I dumped her over the weekend after I found this out. If I can’t trust her, I don’t want her. So actually, you did me a favour, which is why I’ve decided to spare you.” She shook her head. “I should be thanking you for exposing her for what she is, but I’m not quite at that stage yet.”

Melanie had dumped Nicola Sheen — I hadn’t seen that one coming. And while she’d done the right thing, it didn’t stop me feeling sorry for Nicola. That meant she was back to square one, single and living with her parents. But that was her choice, her life. I had mine now and I was more than happy with it.

I waved my hand around the store. “So have you come for a spot of retail therapy?” I asked Melanie.

“Something like that,” she said. “I actually just came to return all of Nicola’s wedding and Christmas gifts. And now that’s done, I feel a lot better. I wanted it to work, but I knew something wasn’t right.” Melanie looked me in the eye. “So you’re welcome to her. But I pity you if she’s your ultimate love, that’s all I’ll say.”

I spluttered. “She’s not my ultimate love.” It felt like I was being unfaithful to Holly even having this conversation.

“You could have fooled me. I read some of those texts you know.”

I’d never said anything close to that I was sure, but it didn’t stop my cheeks turning the colour of a robin’s breast. Is there anything more embarrassing than friends reading your personal, private text messages? Melanie might as well have watched a sex tape. The atmosphere was so thick, you could slice it.

“I certainly never said that — whatever Nicola and I had is definitely in the past. And I am sorry, truly I am. I shouldn’t have kissed her, but it just happened.”

“Your mouth slipped and fell on her face?”

When she put it like that. “Something like that,” I mumbled. Then I

cleared my throat. "I'm sorry it ended like this for you."

Melanie sighed and shrugged. "Like I said, you did me a favour. And now you don't want her either — looks like Nicola's the one to lose out, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Looks like."

We stared at each other, and then Melanie glanced down at my shopping basket with my knitted Christmas decoration sitting pretty, ready to be purchased. She bent down and picked it up, before glancing at me.

"You've moved on already? 'Our First Christmas'?" She shook her head. "You don't mess around do you?"

Now I *really* wanted to get away from Melanie as quickly as possible.

"Who's the lucky lady?" There was definite sarcasm in her voice. "Anyone I know?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It's not for me, it's a Christmas present."

I wasn't prepared to tell anybody about Holly just yet. It was far too new and precious to share with the rest of the world.

Melanie put the decoration back in my basket and hoisted her handbag high on her shoulder. "Well, have a great Christmas, Tori." She stepped forward into my personal space. "And a word of friendly advice — if you want to stay safe, try not to fall on to anyone else's girlfriend's face, okay?"

I swallowed hard as Melanie glared into my eyes. There were so many responses forming in my head, but I decided to say nothing. Being threatened in this setting was already surreal enough.

I let out a long breath as Melanie turned on her heel and walked away from me. I plucked my new decoration from my basket and hot-footed it to the till before anybody else cornered me and threatened violence. Suddenly, this department was not such a sanctuary of hope and glitter.

Now, I just wanted to get home, bolt the door and have a stiff glass of red wine.

TUESDAY DECEMBER 20TH



I was lying on top of Holly on the sofa, still inside her. I moved my fingers slowly and she exhaled, closing her eyes, clutching on to me. I could see she was still falling, still recovering from our most recent sexual encounter.

It had all started when I walked in the door from work around 6pm and Holly was sitting on the couch.

She'd smiled at me, not having any idea how irresistible she was.

I'd walked over to her, full of intent, and kissed her.

Fifteen minutes later, here we were.

I kissed her neck and pushed myself in deeper. I never wanted to leave. I had no idea what I'd done before this point in my life or what I might do afterwards, but none of that mattered. The only important thing was that I was inside Holly, she was mine and I was going nowhere.

She opened one eye and saw me staring.

I shot her a wicked grin.

"You think we could go about our daily lives in this position?" she asked, smirking.

"I'm willing if you are."

"We may as well give it a go."

I moved my fingers again and she pushed her head back into a cushion.

“Can’t see any drawbacks at all, can you?” she asked, her voice croaky.

I shook my head, feeling gallons of emotion well up inside me. “None at all,” I said, pressing my lips to hers.

TWO HOURS later and we were laying on the bed, the sugar rush of sex still coursing through our veins. My stomach rumbled as I lay beside her, one leg slung lazily over her thigh.

“You hungry?” She smoothed back some hair from my forehead.

“Seeing as I haven’t eaten since lunchtime, I think probably yes.”

Holly leaned back and grabbed her phone from the bedside table. She swiped the screen and the light made her squint. “Half eight,” she said. “We could order in. Or we could go out, go to that new Thai place down the road.” She put the phone on the table and rolled back, taking me in her arms and placing a kiss on the side of my neck. “You up for something spicy?”

I laughed. “That’s why we haven’t eaten properly for the past few days,” I said. “Anyway, going out? I’m not sure I’d make it that far.”

“True,” Holly replied. “Shall I order a pizza then?”

I nodded. “Sounds perfect.” I kissed her again. I couldn’t stop. I wanted to make every second count, seeing as I’d spent the last 16 years not kissing her.

She gave me a quizzical look. “What’s going on inside your head right now?”

“Why?”

“Because you have a really weird look on your face. Like you’re thinking about something and it’s hurting your brain.”

I shifted my position to stop my arm going dead. “Do I look gorgeous?”

Holly smiled. “You look constipated.”

I let out a loud laugh. “You see, this is the downside of getting together with someone you know — you would never normally say that to a girl on

your second date.”

Holly grinned her lopsided smile. “Is this our second date? I just thought we’d muddled through a few days not leaving our beds. I wasn’t aware we’d ever actually had a date.”

I rolled on to my back and thought about that. “You know what, you’re absolutely right. We haven’t had a date.”

“We’d have to leave the flat and everything,” Holly said.

I waved a finger in the air. “Definite downside.” I leaned forward and kissed her, and the spark rolled down my body, down to my toes, then back up to my clit.

I really didn’t want to get up. But it wasn’t as if we couldn’t come back to this very spot later, now was it?

I pushed myself up on my elbows, then hopped out of bed. I stepped into my pants and jeans, and when I turned around, Holly’s expression spelled alarm.

“What?” I asked. I walked over and threw back the covers. “Come on, chop-chop. We’re going out on a date. Our very first date, in fact.” I bent over, picked up her jeans and threw them at her. “Get dressed, wench, we’re hitting the town.”

In response, Holly simply pulled up the duvet cover over her head and groaned.

I pulled it back down. “I’m going to splash my face and wash my hands. I suggest you do the same. Especially your hands because I know exactly where they’ve been.”

I knew that would draw a massive grin.

I was right.



WE MADE it out of the flat 20 minutes later and were sat in Baker’s Bar by

9.15pm, burgers ordered, craft beer in front of us.

“I ordered you a Christmas beer — Rudolph’s Ruby Ale.”

I took a sip. It was bitter, but I smiled anyway. Maybe I would get used to the taste eventually. Or maybe I could tell Holly I’d stick to red wine in about a week, when I was sure things had settled down. Not that I thought she was going anywhere, but there was still beginning-of-relationship protocol to follow.

“What did you get?” I asked.

“Cranberry Porter — want to try?” She held out her beer to me, but I shook my head. The colour alone was enough to put me off, resembling what I imagined Rudolph’s blood might look like on a particularly cold day.

Holly took a sip and leaned back, grinning at me.

“What?” I wrinkled my nose.

“Us. This.” Holly stretched out her long legs so her feet were lounging beside my chair. “I’m still getting used to it. In a good way.”

A waft of barbecued meat drifted into the bar and my stomach rumbled. “Let’s hope they don’t burn the kitchen down and Nicola has to rescue us. That’d be just my luck.”

Holly laughed. “I think that’s the smell of burgers cooking, not being burnt.”

I took a sip of my beer and flexed my jaw. “Talking of Nicola,” I said.

Holly raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t think we were.”

I leaned over and planted a kiss on her lips.

“Well, nearly Nicola. I was out shopping yesterday and I ran into Melanie. In Selfridges’ Christmas department.”

Holly covered her mouth as she sat up straight. “Your sacred place,” she said.

I nodded. “Anyway, turns out, this isn’t going to be such a happy Christmas for Nicola.”

Holly looked nonplussed. “She lost you, so I’d say that was obvious.”

I drew in a sharp breath. This ‘girlfriend’ side of Holly was all new to me, and it was still taking me by surprise. A nice surprise, but still — I wasn’t used to her waxing lyrical about me.

“You’re pretty sweet, you know that?”

She dipped her eyes and gave me a bashful smile.

“Anyway, Melanie’s dumped Nicola — the wedding’s off.”

Holly’s mouth dropped open. “Really?” she said. “Well I never. Even Melanie has standards that Nicola didn’t reach. That is damning in the extreme.”

I didn’t say anything, just fiddled with my napkin. I thought Holly was being a little harsh, but said nothing. Old habits died hard where Nicola Sheen was concerned.

“But let’s consign Nicola to the backburner, shall we?” Holly said.

“Backburner? Really?”

Holly laughed. “That was not intentional.” She paused. “But you know what I mean. No more talk of Nicola or Melanie. Let’s just concentrate on us, because we’re far more interesting. Me and you, Christmas, our party, my birthday — it’s going to be amazing.”

“I hope so. How many have we got coming to the party?”

“I think about 20 last count, which is perfect.”

“Agreed. And we’re doing those mince pie martinis?”

“We are.”

“Great. And the Dixie Chicks tomorrow too.”

Holly licked her lips and nodded. “It’s going to be the perfect Christmas. Well, the lead-up is, anyway.”

“It is,” I said. “You know the only thing that would make it more perfect?”

Holly thought for a moment. “A kitten?”

I laughed. “That goes without saying — *everything’s* made better by a kitten. I was wondering if you’d thought about spending Christmas at mine? I

wanted you to come before all of this, and now it just seems weird we might be apart.”

Holly winced before she spoke, which was never a great sign. “I know.” She held up her hand to stop me butting in. It worked. “And I have been thinking about it, even before anything happened between us.” She trailed her finger up and down her glass. “I’m still thinking about whether I can take the fallout from my parents, or if they’d even notice I’m not there.” She shrugged. “Leave it with me, okay?”

I knew being in the middle of her parents’ constant tug of war was no fun for Holly and I felt for her. But I also wanted her to make herself happy too, rather than putting up with the same situation every year.

“It’s less than a week away,” I said.

She fixed me with a stare.

I held up my hands and smiled. “I’ll leave it with you.”

FRIDAY DECEMBER 23RD



Last night, Holly and I had gone to see the Dixie Chicks and it had been just about perfect. I'd bagged fabulous seats and Holly was in her element, the only thing missing being a Stetson and cowboy boots. Being under 30, we were the youngest people there by some distance, but the lesbian contingent as ever was front and centre, which made it all the more special. We'd left the concert tired and elated, then come home to bed with each other. We were still getting to know each other, still getting attuned to each other's bodies, and that was cool. We had all the time in the world.

This morning, Holly had left early — she had a client breakfast. I'd been aghast at the concept, especially on December 23rd, but Holly said this was a corporate client taking her out to say thanks for all of her help throughout the year so she couldn't say no. But honestly, getting people out of bed when they were in the first throes of a relationship? It was just plain rude.

I, on the other hand, was in the opposite camp. I was working from home today, the final day of work before the Christmas break and I had a party to prep for. It was all hands on deck — so long as those hands were mine.

But sitting here now, with my first coffee of the morning, there was an odd feeling swelling within me. I watched the trains rattling by, revelling in the order they brought to the day and tried to pinpoint it. And then it struck me. I was content, happy. And after such a drama-packed December, that was

a gorgeous revelation.

It was December 23rd. On November 25th, on that hilltop with Holly, I'd laid out my plan to get a girlfriend before Christmas. I'd been gung-ho, up for the fight, ready to go into battle. And battle I had — through bizarre sex, through insurance scams, through first loves magically appearing. But I'd made it through to the other side, and I'd found a girlfriend I never imagined. At least, I hoped she was my girlfriend. We hadn't discussed the G word yet.

As if sensing I was thinking about her, my phone beeped on the sofa beside me and I picked it up. It was Holly.

'Morning. Just thought I'd let you know I'd rather still be in bed with you even though this breakfast is delicious. But you're more tasty. X' She'd attached an image of her eggs benedict, replete with coffee, orange juice and champagne.

I smiled goofily at the phone, then rolled my eyes at myself.

Holly. It was Holly all along. All these years, all this time. But would it have worked sooner? I'm not sure. Maybe it took me till this point to see that what I'd been searching for was right in front of me from the very start. Tall, gorgeous, reliable Holly, with legs as long as the M1. Never again would it be a problem painting a ceiling.

I took another slug of my coffee, then grabbed a pen and paper from the kitchen counter. There was a lot to do today, a party to prep for. And it had to be fabulous with Holly as the star guest.

Plus, we were debuting our relationship tonight to our friends. I was a little nervous about how it would all go down.



“I CAN'T BELIEVE you two have finally got together — you took your time!”

I was standing in front of Holly's friend Daisy, who I'd met last year at the Christmas bash. Her girlfriend Jasmine was with her, and they'd brought

a spectacular bunch of birthday flowers that I was currently holding — Holly had dashed off to find a suitable vase.

“Didn’t want to rush into anything,” I replied. Had everyone known we should be together and not told us?

“Daisy and I had a bet it would happen when she met you last year at the Christmas party, didn’t we?”

Daisy nodded. “I thought you were a couple already till Jas put me right.”

“Did you?” This was a new one.

“Uh-huh. Just something about the way you were so comfortable around each other, anticipating the other’s needs, the looks Holly gave you.” She shrugged. “I just assumed, but Jas corrected me. But I knew I was right!”

I smiled at her. “Well done, I think?” I looked around the room. “I’ve no idea where Holly is right now though.”

Looking over my shoulder, Jasmine raised an eyebrow and gave a slight splutter. “I think I do.”

I turned my head and now I saw Holly. Doing her best impression of a modern Santa, wearing bright red velvet trousers, a white shirt, red velvet jacket and a bow tie hanging loosely around her neck. Her green eyes sparkled in the party atmosphere, and her hair was shaped to one side. She was also carrying a tall vase for the flowers.

On sight, every nerve ending in my body jangled. This woman was my girlfriend. The universe could be very kind sometimes.

Gaining wolf whistles as she walked through the lounge and deposited the vase on the counter, Holly took the flowers from me, filled the vase and arranged them. Then she stood back to admire her handy work.

“Pretty good?” she asked.

“You’re a natural,” I told her.

She put the flowers on the window sill, then came back to my side, snaking an arm around my waist.

“I’m here to stay this time,” Holly said. “I haven’t seen you in ages,” she

told Jasmine, touching her arm.

“Far too long,” Jasmine said. “And now look at you — you’ve got a brand new girlfriend and you’ve raided Austin Powers’ wardrobe.”

Holly let out a bark of indignation. “Austin Powers? I think I look a little cooler than that.” She gave us a twirl before looking at me. “I was going for something Christmassy, I’m not sure what. Maybe one of Santa’s taller, sexier, slightly butch helpers?”

I put my arm around Holly’s waist this time. “You look hot, whatever you are.”

“How are things with you guys?” Holly asked.

Jasmine and Daisy radiated matching grins.

“Perfect,” Jasmine said. “We’re hosting Boxing Day for mine and Daisy’s families, so that’ll be interesting. Fifteen adults and four kids in our flat — did we think this through?”

Daisy elbowed her girlfriend. “It’s going to be fine and if it’s not, we’ll just get them drunk.”

“Sounds like a perfect plan,” Holly said. “Talking of which, can I top up your drinks?”

We all agreed and Holly turned towards the kitchen.



THE EVENING WENT off with a festive bang, the mince pie martinis going down a storm. Once they’d run out, we moved on to wine, beer and Prosecco, cranking up the Christmas tunes to get everyone in the party mood. Our friends didn’t need much persuasion. Plus, with our newly purchased patio heater roaring into action, our balcony was suddenly a destination, with train passengers waving at us as they passed. Christmas fever is infectious, my dad taught me that.

Around midnight, we toasted in Christmas Eve and Holly put on Mariah

Carey's 'All I Want For Christmas Is You' — she knew it was my all-time favourite Christmas tune. We danced around our lounge pointing and singing at each other with the rest of our friends, but my eyes were only ever on Holly. This Christmas, she *was* all I wanted and all my dreams *had* come true. Turns out, Mariah was prophetic.

The last guest cleared out around 3am, and we took a couple of glasses of Prosecco out on to the balcony to stare at the stars. Well, that was the plan, but the light pollution in London spoilt the intention. We could see a few sparkling lights in the inky canvas overhead, but whether they were planes, drones or stars, we weren't sure.

A few moments later, Holly clicked her fingers together. "I almost forgot." She dipped into the pocket of her red jacket and produced a sprig of mistletoe.

I grinned at her. "You old smoothie."

She winked, before holding it over our heads and kissing me softly.

I melted on the spot. Holly's lips were so warm and inviting, I was happy to pull up a chair and stay all night. Eventually though, she pulled away.

"Happy Christmas Eve, beautiful," she said. "And happy anniversary!" Holly held up her glass to cheers.

I clinked mine to hers. "It's our anniversary?"

She nodded. "One week today." She paused. "And what a week it's been." She shot me her lopsided smile. "Thanks for getting everything ready for today too, I really do appreciate it."

"The least I could do for my new girlfriend," I said. Then I held my breath. Shit. I hadn't meant that to just slip out. I flicked my gaze up to Holly who was grinning.

"Girlfriend? You don't mess around, do you?"

"It just came out — we don't have to be yet if you're not ready. I won't be upset." I wanted to lower my eyebrows, but they were stuck in an alarmed position on my face.

“You won’t?” Holly stepped forward and gathered me in her arms, looking down into my eyes.

I swallowed and shook my head. “Just an expression, I didn’t mean it seriously.”

The corners of Holly’s mouth tugged upwards. “Tori, I’ve been your girlfriend since we kissed on the kitchen floor. I’m not going anywhere. So just relax, okay?”

I nodded, still not trusting myself to speak again.

Holly put both our glasses on the floor, re-gathered me in her arms and kissed me with utter intent. I was floored, but also wrapped in her warmth — metaphorically and literally. When she kissed me, strange things happened. That much I knew.

Within seconds, she lifted me on to our small balcony table and hitched up my skirt. I took a sharp intake of breath. The mood had just turned up a notch and I smiled as I saw the lust pooling in Holly’s eyes.

“Not too cold?” Holly asked, never taking her mouth from mine.

I shook my head, feeling a rush between my legs in anticipation.

Holly’s body moved forwards and she spread my legs, moving her tongue inside my mouth.

I groaned.

She ran her hands up and down my sides while she deepened our kiss further, then her hand grazed my thighs.

She was going to fuck me on this table, in the open air. In that second, I didn’t think it was possible to love anybody more than I did right then, and that thought made me open my eyes.

Holly’s hand reached up and tugged off my pants, pushing up my bum so I could wriggle out of them. A fresh gust of air hit me as I sat back down and we retook our positions. Now Holly’s hand was hot over my pussy, her mouth in front of mine.

“Okay?” she asked, biting my lip and slipping a finger inside me. “I’ve

been wanting to do this all night long.”

I went to reply but nothing came out. I was too lost in her, lost in the moment, overtaken by Holly.

She slipped in another finger and I groaned, pushing my hips forward, feeling freer now than I had in years. Sex had always been high on my agenda, but I hadn't had sex with someone I felt so attuned to in quite a while.

What's more, nobody had ever taken me on a balcony before, so Holly was winning hands-down.

I put my mouth beside Holly's ear, my breath wispy. “If you're going to fuck me, just do it,” I said.

She didn't need a second invitation.

As her fingers began moving back and forth, my mouth dropped open but the December air that coated my throat felt warm and inviting. I threw my arms around Holly's neck and opened my legs, welcoming her in, encouraging her to go further.

She shifted as close as she could get and slid her tongue into my mouth as she went deeper.

I clung on for the ride of my life as our bodies melded into one.

She ramped up her festive charm offensive, slipping and sliding all around me, over me, inside me — I loved being in her orbit. With every second that passed, we grew more urgent, Holly with laser-like focus, mine more hazy as the thunder in my body built. She hit my G-spot and I groaned into her mouth, before flinging my head backwards.

In return, I heard her grin.

I began seeing stars and wasn't sure if they were fake or real. I was on the edge, staring at the universe, shouting out its name. Or it could well have been Holly's name. I was wrapped around her, pressing into her. Holly was everything I asked for on my Christmas list and way more besides.

I was so close, then Holly put her mouth beside my ear. “Come for me, or

you'll be on the naughty list," she said.

My muscles spasmed, and I dug my fingers into Holly's neck while she swiped her thumb back and forth.

I did as I was told, coming in a hot rush all over her fingers, shouting into the darkness for all I was worth.

But Holly didn't let up and within seconds I was coming again, shouting again, feeling wild abandon cascading from my very core.

Holly kissed my neck, my ear, my hair, my mouth. Every connection made me jolt, my nerves on high alert to this emotional tour de force. She held me close while I steadied my breath, my arms flung around her neck, clinging to my anchor. When I leaned back and found her gaze, we were both grinning like idiots.

I kissed Holly hard, wanting to show her everything I was feeling. But even I knew that was hard to sum up in one kiss. I was still flying and I wanted to take Holly with me too.

I reached for her zip, but she caught my hand and held on to it. I pulled back, searching her eyes with mine.

Holly just smiled a lazy smile as she extracted her hand from me.

I let my eyelids droop lazily.

She kissed my lips. "Shall we take this inside?" Her breath was hot against my ear and tingled down my entire body. Inside was probably a very good idea.

I grinned at her. "When I regain the use of my legs, absolutely," I said, pressing my lips to hers again.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 24TH



We got up around 1pm the following day, cleared up the flat and then sat smiling at each other. I didn't recall doing this with anybody else I'd been with, so I was either turning into someone I didn't recognise, or I was falling in love — truly in love — for the very first time. I was pretty sure it was the latter.

Holly made me a cup of coffee and we sat on the sofa eating leftover pepperoni pizza from the night before. It always tasted better the next day, and this afternoon was no exception.

“I don't want you to go today. It's going to feel like I've lost a limb.” I stared at her.

“I know.”

“So stay. Call your Mum and come with me tomorrow. We can spend our first Christmas together.”

Holly sighed and chewed on some pizza. She sipped her tea and stared out the window at the afternoon winter sun. The trains were still chugging past, although we expected that to stop soon, being it was Christmas Eve, when everything came to a standstill around 5pm.

All I wanted for Christmas was sitting on the sofa staring at me. And preparing to leave me.

“Don't look so sad,” I said, reaching across and kissing Holly's hand. “I

didn't mean to make you sad."

Holly smiled. "You haven't made me sad, believe me." She curled her long legs up under her body and sighed. "It's just... a bit late to tell my parents I'm not coming, that's all. They're expecting me."

I squeezed her arm. "I know — I'm just being a selfish brat." I paused. "Go, and we'll see each other the day after, or the one after that." I smiled to back up my last statement. "It's just, I'm not going to be able to function without you." I put my head in my hands. "And will you stop me talking such drivel? I've turned into one of those snivelling wrecks and it's your fault."

She laughed and put my feet on her lap, massaging one of them up, then down. "Whatever it is, you've turned me into it too." She paused. "But let's not focus on negatives today. We've got the rest of the day together, so let's do something fun. How about we have a walk around the Christmas lights in town, like your parents always used to do when you were little?"

My heart swelled so much inside my chest, I thought it might burst out at any second. This was the love I'd read about, the love I'd hoped for. It's one thing to wish for a Christmas girlfriend. It's quite another for her to arrive and be so utterly, deliciously perfect.

"I would love that," I replied, beaming at Holly. "You really know how to sweep a girl off her feet, you know that?"

She squeezed my foot. "I've got skills," she said. "It's settled then. We can eat hot dogs and roasted chestnuts from those dodgy street carts, have mulled wine and be so Christmassy, your teeth will ache."

"Sounds like my ideal date."

I leaned back, never taking my eyes off of Holly. "You know, when I started my girlfriend quest on November 25th, I wanted three things: a girlfriend, drunk Christmas sex and a present from someone who wasn't related to me." I paused. "But that was Tori 1.0. Unreformed Tori. Naughty Tori."

"I think you're still a bit naughty," Holly replied, grinning.

“I’ve got skills too,” I winked. “But things have changed. I’ve changed. It’s like I told you in the beginning — I didn’t really want anything, I wanted *someone*. But the someone I ended up with is so much more than I bargained for. I had a plan, I had dreams and goals, but you’ve shifted the goalposts. Now you’re a part of those dreams.” I paused. “You are those dreams.”

Holly’s cheeks reddened and she looked down. “Are you trying to make me blush?” she asked.

I smiled. “I’m not, but I can’t keep this quiet. I feel so loved, so cared for, so *safe*. And that would never have happened so quickly if it hadn’t been you because I knew you already.” Tears threatened but I held them in. They were happy tears, but I didn’t want any mixed messages.

I took Holly’s hand in mine and kissed her silky fingers. “You’re more than I ever dreamed of, you know that?” I whispered. “I’m already in love with you.”

I couldn’t contain my emotions around Holly. My mouth just ran away with me. Everything about us was just so huge and overwhelming, I had emotions leaking out of every pore.

“Does that scare you?” I asked.

Holly flipped my feet off of her lap and scooted across the sofa, taking me in her arms. The kiss she gave me started on my lips, but vibrated right down to my toes. When she pulled back, her eyes were large pools of happiness, shimmering in the afternoon light.

“Last night you call me your girlfriend, now you tell me you love me. What’s tomorrow’s declaration?”

“Happy birthday?” I said, smiling. Then I paused. “So does it?” I asked again.

Holly crinkled her face. “What?”

“Scare you?”

She shook her head and kissed me again lightly. “Don’t be stupid. I’ve loved you for years. Taking the leap to being *in love* with you happened

weeks ago. There's no getting away from me now, I'm here to stay."

Relief washed over me. Holly loved me.

I moved my head and stared right at her. "You sure?"

She tilted her head. "Positive," she replied. "I know it's only been a week, but it's been way longer really, hasn't it? We just feel so right, you and me." She shrugged. "We just are."

I put my head on Holly's chest and we sat like that for a few moments, the gentle hum of the trains buzzing by. In that moment, we were cocooned, untouchable, in love. She kissed the top of my head and I was content to ride the rise and fall of her body, warmth emanating from her.

It seemed like for once, I'd landed right where I belonged.

CHRISTMAS DAY



I woke up the next day and my eyes shot open — it was Christmas Day! Then a wave of tiredness washed over me as I checked my phone. It was also 7am. My body clock hadn't got used to waking up late yet, it was still on work time. On top of that, my bed was empty.

Holly had gone to her mum's house late last night after a magical late afternoon walking hand-in-hand around the West End Christmas lights. Being there with Holly as my girlfriend had made it extra-special, and the whole way round, I'd felt like my dad was with us, our very own Christmas spirit guiding us on our way.

Now, Holly would be getting ready for her annual birthday breakfast with both her parents. This was their concession for their Christmas baby — they couldn't stand the thought of spending Christmas Day together, but Christmas breakfast for Holly, they could handle.

I hoped it went okay, although I knew Holly's mum was always anxious on Christmas Eve in the lead-up to it. Holly had already told me that this year would be the last time they all put themselves through it. She'd wanted to stop it years ago, but her parents were adamant they wanted to do it for her. But now, aged 28, she'd had enough. Plus, her dad had a new partner and baby, so he had other commitments to attend to.

Holly much preferred to see her parents separately, where she claimed

they were bearable, albeit in small doses.

As I was up, I decided to get going — there was nothing to stick around the flat for, and I had a suitcase and presents to pack. I turned on the radio and cranked up the volume — it was playing ‘Last Christmas’. I jumped in the shower, positivity crackling in my veins. This year, I’d followed George Michael’s advice to a tee and given my heart to someone special.

Perhaps I should search the entire back catalogue of Wham! for the answers to all of life’s pressing issues.



TRAFFIC ON CHRISTMAS Day was non-existent and my drive home was one of my favourite journeys of the year, singing along to Christmas tunes on the radio all the way. To zip down roads normally clogged with traffic was almost miraculous, and always made me feel like I was in a pop video. Today, the air was crisp with anticipation, the sun sitting low, the clouds lounging casually across the skyline. My drive took just over an hour, and I pulled up outside my mum’s front door on the outskirts of Oxford just before ten — she was going to faint when she saw me this early.

I checked my phone to see if Holly had replied to my good morning text and saw I had a message. I clicked on it, smiling. My smile quickly turned to a frown.

‘Happy Christmas — hope it’s a fab one! Love, Nicola. X’

I stared at the phone. This was clearly one of those ‘text everyone in my phone’ messages, the modern-day equivalent of the Christmas card letter. But couldn’t she have left me out of the loop? Surely she could have unchecked me and Melanie from her list? That thought made my heart stop thumping so hard in my chest. If this rattled me, imagine the impact on Melanie Taylor.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. That was all in the past, and Holly was now my future. Sweet, sexy, gorgeous Holly. An image of her

taking me on the balcony popped into my brain and I shivered. Now I just had to get that out of my brain before I knocked on my mum's front door. It used to be my parents' front door, but now, it was just my mum's. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to that.

I stepped out of my hired Renault and pulled my coat around me, checking the sky. It was freezing, cold enough to snow even. That would make it the most perfect Christmas ever.

The front door was open before I got there with Mum standing in her Christmas apron, fluffy slippers on, face already flushed from the cooking marathon.

"You're early," she said. "Happy Christmas, kiddo."

I set down my case and gave her a hug.

"Happy Christmas to you, too."

Mum peered over my shoulder. "No Holly?"

I shook my head. "Family duty."

Mum picked up my suitcase and pulled me in, but I pulled back.

"Let me just get the presents." I indicated over my shoulder and she nodded.

"I'll put the kettle on," she shouted.

Ten minutes later and I was sitting at the table in Mum's bright kitchen, her well-tended garden shivering through the window in the winter air. Freshly baked mince pies were cooling on wire trays, veg was prepped and floating in water, and a Christmas ham was glazed and steaming on a wooden board.

I sipped my tea and took in the familiar scene from my childhood. Everything was just the same, apart from one crucial missing person.

"What time did you get up this morning? This makes me look lazy."

Mum smiled. "You know me — I'm an early bird. Plus, nothing excites me like Christmas morning, so I like to enjoy as much of it as I can!" She gave me a squeeze and a kiss. "This was always your dad's favourite

morning too, you know.”

“Dad loved every morning in December.”

She smiled. “He did, didn’t he?” A pause. “God, I miss him.”

I squeezed her back. Dad’s absence at this time of year was like an open wound, one that would never heal. We just had to patch it up the best way we knew how and make this the best Christmas ever in his honour. We wouldn’t ever forget him, so it seemed appropriate to include him in whatever we did.

“I know. I miss him too.” My mouth twitched. “But that’s why I love Christmas so much, Dad’s love of it was infectious. Which is why I hate that Holly has to have a sad one, on her birthday too. I wish there was something I could do.”

Mum shot me a sympathetic glance. “Families have to do their own traditions. You can make new ones soon for yourself, you’ll see. And have I told you how happy I am you’re with Holly?”

I smiled up at her. “I might have got that impression when you screamed down the phone.”

“Well I am. She’s wonderful. She’s everything I could ever have hoped for my darling daughter.”

I grinned up at her. “For once in our lives when it comes to my love life, we’re in total agreement.”

Mum brushed her hand across my cheek. “And you’re looking good on it too — glowing. I remember glowing when I first met your father, everybody said so.” She gave me a wistful smile. “Glowing is good, kiddo, so cherish it. Hold on to the person who makes you glow. They’re few and far between.”

I caught my mum’s hand and kissed it. “I intend to hold on to her,” I replied.

If Holly and I could be anything like my mum and dad, that would make us an incredible love story.

I already knew we stood a fighting chance.



THE FIRST EGGNOGS had been demolished, the turkey was resting and dinner was a mere half hour from being served. Gran and Aunty Ellen were busy peering at their new fitness trackers attached to their wrists — Mum’s present to them both.

“So it monitors your steps, your calorie intake and your sleep?” Gran was tapping it, and every time it lit up, her face went into delighted mode.

“It does,” I told her.

“But how does it know what I’ve eaten?” Gran held up her wrist and peered all around her present. “Does it have a camera on it recording me?”

Mum laughed. “You have to log your food in your iPhone, Mum. I gave you my old one, so you’ve got one of those.”

“Right.” Gran put her mouth to her wrist. “Hello?” she said.

Mum sighed. “It can’t hear you.”

Gran winked. “I’m having you on,” she replied. “So it’s called a Fitvit?” She paused. “What does the ‘VIT’ stand for, I wonder?”

“Very important person, Jill. Are you stupid?” That was Aunt Ellen chiming in.

“VIT, not VIP. And who are you calling stupid?” Gran nudged Ellen with her elbow.

“It’s FitBIT, not VIT,” Mum said. “Fitbit.”

“Aaah!” both sisters chorused.

I burst out laughing. “You should take this on the road, you know. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again.”

Gran smiled at me. “We should. But I don’t want to show Ellen up as being the dull sister, and that’s just what would happen.” She sat back and grinned at her sister.

“Dull? Who’s the one sitting around perfecting her Bridge game, while I’m touring the world?” Ellen crossed her arms and harrumphed at Gran.

It was Christmas as usual, with the Robinson sisters fighting for omnipotence. Having no siblings, I had no idea if this is what I'd be like with a sister, but it'd always fascinated me that Gran still quarrelled with hers into her 70s.

The front doorbell interrupted the family moment.

“Will you get that?” Mum asked.

I pushed back my chair. “Who the hell's coming round at 2pm on Christmas Day?”

Mum just smiled at me oddly.

I could still hear Gran and Ellen's chatter as I pulled open the door.

And when I did, my mouth dropped open.

Standing on the other side was Holly and her mum, loaded down with bags and presents.

“Special delivery,” Holly said, smiling so much she looked like she might burst at any second. She'd styled her jet black hair slightly differently, and it fell delectably across her face.

My heart leapt into my mouth and a thousand stars exploded in front of my eyes. I blinked and hoped I wasn't about to faint. Holly was drop dead gorgeous.

“Are you going to let us in then, or is there a special password?”

I stood back and Holly stepped into the house, giving me a brief kiss on the lips. The world swayed back and forth in my vision.

“And close your mouth, drooling is not a good Christmas look,” she said.

I pasted a smile on my face as Holly's mum, Gina, walked in.

“Happy Christmas!” she trilled, a little too brightly.

“You too!” I gave her a kiss on the cheek and heard a wave of greetings as Holly and her mum walked through to the lounge.

I checked my hair in the hallway mirror, took a deep breath and followed them in.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re here, but I’m so glad you are.” I wrapped my arms around Holly’s waist and pulled her down for a kiss. My head swam, but I was getting used to that. I’d dragged Holly into the kitchen to have a minute alone.

“I really missed you.”

“Me too,” she replied, pulling back. “But believe me, keeping this a secret has been hard work.”

I stood back and pouted. “How long have you been cooking this up?”

She smiled. “Only since your mum called me on Thursday.”

“You’ve known that long! But I’ve been badgering you to come here all week. Why didn’t you say anything?” I was taken aback, albeit secretly impressed she’d managed to hold it in that long.

“Because then it wouldn’t have been a surprise, would it?” Holly grinned at me. “Plus, I still had to go home for this morning. But this was the perfect solution, so well done to your mum.”

“She’s a sly one, I’ll give her that.”

Holly laughed. “She’s a good one,” she said, kissing me again. “Then I just had to work on my mum. But when I told her she didn’t have to cook and that she’d have her own room for the night, she was surprisingly okay with it. Especially when I reminded her she liked your mum. It was almost like what I wanted on my birthday counted for something. Wonders will never cease.”

I pursed my lips. “And how was she about us?”

Holly let out a bark of laughter. “Pretty much like everyone else — at last, etc.”

“Wow, we were really slow to catch on, weren’t we?”

Holly moved her head side to side. “Some were a little slower than others,” she said, her voice sing-song.

I poked her in the ribs. “Alright smart-arse.” Then I kissed her again, long

and slow. When I pulled back, she had her lopsided grin pasted on her face.

“I don’t think I’ll ever tire of kissing your lips,” she said, before pausing. “And no, I can’t believe these things are coming out of my mouth either.”

I smiled. “Don’t worry, I was just thinking the same thing.” I paused. “Happy birthday, by the way.”

“Thanks, gorgeous,” Holly said, before kissing me again.

And then my mum walked in, clapping her hands to announce her arrival. “Okay lovebirds, enough of that!”

We untangled ourselves and turned to see Mum and Gina smiling at us, dressed in identical grey jumpers.

“Why are you dressed the same?” Holly asked, before covering her mouth. “Shit, those are our presents, aren’t they?”

“Not that they’re not lovely, but was it buy one, get one free by any chance?” Mum was smiling as she said it. “They’re ever so soft though, aren’t they Gina?”

Gina put her sleeve to her face. “Like a baby’s bum,” she confirmed.

I started to laugh, as did Holly.

“Okay, in our defence, these were bought weeks ago and I never expected you to be opening them together. They were bought before we were even together,” I said.

“We believe you, thousands wouldn’t,” Gina replied.

“They look great on you both, though,” Holly said, styling it out.

I nodded to back her up. “Really good.”

Mum gave Gina a nod. “Okay, we can take them off now. I think we’ve embarrassed our daughters enough.” They chuckled as they took the jumpers off and put them on the sideboard.

Mum clapped her hands again to grab our attention. “Right, this is now officially operation Christmas and I need turkey carvers, vegetable carriers, potato wenchers and all sorts of other jobs that I can’t think of funny names for right at this moment. You in?”

I gave Mum a salute. “At your service, captain.”



CHRISTMAS DINNER WAS DELICIOUS, with Mum working her magic as she always did. As for Gina, well she really came out of her shell after her third glass of wine, telling us this was the best Christmas she'd had in years, and Holly agreed. When Mum invited them again for the following year, I thought Gina might sob with happiness.

And now Mum, Gina, Gran and Ellen were in the lounge watching *Love Actually*, while Holly and I had just finished clearing up the kitchen. Now she was pulling me up the stairs, into my bedroom, the one where we'd shared so many times as teenagers.

Only now, things were slightly different.

Holly sat me on the bed and then presented me with my present — it was a beautiful watch from Michael Kors.

“I love it,” I told her, turning it over in my hand before putting it on my wrist. “Thank you.” I tilted my head upwards and she leaned down and kissed me. “Is this what you bought me that day in town?”

Holly's cheeks coloured red. “I might have gone back and exchanged it for something a little more extravagant after what happened,” she said.

“That's not in the rules,” I replied, smiling. “And there was me, thinking I'd fallen for someone who could be trusted.”

“You didn't change yours?”

I shook my head. “No, but I did buy you a bigger birthday present instead.”

Holly rubbed her hands together and sat down beside me. “And have I told you, I can't wait to make some new Christmas memories in this bed tonight,” she whispered in my ear.

I laughed as my ears turned red. “With both our mums in the house —

ideal.”

“It’ll test your stealth powers,” she replied, nibbling my earlobe.

“Anyway,” I said, standing up and brushing Holly off. “Your presents. Here’s what I bought in Selfridges that day.” I put the present in her hands.

Holly ripped it open and gave me a broad smile when she uncovered her new bag. “Just what I wanted. How did you know?”

I laughed. “I’ve no idea, apart from all those hints you kept dropping.”

She reached out and grabbed my hand. “I love it, it’s so soft.” She stroked the leather. “Nearly as soft as your bum.”

“That’s the criteria I gave to the salesperson, so I’m glad you think so.”

Then I leaned down with the jewellery box in my hand. “And this is for your birthday. I was going to drive over to yours tomorrow and surprise you, but no need for that now.” I was inches from her face, looking into her deep green eyes. “Happy birthday.” I kissed her and waited for her to open the gift.

This time, she was slow and considered, carefully undoing the Sellotape and then opening the box. When she saw the silver key necklace, she drew in a huge breath. Then she looked up at me, an epic smile splitting her face.

“It’s perfect,” she said. “Thank you.” She put the necklace on straight away, then stood up and pressed her lips to mine. It was a wordless kiss, but it communicated the promise of so much more.

“Happy birthday, baby,” I said. “And can I say, I’m so glad you’re my Christmas girlfriend.”

Holly smiled. “You do know that a girlfriend is for life though, right? Not just for Christmas? You can’t leave me on the street in a month when you get bored of me.”

“You better find a way to keep me interested then.”

“I’ve got some ideas,” she said, raising one eyebrow before pressing her hand between my legs.

I jolted in surprise.

“Girls, are you coming down?”

We both jolted this time. It was my mum, shouting up the stairs.

I rolled my eyes. “Be there in a minute!” I shouted. “And why does being in my room make me feel like we’re 15 again? Tonight is going to be very weird.”

“I can do weird too, if you want,” Holly said, laughing.

I pulled her out on to the landing and she followed me down the stairs. I’d had a cheesy grin on my face most of the day and it was still there because today had been perfect, a Christmas surrounded by everyone I really loved. As we walked down the stairs, I could see flakes of snow falling outside the window.

“It’s snowing!” I shrieked, rushing to the door and flinging it open. “It’s snowing!” I repeated over my shoulder to Holly.

She walked up behind me, peered outside and then shut the door. “Yes, and it’s freezing,” she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the lounge.

We pushed open the door to be greeted by Mum, Gran and Ellen letting off party poppers, and standing in front of them was Gina. She was holding a chocolate sponge birthday cake for Holly, lit with 28 candles. They began a chorus of ‘Happy Birthday’ and Holly looked bashful, all 6-foot-2 of her. When the song was done, she blew out the candles and we all clapped.

“Speech!” Gran said, wolf-whistling through her teeth.

Holly gave me an alarmed look.

“What?” I asked. “Whistling is one of Gran’s super-powers.”

“Very handy in a street fight too,” Gran added helpfully.

Holly let out a nervous laugh.

“If you’re not going to do a speech, I hope you at least made a wish before blowing out all of those candles,” Gran continued.

“I hope you did too, love,” Gina said, smiling at her daughter.

Holly’s gaze, however, wasn’t on Gran or her mum, but rather it was focused on me. She walked over to me and put an arm around my shoulders.

“So did you make a wish?” I asked.

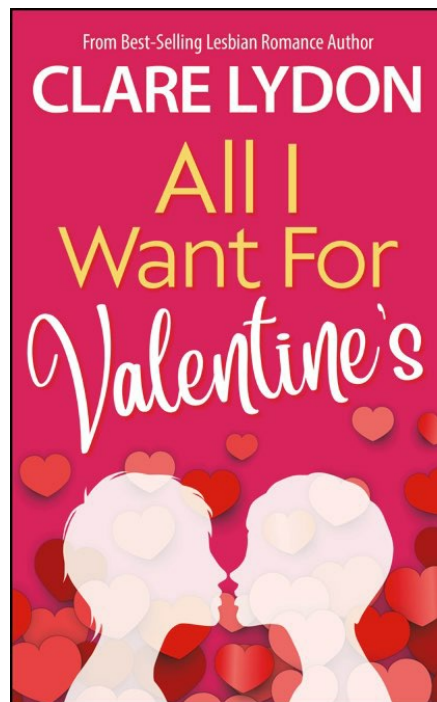
Holly shook her head, before putting her mouth to my ear. “No need, they already came true.”

I spluttered before looking up at her. “What did I say about you and your sweet talk?”

“That I’m the best at it?” she asked.

“You’re a world beater,” I replied.

Want to read more Tori & Holly? Then read All I Want For Valentine’s!



FROM BEST-SELLING LESBIAN ROMANCE AUTHOR

CLARE LYDON

Christmas
in Mistletoe



CHAPTER 1



The hairs on the back of Fran Bell's neck stood up, one by one, as if preparing to applaud. She tilted her gaze at the singer in front of her, squinting against the glare of the bright stage lights.

Fran didn't look away. She couldn't.

Ruby O'Connell had Fran under her spell, just where she wanted her.

Fran hadn't checked her phone once during the whole performance. Hadn't had one other thought but Ruby, with her long, willowy body, confident stare and voice like painted gold. Fran had been to a lifetime of gigs, but only a handful had made her react like this. Ruby O'Connell's voice told a thousand bold stories. Fran wanted to hear more.

Beside Fran, her colleague, Damian, nudged her. "What do you think?" he mouthed, his blue contact lenses glowing in the dark.

Fran leaned in to shout in his ear. "I think she's a bloody slam-dunk."

Damian nodded his agreement.

Ten minutes later, and the whole crowd in the downstairs of Holborn's Pizza Express were on their feet. Whistles from the back along with stamping of feet. A shout of "more!" from the man to Fran's right. He was just saying what everyone was thinking.

Ruby bowed, thanked the crowd for coming, then walked off-stage. She pulled the leather strap of her acoustic guitar over her head and put the

instrument down, then gave her bass player a hug.

Fran followed Ruby's movements, just in case she was leaving. When Ruby headed for the loo, Fran turned to Damian. "She was fucking incredible. It's a travesty she's not headlining tonight."

"Totally agree." Damian pulled in his chair, his 5 o'clock shadow pronounced. He was one of the hairiest men Fran knew. "What a voice. It oozed class. Spoke to my soul."

Fran raised an eyebrow. She hadn't taken Damian for a poet, but he constantly surprised her.

"I just hope she listens to what I have to say. I'd love to work with her. She's a little different to Fast Forward."

Damian snorted. "Understatement of the year. But Fast Forward will be fine. I have faith. You need to get some, too." Damian turned and got his phone out. He checked it, then raised his head, giving Fran a stiff grin.

Now they'd seen Ruby, he wanted to leave. As his boss, Fran wasn't sure how long she should toy with him. Maybe another few minutes.

"Nine thirty. The final act's on in ten. It's going to be at least another hour before we're done."

Fran twisted her wine glass on the round jazz club table, a dim amber hue spilling from a small lamp. She loved these venues: dark, intimate and with more than a hint of debauched times gone by. It was a far cry from some of London's more sticky, grimy clubs. Plus, you got a seat. Fran could totally see what her dad meant now when he refused to go to any gig without a seat. There was no danger of getting a pint of Stella flung at you here. As if to illustrate her point, the table beside her made room on their table for another glass of wine and a pizza to share. Eating at gigs. Only in jazz clubs.

Damian's face was a stricken picture. "Really? Another hour?"

She was being unkind. But she was sort of enjoying it. Fran nudged him with her elbow. Being unkind to Damian was like being unkind to a puppy. "I'm only kidding." She inclined her head towards the exit. "Go. Do

whatever it is young people do on a Wednesday in town.”

Damian returned her look. “The same thing you do?”

Fran used to think that. But lately, as she’d just tipped over to 36, she’d begun to think otherwise. Now the lure of a cuppa was far greater than the lure of another glass of wine at times. Her dad would laugh at her for thinking so. But when her music industry job involved so much going out, staying in was a treat for Fran. Sofa, wine, movie. Bliss.

Damian, though, being 29, was already up and away, grabbing his jacket and legging it before Fran changed her mind. She followed his retreating form, but then her attention was snagged by the returning Ruby O’Connell.

Fran raised her chin and got up, tracking Ruby with military precision. She brushed down her navy jeans and pulled on the cuffs of her black shirt.

Ruby accepted a flurry of congratulatory handshakes.

Fran waited for them to die down, then for Ruby to return to the rest of her band. Once Ruby had given her friends her first relaxed smile, Fran swooped. She’d done this enough times, she knew the drill.

She cleared her throat to get Ruby’s attention. It worked.

Ruby turned, her reddish-brown hair not as vibrant away from the bright lights of the stage. However, the intense gaze of Ruby’s emerald stare locked Fran in place. Her eyes had looked incredible from a distance, but up close, they were even more alluring. How old was she? Her smoky voice and old-soul vocals made her seem older. When she sang, Ruby could be any age. Up close, though, she was probably no more than early 30s.

Fran extended a hand.

Ruby took it.

Her handshake was firm, her stare true. This wasn’t the first time this had happened to Ruby.

“Fran Bell, Dronk Records.” She turned up the wattage on her smile. “You were incredible. You have an absolutely amazing voice.”

“Thank you.” Ruby gave her a wary smile.

“I wondered if you’d like to come in for a meeting. We’d love to work with you, have you put out a new album with us. Gigs, album, touring. The whole package. We’re currently lining up our Christmas gig schedule, and I could see some venues where you’d be perfect. I know Christmas is seven months away, but it comes around quicker than you think.”

Ruby gave her a weird look. “Happens every year, apparently.” She paused. “You’re offering me the chance to gig and make an album?”

Fran nodded. “I am.”

Ruby swept her cool gaze around the room, before settling it back on Fran.

Fran kept her smile in place. She couldn’t read Ruby.

“As you can see, I already gig. You’re here at one of my gigs. I have an album out, too. People come to see me, they buy my music. It’s already happening.” As if to prove her point, Ruby broke off to sign an album for four fans in a row, chatting with them, taking selfies.

Fran gave Ruby’s band a tight smile, feeling more like a spare part than she had in a long time.

Eventually, Ruby turned back to Fran, giving her a ‘see-my-point?’ smile.

Fran picked up the baton. “I totally get that you’re an independent artist, one with a great platform. But what I’m offering is the chance to do so much more. Build on that. Really get your name out there. You’re on Spotify now, right? All the other streaming services?”

Ruby nodded. “Of course.”

“We could make sure your streams go up exponentially. Give you the exposure you deserve, really broaden your market.” Fran paused. “I bet you don’t make a full-time living with your music yet. That you do other jobs on the side, just to make ends meet?”

Ruby tilted her head, her striking green eyes clouding over.

Fran didn’t want to see that.

“I do a little more than make ends meet. I do just fine, thanks.” Ruby

drew back her shoulders. “Which is why I don’t need you to swoop in and save me with promises that may or may not come true.” She waved an arm around the venue. “I’m not a star, but I don’t want to be. Enough people know me and come to see me. I do just fine.” She put a finger to her chest. “I’m my own boss, and I like it that way.” Ruby took a swig of her beer, before glancing back at Fran.

Fran gulped, no idea what to say.

A hint of contrition crossed Ruby’s face. “Sorry, you just pressed a button. I’ve been down this road before with a former label and I don’t intend to do it again. It’s not personal.”

Fran stood up straight, a blush crawling up her cheeks. It certainly felt personal. She’d never had this sort of reaction before. A record label seeking out an artist after a show was normally a thing to be pleased about.

Ruby O’Connell was not most artists.

“How about just an hour of your time? Just to outline what I can offer. You may have been burned before, but I promise you, I’m a fan. I came here tonight to see you play live. I know you’re special and I want the rest of the world to know it, too. I’ve worked with Delilah, so I know what I’m doing. A few years of hard work, and now she’s gone global.” Delilah had also blown up Fran’s life, too. But that was on a need-to-know basis.

Tonight was about Ruby O’Connell.

Nobody else.

Ruby assessed Fran, as if running a lie detector down her body, seeking the truth. “You did a great job with Delilah, I’ll give you that. But we’re hardly the same market. She’s pop. I’m not.”

She wasn’t going to budge, was she?

“I appreciate everyone who comes to see one of my shows. But my stance hasn’t changed. I’m an independent artist doing my own thing.” Ruby smiled to soften the blow. “But I’m glad you enjoyed the show. It’s always what I want to hear.”

Fran ground her teeth. “You were sensational. Nothing I can do to change your mind? I can make you as famous as Delilah. Maybe even more so.”

Ruby shook her head. “Not everybody wants that, though, do they? But, thank you. It’s nice to be asked.”

CHAPTER 2



Four months later.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK, Rubytubes? Home-made crackers? Or are we crackers? You’re the queen of marketing, you tell me.” Dad sat opposite her at the family farmhouse kitchen table. He scratched his bald head as he spoke, before sitting up, fixing Ruby with the same green stare as her own. Ruby had inherited her height and her eyes from her dad. From her mum, she’d got a singing voice, a love of bananas and her distinctive shade of red-brown hair.

“It could work, why not? But you need to get more people into Mistletoe Christmas Tree Farm first. Once they’re here, give them an experience they won’t forget. Make them want to stay and buy things. It all hinges on getting them here in the first place.” She rested both elbows on the table, cupping her chin in both hands. “Have you got enough time? It’s September, just over three months until Christmas. Only six weeks until the farm goes into overdrive.”

Dad nodded. “We reckon so, don’t we, Mary?”

Mum turned, popping a slice of apple into her mouth. She finished before she answered. “We do. We talked about it with Scott and Victoria, and

they're both up for helping. As is Eric, too."

The whole family roped in. Ruby could just imagine their faces. Should she offer to help? She wrestled with her conscience, but she couldn't. She didn't have time this year. She had too much work on. Plus, she was still coming back to help out in December.

"And before you offer to pitch in, don't even think about it."

Ruby frowned. Had her dad developed mind-reading abilities?

Mum sat next to her and patted her knee. "In fact, we were going to tell you not worry about coming back for the festive period this year. Your career's important, and you've put your life on hold every December for long enough. Scott's doing the pumpkin patch for the second year running. He's got 2,000, and we reckon we're going to sell out. That generates interest for Christmas as well. Things are slowly getting back on track, and we want you to put yourself first."

It was her parents' entrepreneurial spirit that had started Ruby down the independent path. While she liked being her own boss and doing what she loved, it was hard work. Writing, producing, scheduling, gigging, teaching. Sometimes, she envied people who had an office job they clocked in and out of. Ruby had been a singer and voice coach for the past seven years, since she graduated from music college. She'd never had what Dad would call a "proper job". But lately, she'd been thinking she'd love some help. Or just more hours in the day. But not quite yet. Her family still needed her.

"Your mum's right. Mistletoe Farm is our responsibility, and when we need family help, we'll ask Scott and Victoria. You have a life elsewhere and we want you to enjoy that."

Ruby narrowed her eyes. "I know that. But I like coming back at Christmas. It wouldn't feel right if I didn't. I love working at the farm." She wasn't lying. But it did put a strain on her every year.

"We're not saying don't come home. But we can hire extra help if you need to be elsewhere." Mum eyed her. "Just think about it, okay? You could

simply come home for Christmas like normal people.”

Ruby snorted. “We’ve never been normal people. You run a Christmas tree farm for starters.”

Mum grinned. “That’s true. You have to be a little unhinged in the first place.”

Ruby drummed her fingers on the table. “I’ll think about it. I’m still coming this December, but maybe next year might be different? Let’s see what happens.” It would mean she could really focus on her career and push things forward. Which was all kinds of scary.

Her dad nodded. “We just want you to have the best run at making it as a singer. Year slip by so quickly. We don’t want to stop you fulfilling your dreams.”

Mum offered her a slice of apple from her plate.

Ruby shook her head, her heart warmed through. Her parents support and belief in her singing talent had never wavered. Even when Ruby had often felt like throwing in the towel herself.

Chipper, their eight-year-old golden lab, stuck his head up from under the farmhouse table. His sixth sense that food was on offer was notorious.

Mum gave him a slice of apple, then another. Chipper made short work of them.

He put his soft head between Ruby’s legs and she ruffled him under his ears, just the way he liked it. Chipper had the whole family well trained.

“Besides making home-made crackers—”

“Call them artisan,” Ruby interrupted.

Mum frowned. “Arty-what-now?”

Chipper barked as Ruby stopped petting him. She began again.

He dribbled on her thigh as a thank you.

“Artisan. It’s the new way of saying home-made. Sounds posher. You can charge more.”

Ruby had Mum’s attention now. Mum grabbed her phone and made a

note. “Good job you live in London and know these things, isn’t it, Paul?”

Dad nodded. “We’d have no idea, that’s for sure. Although maybe Michael and Dale might.”

“Anyway,” Mum interrupted. She gave Dad a look. “Besides artisan crackers, the other big news in the village is that Hollybush Cottage has new owners, and they moved in this week. They’re called Michael and Dale.”

Hollybush Cottage was next door to her parents’ farm. Sort of on it if you were going to be picky. When Mistletoe Christmas Tree Farm had been going through a lean patch around ten years ago, Mum had the bright idea of portioning off a section of the land and renovating one of the outbuildings into a three-bedroom home. Hollybush Cottage had the same owner for the first eight years of its life: a woman called Deirdre with six jumpy dogs. That is, until Deirdre up and left. The new owners had had decorators in for the past month. Her parents had been dying to meet them, and now they’d been unveiled. Ruby was glad. Mum had been ringing with updates for the past month.

“Are they nice?”

Mum nodded. “Very.” She leaned in closer. “*And gay.*” She whispered those two words. Like Michael and Dale might be able to hear if she spoke any louder.

Ruby smiled. Cool as her parents were, sometimes she forgot they still lived in sleepy Suffolk. Although having a lesbian daughter put them ahead of most.

“It’s about time Mistletoe had a bit of male gay in the mix, isn’t it? Gayle and Penny will be pleased the spotlight’s off them.”

Dad snorted. “I dunno. Gayle and Penny revel in the spotlight. Their noses might be put out of joint now they’ve got competition.”

Chipper huffed at her.

Ruby ruffled his fur. “I know, you’re a gay male, I’m not leaving you out,” she told Chipper, kissing his nose.

“Anyway, they’re lovely, I met them the other day.” Mum brushed down the front of her pale pink jumper. “Their daughter’s coming over from London today, so I told them to come over for a glass of wine. I thought it’d be nice, as you’re here from London, too. Make her feel more at home.”

Ruby’s heart dropped. “Are you trying to set me up again? Apart from anything else, just because Michael and Dale are gay, it doesn’t mean their daughter is, too.”

“I know that!”

Mum sounded hurt. But Ruby would bet money that had been her logic.

“I just thought you’re both from London. They lived in Surrey before, so coming to Mistletoe is a bit of a change.”

“I’ll say.” Mistletoe wasn’t so much a Suffolk village, it was more a hamlet. It had a church, a cafe, a shop and a part-time bar. If you wanted a proper pub, you had to walk 20 minutes to the next village, Snowy Bottom, where the nearest train station was, too.

When the O’Connells had arrived, there hadn’t even been a shop or a bar, so Ruby’s elder sister, Victoria, and her husband Eric, had opened both. The shop opened during the day; the bar to the side from 6-9pm, Thursday to Sunday. Although if you were in the know — and Ruby was — a lock-in had been known to happen.

Ruby checked her watch. “What time are they due? I have a couple of calls to make.” Even though she was home for the weekend, she still had work to do.

“After seven. Drinks and nibbles. Just to welcome them.”

Ruby glanced around the kitchen, with its peeling units and trusty aga. ‘Lived-in’ was what some would call it. Weathered was another term that could be applied. Her parents needed the upcoming festive season to be a knock-out financially if they wanted to update their kitchen, paint the outside of the farmhouse, or any of the other myriad jobs that needed doing around the place.

Ruby was pleased to hear the farm was clambering back to its feet after a few dodgy years. That was all thanks to her brother, Scott, as well as her parents' never-say-die attitude. Mary and Paul always had a new scheme that was going to be their big hit. This year, it was artisan crackers.

“Why don't we take the newbies to The Bar?” Ruby said. “That way, they can meet the whole village.”

Mum wriggled her nose. “They're coming here first, but maybe afterwards if they want to. So long as it's not too late.”

“Is Scott showing his face?” Ruby hadn't seen her little brother since she arrived this morning.

“He might. We finished planting the younger trees this week, but he still had some photoshoot trees to send today.” Dad pushed his metal-rimmed glasses up his face.

Ruby made a face. “Has Nettie gone?”

Her mum pouted. “Tuesday. You should go and say goodbye before she leaves.” Nettie was a statuesque 12-year-old Nordman Fir who was destined to be a photoshoot model this year. September was the month they shipped the largest 10-12ft trees to studios and a variety of media outlets for snapping.

“I'll go give her a pat tomorrow.” What was it her parents had said about being unhinged? However, when you tended to a tree for a decade, you got attached. Nettie was a firm family favourite.

“I say let's take the newbies to The Bar. Then they can meet Victoria, Eric, and Scott, too. The entire O'Connell family.”

They had no idea what they were in for.

CHAPTER 3



Fran still couldn't quite believe her parents had bought this cottage.

Although, in another way, she totally got it. It was *them* to a tee. Quaint. Full of charm. Shiny. It should be. Her parents had spent a huge chunk of money having it done up, after the previous owner had lived there for eight years with an array of dogs and an allergy to opening a window.

"Dog and chips, that's what it smelled like," Dad had told her over the phone. You'd never have known. Now, it smelled like fresh paint and promise. Plus, with Pop's Jo Malone candles already burning, it smelled like home.

That Hollybush Cottage was lovely wasn't in doubt. It even had a holly bush in the garden.

Of course it did.

Fran's issue was that it was in the middle of nowhere, in a village called Mistletoe. Better yet, the cottage was situated on the edge of Mistletoe Christmas Tree Farm. It was like her parents had moved into a Hallmark Christmas movie. One that smelled divine, and was super gay.

In the real-life version, which Fran was reluctantly starring in, she and her parents were going round to their neighbours house for welcome drinks tonight. Fran had endured a tough week. Delilah was number one, and Fran was still bruised from their split. Recovered, but bruised. She'd come to

Mistletoe to check out her parents' new house, but also to hide away for a bit where nobody knew her. To take a moment to breathe. Making small talk with the neighbours wasn't on her agenda.

However, she couldn't say no to her parents. This was their new life, and Fran wanted to support it. They'd supported her in everything she did, after all. Even when she'd ditched her art degree for a career in the music business. "It's connected to art. Sort of art," she'd told them. But they'd understood Fran's passion for music as well as business. They wanted her to follow her dream, not theirs. Some people asked her if it was confusing having two dads. It wasn't confusing in the slightest. It was all Fran had ever known. Michael was Dad; Dale was Pop. To Fran, they were simply her parents.

Michael and Dale were both frustrated artists who'd spent a lifetime working in commerce. In their mid-sixties, they'd both just retired and downsized to spend their retirement enjoying life and living the dream. The final piece of the jigsaw was the art studio they'd installed in the back garden, looking over row upon row of Christmas trees. As views went, it was pretty spectacular.

"What are the neighbours like?" Fran was pretty sure she had an idea, but she wanted to hear it from Pop's mouth.

"They seem lovely." But Fran could hear the amusement in Pop's voice as she followed him up the stairs.

"Uh-oh," she said.

"No, they really are!" Pop couldn't help the gasp of laughter that escaped his lips as they arrived on the landing. "You know, they're just a bit... country with it."

"Which is absolutely fine," Dad added from behind, a scold in his voice. He pointed through the rustic pine door off the landing to her left. "This is your room."

"You're a bit country now, can I add?" Fran gave them both a look. She walked into her new bedroom, and took a breath. The views over the fields

and beyond were spectacular. Especially with the sun just going down, an orange haze cast over the sea of green. “Wow, I can see what you mean when you said it was a room with a view.”

Dad put his arm around her. “We are a bit country now, too. I guess that’s why we moved here. To embrace this life, with these views. Plus, Paul and Mary who own the farm have been very welcoming. Mary even brought us a casserole. Like we’re in a real community.”

“You had that in Surrey.” But even as she said it, she knew it wasn’t true. They hadn’t had that. The people in their Surrey village had kept themselves to themselves. Perhaps Mistletoe was going to be what her parents had hankered after for a fair few years. A thriving community who looked out for each other. A far cry from where Fran lived in East London.

Dad took Pop’s hand in his. “We didn’t. But we might get it here.”



TWO HOURS LATER, Fran, Michael and Dale trudged out their front door, down the garden path, and then along the perimeter of the farm until they reached the main entrance. A massive wooden sign welcomed them to Mistletoe Christmas Tree Farm, although one of the three small bulbs illuminating it had blown. The painted Christmas trees on the sign could do with some touching up, too.

“Do people actually make a living growing Christmas trees in the UK?” Fran blew on her hands as she asked. Out of London, the temperature had dropped at least ten degrees. “Also, why have we never come to a Christmas tree farm before?”

“Because we always had a fake one?” Pop replied.

“Let’s not share that fact right away, okay everyone?” Dad added.

They all nodded as they walked the 100m down the main gravel path to the farmhouse.

Barking from the other side of the door greeted their knock. It opened to reveal an excitable golden Labrador, held tight by a woman in jeans and a dusky pink jumper, her short ruddy brown hair sticking up at all angles. A bald man with a lop-sided smile and metal-framed glasses appeared at her side. The woman's face broke into a welcoming smile when her eyes settled on Fran's parents, and then on her.

"You made it! Come in, welcome! You must be Francesca. I'm Mary. This is our overgrown puppy, Chipper, and that's my husband, Paul. It's lovely to meet you!"

Paul gave them a wave, then grabbed the dog and disappeared, before returning in seconds.

Her hands now free, Mary wasted no time in hugging Fran.

Fran hesitantly returned it. There was no other option.

Paul, who towered over Mary by some distance, did the same, before leading everyone through to their farmhouse kitchen which had seen better days. It was in stark contrast to Ruby's parents' newly refurbed pad.

However, even though the floor was scuffed and the cupboards worn, the smell swirling through the air was divine. The table was laden with sausage rolls, cheese, crackers, chutneys and a tray of scones. There were also wine glasses in an array of shapes and sizes, like they'd once had six sets, but now just had one glass left from each. The fridge was covered in a montage of flyers, leaflets and lists, and the mantle that adorned the room's centrepiece fireplace was laden with family photos. Dad and Pop had mentioned one daughter who lived in London, but there were clearly more. None of them were in this room, though.

As if reading her mind, Mary walked past, patting Fran's arm. "Let me just give Ruby a shout."

Fran braced herself. She hoped she and Ruby had something to talk about. It was going to be a toe-curling evening, otherwise. Or perhaps one where she could just fill her mouth with pastry items so she didn't have to

talk.

Fran was just doing exactly that — a still-hot sausage roll, so good she was worried she might have made a noise when she bit into it — when Mary reappeared.

“Found her!” Mary stepped back, to reveal her daughter. Tall as a tree. Mud-red hair. Intense green eyes. A stare that Fran had been on the receiving end of before.

Fran blinked. Then sucked in a breath. Big mistake. A piece of her sausage roll lodged in her throat and she began to convulse. She doubled over, coughing violently. She sucked in a huge breath. That only made it worse.

In seconds, Dad was behind her, whacking her back with his shovel-like hand. Why did people insist on doing that?

Fran shook her head with gusto, but couldn't talk to tell him to stop, being too busy choking.

Dad switched to two hands around her middle. He gripped, then pressed hard.

A huge gust of breath rushed up Fran, and the offending bit of sausage roll flew out of her mouth at speed. It landed on the toe of Ruby's right slipper, styled in the shape of snowmen.

Fran should have been more embarrassed, but she was too focused on getting her breath back. She coughed some more, tears streaming down her face. She could just imagine the bemused faces all around the kitchen. She put the palms of her hands on her thighs, then took a few more steadying breaths. She accepted a tissue from Mary, a consoling hand on her back from Pop, then stood up.

It was only then she was doused in embarrassment. Way to make an impression on her dad's new neighbours.

One of whom was the only singer to ever turn her down.

“I'm so sorry, that sausage roll went down the wrong way,” Fran said.

“Don’t be silly!” Mary thrust a glass of red wine into her hand. “Have a wine, that’ll make you feel better.”

But all Fran could see was the regurgitated sausage roll, still sitting pretty on Ruby’s slipper. Where was Chipper when she needed him? Fran glanced at Ruby’s face, then back to the slipper. She had to deal with it.

She put her wine on the table, then lunged forward, tissue in hand, and scooped up the sausage roll. It would have been a successful mission too, if her head hadn’t met the farmhouse table on the way back up. The crack as her skull hit solid wood reverberated in the air. Fran staggered left, clutching her head.

Arms held her upright as pain ricocheted around her head. She winced, closing her eyes, waiting for it to pass. Could this night get much worse? She *really* hoped this was the low point.

“Oh my goodness, are you okay?” That was Mary again, her voice rising as she spoke.

Eventually, Fran opened her eyes, her vision watery. When she glanced Ruby’s way, she was sure she could see the hint of a smirk under her blank features. Fran didn’t blame her. She’d provided a wealth of entertainment already.

“I’m fine. I just need to stand still and not move or eat anything for a little while.” Her head throbbed as she eased her dad’s hands from her. “I’m not normally this clumsy.”

“Don’t worry about it. Ruby was a terribly clumsy child. Always in the hospital, weren’t you?”

Ruby frowned. “It was once, Dad.”

“Had an argument with the living room fireplace, and the fireplace won,” Paul added.

Mary put an arm around Ruby, then angled her towards Fran. “Anyway, this is our daughter, Ruby. She lives in London, too. Ruby, this is Francesca.”

“Just Fran.” She was still holding her head.

Mary nodded. "Just Fran it is."

"Hi, again." Ruby didn't quite meet Fran's gaze.

She clearly wasn't sure how to play this, either.

"Are you stalking me?"

Fran smiled despite herself. "I'm not a very good stalker. I haven't seen you in four months."

There was a silence, broken eventually by Fran's dad. "You two know each other?"

"Sort of." Fran leaned over and grabbed her wine. She took a swig. "Ruby's a folk singer. A really good one. I went along to one of her gigs and tried to sign her, but she turned me down." Fran met Ruby's gaze. "Maybe this is a sign you should say yes."

Ruby gave her a measured smile. "I don't believe in signs." She paused. "But this is freaky. What are the chances of you being my new neighbour?"

"What are the chances?" Paul touched his wine glass to Fran's with some force.

Fran made a face. If Paul smashed her wine glass, that would be her evening complete. Luckily, it held.

"However you two know each other, you have good taste in music, Fran. And you," he pointed his glass at Ruby, "you never told us you'd been approached by a label. You should think about it again. It might work out this time. You might become a household name."

"And give up control of my life. We've been through this, Dad."

"We have. But sometimes, a little help can be good. Especially if it gets you into places you wouldn't get to otherwise."

Fran winced. She focused on a time when her head wouldn't be throbbing.

When she wouldn't be in this kitchen with Ruby.

Who still didn't want to sign with her.

"Enough, Paul. We have guests. I think it's lovely you two know each

other. You can be friends even if you don't sign to Fran's label, can't you?"

Ruby eyed Fran. She gave a shrug.

Fran gave her one back.

It was like they were six years old, both being scolded by their parents.

"Anyway, have another sausage roll," Mary told Fran, breaking the tension. "You looked like you were enjoying the first one until you spat it onto Ruby's slipper."



THE ROAD from the farm to the bar had minimal street lights. At 8pm on a Saturday, it was also deserted. Fran took in a fresh lung of country air, the faint whiff of manure lingering in her nostrils. She could see no animals nearby, but maybe that was just what the country smelled like? She had no idea. She'd grown up on the mean streets of Surrey.

Was walking on a road like this safe? She'd never do it in London. Then again, London had tons of cars. They'd been walking for five minutes and hadn't encountered one. Their parents were up ahead, chatting merrily, their phone torches guiding them. Ruby was walking beside her. They hadn't spoken a word in the past couple of minutes. If Fran had been hoping that meeting Ruby in her natural habitat might break down her barriers, it appeared to be doing the opposite.

"Sorry again about your slipper." Was that a good opening gambit? Fran couldn't think of anything else.

"No problem," Ruby said. "I don't normally have that effect on women, but there's a first time for everything."

Fran smiled. A little warmer. "I was just surprised it was you. When my dads told me I was meeting someone, I could almost tell they wanted to say, 'she lives in London, you might know her!' I never expected it was going to be true."

“At least that’s something we can agree on.” A few more moments of silence.

“How long have you lived here?”

“I live in London.”

Fran suppressed an eye roll. “I mean your family. They seem quite settled.”

Ruby nodded. “They are. We moved here when I was nine. So, 20 years. At first the farm paid its way, but as time’s gone on and people don’t come to farms to get their Christmas trees, things are always hanging in the balance. But somehow, my parents make it work. They inspired me to go my own way, too.”

Fran stuffed her hands further into her pockets. The chill wasn’t just coming from the air. “I admire that. I’m not out to change that. You made your feelings very clear when we met before.” She glanced at Ruby, still a few feet taller than her. “Do you earn enough doing it on your own, though? I’m genuinely curious.”

Ruby took a moment before she answered. “I do. I have a core group of fans, I gig, and I’m a voice coach. I get by. My parents told me to audition for a reality TV show, but I never think they’re about singing. I don’t want to be judged on my looks or who I am. I want it to be about my songs, my art.”

Fran nodded. “I get that. But if you were judged on your looks, it wouldn’t deter from your music. You’ve got a great voice, great songs, and a great look. You’re the full package. I know you don’t want to sign with me, but you will get other offers.”

“I’ve had other offers. I’ve turned them all down.” Ruby’s tone held a warning. “I signed with a label a few years ago. It didn’t work. They blew very hot, and then very cold when I didn’t want to do exactly what they wanted. It wasn’t a great experience, to say the least. I like having full control of my life, now.”

Fran was getting that. “But isn’t it a whole lot of work? Wouldn’t you

like some help?”

“I cope just fine.”

“I won’t say another word about it.” Fran clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and they walked in silence to the end of the road, a slight incline at the top. Mistletoe Stores was on the corner of Mistletoe’s one and only junction. Propped up on the bench outside was a chalkboard, with ‘This way to The Bar’ written on it.

Ruby pointed. “My sister and her husband named Mistletoe Stores and The Bar. I think I got the creative gene.”

Fran smiled. “I think you’re right.”

CHAPTER 4



“*R*uby O’Connell! Look at you! Did you get taller in London? Are they feeding you some kind of weird magic beans that make you shoot up?”

Audrey Parrot said this to Ruby every time she came home. Audrey was one of the many locals who’d known Ruby since she arrived in the village in knee-high socks, with ribbons in her hair. Ruby had altered drastically in that time, but Audrey hadn’t changed much at all. Her grey hair had always been welded to her head, and she had far too many opinions about everything under the sun. Including Ruby.

“Just the usual, Audrey. Tofurkey and vegan bacon, you know what London’s like.” Ruby always replied with what wound Audrey up the most: veganism. She wasn’t sure why Audrey was so offended by those who shunned meat and dairy, but she was. Ruby suspected it had to do with an overdose of *The Daily Mail*. It was a common symptom in the village, for which nobody had yet found a cure.

Audrey leaned forward and patted Ruby’s flat stomach. “You should be eating steak, and lots of it. Makes you good and strong and it’ll fatten you up. If you just eat plants, how are you going to survive? Look at that girl who won *Strictly* who announced she was vegan. Nothing but skin and bone.” Audrey wagged a finger in Ruby’s face. “Shall I come to visit you and bring

some steak-and-ale pies?”

It was tempting. Audrey’s pies were the stuff of legend. However, telling Audrey her address would be a catastrophic error, because she’d definitely use it.

“Who’s this you’ve got with you? A new friend?” Audrey might as well have put the word ‘friend’ in air quotes, such was her stress on the word. Ruby widened her eyes to stop them rolling.

Fran wasn’t a friend. She’s simply landed in Ruby’s lap tonight. It wasn’t how Ruby had expected her Saturday night to go down, but then again, Mistletoe always held twists.

Mum came to Ruby’s rescue. “This is Fran, Michael and Dale’s daughter. She’s just visiting from London. Would you believe she works in music and knew Ruby already?” Mum pushed Michael and Dale towards Audrey. “This is Audrey, the village oracle.”

“Village gossip, more like,” said Gayle. She was the village yoga and Pilates teacher, as well as the local artist. If you looked close enough, there was always a splash of paint on Gayle. Tonight was no exception, Ruby spotting flecks of yellow on Gayle’s elbow. Her wife, Penny, looked at her adoringly. Gayle and Penny were what Ruby aspired to.

“I was being polite the first time we introduce her to the newbies,” Mum replied. “Audrey will know what’s happening in your life before you do. You might be surprised at first, but the sooner you accept that, the better.”

Michael and Dale laughed like that was a joke.

Ruby smiled: they’d learn. She moved past Audrey and towards the bar, where Eric was pouring a pint of cider, her sister Victoria sat on a bar stool. Ruby gave her a hug, before doing the same to Eric. She had a lot of time for both of them, and after opening the village shop and bar, they seemed to have found their calling. Victoria claimed she’d always wanted to be Sharon Mitchell as a young girl, and now her dreams were coming true.

“Busy in here tonight.” Ruby swept her gaze around the bar. It was

compact and bijou, with room for two bar stools and nine tables, along with four keg taps and two wooden pumps. Seven of the nine tables were filled, with all the usual suspects present. Each table had a bowl of peanuts and Twiglets, but Eric had resisted adding tinsel to the optics as yet. Victoria thought you needed to wait until at least November for that. For Ruby, tinsel was an appropriate decoration all year round.

Eric ran a hand up the back of his head, his hair closely cropped. This time last month, he'd had the biggest afro Ruby had ever seen. He'd shaved it for charity, but now kept complaining his head was cold. "There was something on at the church today, so everyone's having a debrief."

Michael, Dale and Fran rocked up alongside her, and Ruby made the introductions. The newbies ordered their drinks, then stood back, looking awkward. Ruby avoided Fran's gaze, hoping they'd move soon.

Thankfully, Ruby's parents moved the two empty tables together, then ushered the trio to sit. Now the bar was full to capacity, and their double-table was in the middle. Michael, Dale and Fran were now the star attraction, whether they liked it or not. Her mum guided Ruby to the seat next to Fran, before sitting, too.

"How did the church thing go, Audrey?" Mum leaned back on her low stool and almost fell into Audrey's lap.

"We voted for a midnight mass, and it went through. Good thing, too, the number of hours we all put in at that place. Penny and I were there for two hours this morning, getting it spick and span for the meeting."

"We're the god dusting squad, aren't we, Audrey?" Penny gave the group a wry smile.

"We certainly are, so it's a good job the vicar listened to us. Now there won't be a service on Christmas Day in the village. I've already told Victoria and Eric they need to stay open until 11.30pm on Christmas Eve, then we can walk over to the church after."

Victoria pulled up a stool. "That's against our license, Audrey. We need

special dispensation for extended hours.”

“Who’s going to shop you? I defy them. They’d have a whole bar after them, and we can be mean when we want to be.” Audrey raised her voice. “Can’t we, everyone?”

Cheers from every table. That was the thing with The Bar. The tables were all within touching distance, so the whole place could be involved in the same conversation with ease.

“You tell them, Audrey!” That was Norman, who lived opposite the farm and owned the local funeral directors. He claimed to be partly deaf, but had incredibly good hearing when he wanted to.

Mary sipped her drink, smiling at the newcomers.

They looked a little stunned.

“You have to come along to the midnight mass on Christmas Eve,” Mary said. “There’s no better way to see Christmas in.”

Michael frowned. “We’re not really church-goers.”

Paul laughed. “You don’t need to be a church-goer. I’ll be there and I’ve no religion. But who doesn’t love a sing-song? It’s all about wetting the baby’s head. The baby being Jesus. We do that in here first, then we sing. It’s tradition. The church went against tradition last year when they banned the midnight mass. They said we were too rowdy.”

“Us! Too rowdy!” Audrey bumped shoulders with Mary. “I told them at the meeting today, I’d give them rowdy if we weren’t reinstated. That Christmas Day mass last year was terrible. Too early and we were all hungover. Get us at our best when we’re in full flow, that’s what I say!”

“And Ruby can sing us a song like she did when she was a teenager!” Gayle added, nodding in Ruby’s direction.

Embarrassment blazed up Ruby’s spine. It was true she’d been a singing prodigy when she was growing up, and she’d often led the singing at midnight mass. But it wasn’t for her anymore. Whichever way she looked at it, she couldn’t support a church which didn’t support her.

“My church singing days are over.” Ruby made sure her tone was firm. Any weakness on this and before she knew it, she’d be on the altar with a microphone in hand.

“What about you, Dale and Michael? Any vocal talent? Gay men are normally theatrical, and we welcome fresh talent in the village.”

Ruby winced. Audrey was never going to win any prizes for her tact, was she? Imagine if they were vegan, too. Audrey might combust.

Both Michael and Dale shook their heads with some vigour.

“Not really our scene,” Michael replied. “I can’t hold a note, and Dale’s more a sing-in-the-shower kinda guy.”

There was an uncomfortable moment where Ruby was sure Audrey was picturing that. “What about your daughter? Didn’t you say she was something in music?”

Panic flared in Fran’s bright blue eyes as she shook her head. She ran a flustered hand through her dirty blond hair. “Oh no, I’m very much behind-the-scenes, not on the mic.” She guzzled her wine. “Besides, I don’t think I’m going to be here for Christmas. It’s a very busy time of year in London, and I’ve told my bosses I’m going to be working the whole time. So I’ll be staying in London. It’s just another roast dinner, after all.”

Every muscle in Ruby’s body tightened, and she closed her eyes. Had Fran really just said that, to this crowd?

Mum was first to crack. “Just another roast dinner?” Mary’s frown was deep. “It’s certainly not just another dinner in Mistletoe. Not coming home for Christmas is almost a criminal offence.”

Ruby glanced at Fran. “She’s not wrong. When you move here, it’s kinda written into the contract.” Did Fran not like Christmas? Ruby could not compute. It wasn’t a sentence any of the village would utter.

Fran didn’t meet Ruby’s eye. “Q4 is the busiest time of year for sales. I don’t make the rules for the record industry. I just follow them.”

“Maybe you need to re-jig your priorities.” Ruby gave Fran a pointed

stare. Music execs were all the same: money, money, money. Fran probably didn't even listen to Christmas music.

"Maybe you should open yourself up to new possibilities that might further your career," Fran countered.

Beside Ruby, her mum sat up a little straighter.

Ruby's vision flared red. "My priority at Christmas is to come home and help my family business." She wasn't going to be wound up by Fran. She glared at her.

"Even if I could give you some fantastic exposure in the weeks leading up to Christmas?"

"Even then." Fran really didn't take no for an answer, did she?

The whole bar took an intake of breath.

Victoria clutched her half of lager and lime.

"Twiglet?" Michael held up the bowl between them, signalling a time-out.

Ruby shook her head.

Fran did the same.

Honestly, who worked through Christmas? Ruby hoped Fran stayed in London, if only so Ruby could have Mistletoe all to herself. Her home town was Ruby's refuge, the place where everyone knew her from old. When she was here, she wasn't a struggling musician. She was just Ruby.

She certainly didn't need to be pestered by the likes of Fran Bell.

CHAPTER 5



Fran hadn't been kidding when she said she was busy in the run-up to Christmas. One of her many gigs was this independent artist showcase that Damian had dragged her to. He wanted to approach the headliner, Tom Darby, and he wanted Fran's opinion.

The smell of weed hit her nostrils as she walked through the front bar, Damian stopping to say hi to a couple of friends. This was his manor, after all. Fran lived a bit further out in Stratford, where the Olympics had been held. She'd bought one of the flats in the former athlete's village post-2012, and she didn't venture over this way much. Hackney Wick was more her local hangout, or Greenwich if she was being fancy. Damian, however, was in his element.

When an artist had a label behind them, a showcase — the artist performing a handful of songs for press and invited fans — was normally held in a private members club or swanky Soho bar, with free drinks a prerequisite. Fran was intrigued to see how it worked without a label. The location was different, for a start: a pub in Hackney.

“Did you listen to the link I sent you for this artist tonight?” Damian's eyes lit up when he spoke about music. It was one of the reasons Fran had taken him on. That, and the fact he made her laugh with his random facts in the interview. If she was going to work closely with someone, the ability to

make her laugh was high on Fran's list of wants.

She nodded. "I did. He sounds immense." The music was a crossover of country and folk, and Fran had loved the artist's depth on his vocal, as well as the fiddles. She was a sucker for a fiddle. Fran was keen to see if his voice was the same live.

They walked through to the back bar, where a healthy crowd was already gathered. The stage was on the far side of the room, with a drum kit and three mics set up. A double-bass loitered to the rear, and a bushy-bearded man was testing the guitars, too.

"You know who this bloke tonight would sound great with?"

Fran shook her head.

"Ruby O'Connell. Imagine his timbred voice with her smoky vocals. The folk world would go mad for it. It'd be like The Pogues and Kirsty MacColl, but this time the leads can all sing like angels."

"Careful, people love those artists." But Fran had to agree. Ruby and Tom Darby would be a dream ticket.

"So do I." Damian leaned into her ear so she could hear him above the music, which had just been turned up. "But I have it on good authority they know each other, so it could happen."

Fran gulped, then let her gaze wander the room. Ruby O'Connell might be here? That was just what she needed. Although, if they were destined to be neighbours of sorts, perhaps she could try to talk to her. Smooth things out. Fran's parents would be pleased, at least.

Damian leaned in once more. "Your dads really moved into a village where Ruby O'Connell's parents are their neighbours?"

Fran winced at the memory. "Uh-huh. And I had a coughing fit in their kitchen, and spat her mum's delicious sausage roll onto Ruby's slippers."

"I can't believe the super-cool Ruby wears slippers." He paused. "Tell me at least they were ruby slippers, like in the Wizard Of Oz."

Fran shook her head. "I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings. They were

snowmen. Or snowwomen, I didn't stop to look too hard." Fran grabbed two Heinekens from the ice buckets set up on the bar. It was that or wine. Wine was dangerous on an empty stomach, so beer it was. She opened two bottles and gave one to Damian.

"Maybe you can wear her down to sign with us over Christmas drinks."

"That is doubtful. I wouldn't be able to get a word in edgeways in the only bar in the village. It's the epitome of a local bar for local people."

"The village is really called Mistletoe?"

"It totally is."

Damian tilted his head. "Do they have mistletoe hanging over the village sign when you drive in? Do you have to pull over and snog the nearest person under it to be allowed in?"

"Maybe when we get closer to December, who knows? Right now, the sign is just a regular sign with a drawing of mistletoe on it."

Damian stroked his stubble. "Do you know the origin of the word mistletoe?"

Fran shook her head. Here he went again with his random facts. "I don't. Do you?"

He nodded. "It's an English-German word, derived from the old English term for twig, along with the old German term for dung. It basically means shit on a twig." Damian gave her a wide grin.

"You're kidding."

But the shake of his head told Fran he wasn't.

"That's brilliant. I wonder if the village knows. You think I could endear myself to the locals and maybe get it on the town marketing? I'm sure they'd love it." Fran wafted a hand in the air above her, like she was reading a movie poster. "Come to this village in the middle of nowhere and buy a Christmas tree from Shit On A Twig Farm."

"I think it needs work," Damian deadpanned. He looked around the bar. "Good turn-out here, though." He held up his bottle of Heineken. "Good beer

choice, too. Maybe indie is where the music business is going.”

“I hope not, or we’re out of a job,” Fran replied. “Talking of jobs, how did the interview with Fast Forward go today? No problems? They smiled in all the right places? Tenny’s anxiety didn’t get the better of her?”

Their all-female, indie-pop band of the moment had been interviewed by a big Sunday paper this week. The band had been primed and media-coached, but their lead singer Tenny was still a bag of nerves. Fran hoped it had paid off.

Damian’s nod was confident. “They did good. They were nervous as hell going in, but nobody’s out to trip them up.” He paused. “If you discount the Twitter trolls who most definitely are.”

“Really?” It was a hazard of the industry, particularly for young women. The rise of the keyboard warrior meant that everything was fair game to comment on, at any time of the day or night. It was exhausting for everyone involved, but most damaging for the artists on the sharp end.

Damian sighed. “Yes, but I’m trying to ignore them and focus on the positives. Plus, their latest single broke the top 10 this week, so their trajectory is on target. When their Christmas single lands and they hit their big London gigs, we’ll really see what they’re made of. If they can get over their stage jitters.”

All their other artists were pure musicians, signed on the strength of their songwriting and performance. Fast Forward, on the other hand, was the label’s attempt to break into the indie girl band scene with a manufactured band, albeit five women who could play all their instruments. Despite their early success, the band were still getting used to the glare. They looked the part, but they didn’t quite believe it yet.

Fran grimaced. “They’ve certainly embraced their pre-gig nerves. We need to coach them. Or give them Valium, one of the two.”

Damian spluttered. “We’re trying to steer them off the drink and drugs road for as long as we can.”

“Rock and roll ain’t what it used to be.”



HALF AN HOUR later and they were immersed in the set from Tom Darby. His songs were big, wrapping their arms around you. He had an easy stage presence, and Fran was transfixed.

“Thanks so much for coming out tonight. This gig is for all the people who’ve helped me along the way, and let me sleep on their sofa so I could gig around London without bankrupting myself. Especially my good friend, Ruby O’Connell, whose sofa I am now intimate friends with. She’s also written a new song which is an absolute killer, and I’ve persuaded her to debut it tonight. So please, go mad and give it up for the brilliant Ruby O’Connell!”

Fran twisted her head just in time to see a tall figure moving through the crowd.

Ruby.

When Fran’s brain registered that, something bubbled inside her. Fran frowned and rolled her shoulders.

The crowd clapped and whistled, as Ruby got up on the stage, giving them a confident wave.

Damian nudged her with his elbow. “I called it.”

This was the Ruby that Fran remembered. Professional Ruby. Far from the one who’d scowled at her most of the night in Mistletoe. Shit on a Twig town. They were the same people, but somehow, Fran couldn’t make the connection to the smiley, happy singer on stage.

Was Fran the same? Confident and cool at work, snappy at her parents? Maybe. Perhaps it affected everyone when they returned to their childhood home: they reverted to what used to be.

But right now, in front of Fran, Ruby was totally in the moment. If there

was anyone more born to sing and perform than her, Fran hadn't seen it in a while. Even Tom Darby was put in the shade, and Fran had been impressed by him.

When Ruby sang, time stopped, as did everyone in the crowd. When Ruby drew a breath, the audience leaned in, desperate to get closer.

Ruby's new song, 'Pieces Of You', was immense, with a sweeping chorus that roused the whole room. Violins twanged and the double bass boomed.

She hadn't had fiddles at the jazz club. Fran's heart swelled at their sound.

Tom Darby provided soft backing vocals, but it was Ruby who opened her mouth and created stardust, her voice mesmerising the room. She was incredible.

It was a crime she didn't want to be signed. How could Fran persuade her? Not with the cold sell. That hadn't worked the first time, or in Mistletoe. Fran had to come up with another way. Because if she could promote this single, they could have a worldwide hit on their hands.

"Fuck me, that was better than my dreams." If Damian's mouth could have hung open, it would. He put a hand on Fran's arm as Ruby got down from the stage, the crowd now cheering with gusto. "But it's not Ruby I'm here to see. I'm going to talk to Tom. Wish me luck."

"Good luck." However, Fran's eyes weren't on Damian. They were totally on Ruby, as their gazes met.

A question crossed Ruby's face, before she frowned, then walked towards Fran.

Fran pulled herself upright and wriggled her hips. She just had to try to be friendly. Get Ruby on-side. That was the first thing to get done. Part one of the charm offensive: flattery. It helped that it was genuine.

"Bravo." Fran gave Ruby a broad smile. "That was insane. That song has smash-hit written all over it."

Ruby nodded, her chest red from exertion. She was wearing a brown and cream top with a silk scarf, and tweed trousers with big boots. It would have looked ridiculous on Fran. On Ruby, it was perfect. She was every inch the star.

Fran's scalp prickled. She gritted her teeth. She wanted to sign Ruby, not shag her. However, the way her whole body had just heated up when Ruby got close, it apparently had other ideas.

"I didn't expect to see you here. Now I really do think you might be stalking you."

Fran held up both palms. "In my defence, you weren't on the bill tonight. We came to see Tom, but you were an added bonus. My colleague Damian was just saying earlier what a great match you two would make. Then, up you popped, and now he thinks he can predict the future. Between you and me, I might never hear the end of it now."

"Sounds like he has good taste."

There was an awkward pause as Ruby stared at her, and Fran grappled for something else to say. Dammit, she schmoozed for a living. Why did she find it so difficult to speak to Ruby O'Connell? The one person she really needed to impress and gain the trust of. She couldn't even spit out two sentences without her brain flatlining.

"How are your dads settling into the village?"

Ruby could do small talk.

Fran could conquer it, too.

"They're doing well. They're just settling into their lives, and their art studio. They're going to give Gayle a run for her money."

"Gayle will love having someone to talk art with."

"I spoke to them last night. Pop was talking about designing some gay greetings cards because he can never find good ones. So I'm expecting a 'Happy Christmas To Our Lesbian Daughter From Your Two Gay Dads' this year. Although I think that might be a bit niche, but isn't niche and indie

where it's all at these days?"

Shit, she'd just come out in the most awkward, clumsy way, hadn't she?

However, Ruby's face relaxed as she took in Fran's words. "You're gay, too? I hadn't picked you up on my radar." She gave Fran her warmest smile yet. "If they make one that says 'Happy Christmas To Our Lesbian Daughter From The Farming Family', let me know. Perhaps they could really embrace niche. I mean, it works for me."

Hang on, had Ruby just come out, too? Fran wasn't that surprised, but the confirmation of what she'd suspected sent a frisson of triumph from her brain to her heart. She always loved it when cool, attractive, talented people were part of her crowd. It made Fran feel all those things by association.

"I wouldn't say you're niche," Fran told her. "In fact, I'd say having one of the most pure and natural folk voices in the country was anything *but* niche. It deserves to go mainstream."

Ruby laughed. "Are you trying to butter me up again, then slip a contract into my drink when I'm not looking?"

Fran laughed right back. "I promise, no signing talk tonight, okay? My compliments are just that."

"I'll believe you this once."

"Good." Fran let her shoulders drop. She breathed out. Could she almost be relaxing in the presence of Ruby O'Connell? It would be a first.

"Have you been back to Mistletoe since we were there last?"

Ruby shook her head. "I've had a lot on. But I'm hoping to go back in two weeks. It'll be December 1st by then, and that's when things really hot up there. Then, I'll be back for the season."

Fran's parents had asked if she was coming to see them before Christmas, particularly as she wasn't going to be there for the big day.

"I was planning on going back around then, too." Fran paused. "Where do you live?"

"West Ham," Ruby replied.

“Pretty close to me. I’m in Stratford. I could give you a lift home. I promise, I won’t bring a contract there, either.”

She had Ruby’s interest. A lift home was like a golden ticket in London. But would it be enough to tempt her?

“I don’t know. I don’t want to put you out.” Ruby put a hand to her perfectly oval lips. “Although, I do have a lot of presents to bring back.”

Fran shrugged. “There you go, then. No schlepping them on the tube and train. It’s really no bother.”

Ruby took a deep breath, sizing Fran up. “I didn’t think we were going to be friends after our first two meetings.”

“Just being a good neighbour. You can buy me a coffee on the way if it makes you feel better.”

Why was she trying to persuade Ruby? Fran normally loved the solitude when she drove. Just her and her Spotify playlist, and the ability to belt out her favourites at the top of her voice. She wouldn’t be able to do that with Ruby O’Connell in the car.

“You’re on. I’ll buy you a coffee and a sandwich. Perhaps even a bag of crisps.”

“A meal deal.”

“Now we’re talking.” Ruby pulled out her phone. “Should we exchange numbers?”

Ruby plugged in the number Fran recited. “This is not just another step in your stalking plan, is it?”

Fran gave her a butter-wouldn’t-melt smile. “You fell right into my evil trap.”

CHAPTER 6



“*Y*ou weren’t kidding when you said you had a lot of presents.” Fran turned to the backseat, mainly taken up with Ruby’s bags of gifts. When she turned back, spits of rain were visible on the windscreen. Or was it snow?

Ruby gave her a smile. “I go a bit overboard at Christmas. It’s a trait. Plus, when I knew I had a lift, all bets were off. I like to get everyone I love in the village a gift. Most of them are just fancy biscuits in posh tins, but they’re exotic as they’re from London. Audrey, for instance, would kill me if I didn’t come back with some for her.”

Fran laughed. “She was one of the more interesting characters I met at The Bar.”

“Audrey doesn’t hold back, but she means well. She played cards with me when I was a kid. You don’t forget things like that.” Ruby did up her seatbelt with a click. “By the way, I was expecting you to have a bit more of a fancy car than this.”

“Creative industries don’t pay well.” Fran gave Ruby a look. “This is my dad’s old car, actually.” She patted the dashboard softly, as if the car had to be handled with care. “My trusty Honda might be old, but she’s never given me a moment of pain.” Fran started the car and pulled out onto the road.

Ruby glanced at Fran’s hands gripping the wheel. Her nails were

polished, and short. Her hands looked strong, too. Capable. They'd only met a few times, but already Ruby knew that about Fran. Also, that she was persistent.

"In fact," Fran continued, flicking her indicator and turning right. "My parents are getting it serviced for me this weekend. I keep missing the dates they've booked in for me, and they insisted I didn't miss this one. It's been over two years since I had it done, which is way overdue. Is it shameful to admit that at the age of 36, I still don't pay for my car to be serviced?"

Ruby laughed. "Canny is more the word I'd choose. If I could get my parents to give me a car and pay for its upkeep, I would, too. Sadly, I don't think that's going to happen any time soon." Ruby made herself comfortable. "Has it got a name?"

Fran shook her head. "It doesn't. I just call it Car."

"Very creative. Perhaps you and my sister have something in common. You called your car, Car, and she called her bar, Bar. Very literal."

Fran glanced her way. "Do you and your sister get on?"

Ruby nodded. "Now we do, but it was touch and go in our younger years."

"Then there's hope for us yet."

Getting out of London on a Friday night was just as sticky as Ruby had imagined. The M11 was way too popular, and a light snowfall was just beginning.

Fran flicked on her windscreen wipers. At least she didn't need constant chat. The radio had been the soundtrack to their journey so far, which was fine with Ruby. They were currently in a jam, with no sign of it easing. Outside, light snow was beginning to fall. Ruby sucked on the inside of her cheek. When she glanced at Fran, she was doing the same.

"Here's the next smash hit from Delilah, called 'Losing You'," said the DJ.

Fran flinched, before leaning forward and turning the radio off. She

grabbed her phone from the centre console and plugged it in. Spotify flashed up on her screen. Fran slid her finger left, then right, until music filled the car.

Ruby tapped along for a few moments before she spoke. “Not a Delilah fan? I would have expected the opposite. I thought you worked with her?”

Fran’s jaw muscles tightened. “I did, so I’ve heard her stuff a lot. Plus, things didn’t end well.”

Ruby sat up. “She wasn’t great to work with?”

“She was at first.” Fran took a deep breath. “I signed her, but now her immediate team has changed. It happens.” Fran shrugged. “I wasn’t that involved in her last album. The first one, though, was the two of us driving it from the start.”

Fran’s jaw muscles clenched again. The traffic began to move, and she pressed the accelerator.

Ruby didn’t want to pry, but her curiosity was piqued. She couldn’t imagine being as big as Delilah, having her hits known around the world and playing to massive stadiums. It was never what she’d got into music for, but she’d love to experience it once.

However, Ruby loved the intimate connection with her fans. She usually gigged in places where she could see their faces. She even knew their names. Her hardcore fans came to most of her gigs when they could, and she often had a drink with them in the bar afterwards. She couldn’t imagine Delilah being able to do that.

“I didn’t realise you were so involved. That must have been quite exciting, being a part of a career that really blew up like that.”

Fran didn’t take her eyes off the road as they finally got over 30mph. She gave Ruby the faintest of nods as the snow fell that little bit harder. “It was for a while.”

There was an edge to Fran’s tone that Ruby couldn’t quite nail down. “Is it true she’s queer? I’ve seen her out with guys and girls, but you never know

what to believe. I'm nobody, but I've had fans question whether my flatmate and me are involved." Ruby eyed Fran. "For the record, we're not. Tom is just as queer as me."

Fran gave Ruby a wide grin. But that was soon wiped off her face as a loud bang made them both jump.

Instinctively, Ruby turned around, but it wasn't on the inside of the car.

Fran turned the music down, her blue eyes lurching left, then right.

As the car moved forward slowly, something was dragging and making an ominous guttural sound.

Ruby put a hand to her chest. "What the fuck is that?"

Fran winced then gripped the steering wheel, leaning forward as if searching for answers. "Not sure, but it sounds like something fell off the car." She looked left, then right. "Fuck, my dads are going to kill me for not getting this serviced sooner."

Ruby's heart thudded in her chest. The noise wasn't letting up. "Do you think it's your exhaust?" It was just a guess, Ruby was no mechanic. "Can you pull onto the hard shoulder?"

Fran nodded, then steered the car left. She flicked on her hazard lights. "Luckily, my parents buy me an AA membership for Christmas every year." Fran cut the engine and picked up her phone. "Let me see what the issue is, and then call them." Fran grabbed her coat and got out of the car, slamming the door and stamping her feet. Then she disappeared out of sight.

Ruby twisted round, then back. She bit her lip. There wasn't much she could do. It was just beginning to snow a bit more steadily, and the traffic was slowing again. They could be here for a while. She closed her eyes. She should have got the train. She'd bargained on two to three hours for this trip. However, now it could be double that. Ruby grabbed her phone and texted Mum to let her know what was happening. She got a sad face emoji back, with Mum saying she'd keep dinner for her. Then another message with a unicorn, rainbow and crying emojis among an array included. Mum was a

new emoji convert.

The driver-side door opened and Fran sat back in her seat, rubbing her hands. Being November 30th, it was a barmy two degrees outside. She jabbed the heater on, then breathed into her hands in a bid to warm up.

“What happened? Could you see?”

Fran nodded, still shivering. Her dirty-blond hair glistened with snow, as did her dark grey coat. “It was the exhaust. It’s hanging off the car. I called the AA, and the bloke reckoned a bracket’s come loose. He might be able to fix it roadside or he might have to tow us, but it’s likely to be at least an hour until they can get someone here, so get comfortable.” Fran lifted up a bottle of water. “We have fluid. I also have wine in the boot if things get desperate.”

“And I have Christmas biscuits. That’s almost a party.” Ruby gave her a grin. “If we have to eat my sister’s present, so be it.”

“Not Audrey’s?”

“Are you mad? I value my life.” Ruby tapped her fingers on her knees. Another hour in the car with Fran, maybe longer. This was going to be a challenge.

“How about we play a game. You ask me a question, then I’ll ask you. It’s how we used to pass the time on long car journeys when I was little.”

Fran didn’t look convinced. “So long as they’re not too personal.”

Ruby shook her head. “Not at all.” She tapped her foot. “Let’s see. What’s your favourite colour?”

Fran threw her a look.

“Would you prefer to sit in silence?” Ruby was trying her best. “Work with me.”

“Okay.” Fran paused. “Yellow.”

“Really? But you’re always dressed in dark colours when I see you.” She wiggled her fingers in front of Fran. “Black shirt, blue jeans today. You were all in black again when I saw you at the pub the other day.”

“You’ve got a good memory.”

Ruby blinked. She did. “I look at people’s clothes.”

Fran shrugged. “Yellow is still my favourite colour, even if I don’t wear it all the time.”

“Do you have *any* clothes that are yellow?”

Fran rolled her neck before turning to Ruby. “I had some yellow socks once.”

Ruby laughed. “Daring. You need to get some colour into your wardrobe. It might cheer you up. Colour has an effect on mood.”

“Is that right?” Fran tilted her head.

“Yep. I wrote a song about it. Called ‘Multi-coloured Dreams’.” Ruby paused. “Have you ever written a song, or do you just sell the music?”

“Isn’t it my turn for a question?”

Ruby held up her palms. “My mistake. It is.” Fran had flipped from being friendly Fran to spiky Fran. She clearly didn’t deal well with motoring hiccups. Perhaps that’s why her dads looked after her car for her.

“I got it.” Fran clapped her hands together. “Signature dish.”

A creative question. Ruby was pleasantly surprised. “That’s easy. Chicken & mushroom pasta bake. I know it sounds a bit easy, but trust me, it’s delicious. The secret? A ton of parmesan and cream.”

“Everything’s better with parmesan and cream.”

“Exactly.” Ruby’s stomach rumbled. “I could really eat a pasta bake right now. Warming. Tasty.” She shivered. Outside, the snow was still falling.

Fran clicked the ignition and fired up the heater. Warm air shot out the vents.

Ruby adjusted the vent, then put her hands up to it like it was a roaring fire.

Fran laughed, then got on her knees and twisted round. Seconds later, she dropped Ruby’s coat into her lap, before wriggling back into her seat, hugging herself. “You look cold, put it on.”

Ruby glanced her way, doing what she was told. Gratitude tiptoed up her scalp. “Thank you.” She buttoned up before she asked: “What about yours?”

“Mine?”

“Signature dish.”

“I don’t cook much. Perils of the job. I’m usually out at a gig or working late. Can I say Deliveroo?”

Ruby let out a bark of laughter. “You cannot. You must cook something.” She twisted to face Fran. “Come on, you’ve got a date with a hot chick. She’s coming round to yours. What do you cook her?”

“Panic on toast?”

Ruby gave her a look.

“Okay.” Fran paused. “Malaysian curry. My old flatmate taught me how to make that. It’s surprisingly easy and never not impressive.”

“There you go. Malaysian curry. If you fed me that, we’d definitely be off to a good start.” It was only when the words were out that Ruby realised what she’d said. “Not that I’m coming round to yours for a date.” Heat flooded her cheeks. “I mean, not that you’re not datable, it’s just...”

Now Fran twisted in her seat, a smile hanging from her lips. “You’re right, this game was a good idea. Watching you squirm while we’re sat freezing on the side of the motorway has taken my mind off things.”

Ruby wanted to curl up in the footwell, but being 5ft 9, that would have been uncomfortable. “Here to help,” she replied.

CHAPTER 7



Ruby's face was a picture.

Fran couldn't help smiling. She had to get out of her funk about the car. It wasn't helping either of them. Plus, as she kept reminding herself, the whole point of this trip was to thaw the relationship with Ruby. Being snarly wasn't going to win Fran any popularity points. Perhaps sharing something of herself would make Ruby feel more at home. Who knows, they might even become friends.

"My Malaysian curry was a favourite of my ex."

Ruby stretched her legs at that. "You see, I told you it would lead to a sure thing." She smiled. "My ex was a fan of my pasta bake, too. Although she did constantly tell me I might die an early death if I kept eating it. Either from heart failure or obesity due to the amount of cheese and cream."

Fran glanced her way. "Seeing as your stomach is impossibly flat, the obesity dilemma seems sorted."

"You never know about heart failure, though, do you? You hear about those people who run marathons and drop dead all the time."

"Don't run marathons. They bugger your knees and then you keel over and die."

"Good point." Ruby paused. "Are you cooking your curry for anyone at the moment?"

Fran shook her head. “I’m not. I broke up with my ex two years ago. I’m done with women.” She snagged Ruby’s gaze with her own. “What about you?”

“Confirmed singleton, too. Meal deals for one.”

“Sounds like we both need to start a supper club. Or at least a meal exchange.”

“Or just get laid.” Ruby blushed again. She was cute when she blushed.

“Nah, I’m off that, too. After Delilah...” Fran stopped. *Shit*. She hadn’t meant to blurt that name out. They’d never been out publicly, which was one of the reasons they’d broken up.

But Ruby was already staring at the mention of the name, her forehead furrowed as she pieced Fran’s history together. “It was Delilah who ate your curry?” Astonishment tinted her words.

Fran bristled. “Is it *that* improbable?” She’d always worried she was punching above her weight. She didn’t need it confirmed by Ruby.

Ruby shook her head. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way. I’m just surprised she’s actually gay. I’d heard rumours she was seeing someone, but we hardly run in the same circles. Now I find out it was you.”

“It was me.” There had been something there from the first moment they met. “I don’t normally date musicians. Not because it’s unethical — it happens all the time — but rather because I know it’s a difficult road, with touring, fans throwing themselves at them, all of that.”

“I don’t get nearly as much of it as she would.” Ruby twisted her mouth one way, then the other. “I never saw you with her, though. How long were you together?”

“Nine months. My dads knew, and my colleague, Damian. But apart from that, I was sworn to secrecy. It couldn’t get out while she was trying to make it big, so we had to be super careful everywhere we went.” Fran shook her head, remembering. “It was more than tiresome. Plus, I’ve been out and proud since I was 15. When you have two gay dads, you don’t have to hide

who you are. Going back into the closet was hard. They hated it as much as me. Plus, they could see that despite us getting along, it was never going to work. But I had to learn the hard way.”

“I bet.” Ruby paused. “No wonder you snapped off her music earlier.”

Fran shrugged. “When we broke up, I asked to be taken off her team, and she endorsed it. But she’s off on tour now, and things are really hitting the big time. I’m pleased for her, but she needs to be who she is. Come out as queer.”

“Why wouldn’t she, though? It’s hardly taboo anymore. Maybe in the film or TV industry. But in music, people have always been able to be way more themselves.”

“That’s the irony, isn’t it?” Fran was quiet for a moment. “Does whatever I tell you in this car stay in this car?”

Ruby nodded. “Of course. You have my word.”

Fran hoped she could trust Ruby. She was in the business, too, and she didn’t strike Fran as the gossipy type.

“For Delilah, it’s her parents. She might be the woman of the moment with chart-topping hits, but her parents are crazy-religious and she’s not out to them. Until she does that, she can’t be who she truly is.” Fran shrugged. “Pop stars have hang-ups, too.”

“More than most from the ones I’ve met,” Ruby replied. “Wow, I can’t believe you were with Delilah.” She waved her hands at Fran. “Again, not in *that* way. I just thought she’d want a bit more of a starry girlfriend. Someone she could share the spotlight with.”

“Nope. Delilah wants someone who she can keep in the closet. I did it for a while because she said she was going to come out eventually. But as time went on, it became apparent she was lying. That’s when I realised it was never going to work. Doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt, though.” It had hurt plenty. Still did sometimes.

“Makes my tale of woe about my ex being a different person to me pale

into the background.” Ruby rolled her shoulders. “Still, you’ve slept with a chart-topping artist. And she loved your curry.”

“She did. She just didn’t love me all that much. Or herself.” Fran glanced in her rear-view mirror. No sign of a recovery truck. She wished it’d hurry up. Her stomach gurgled loudly.

Ruby twisted around, rummaged in her bag, then produced one of the neatly wrapped gifts. She tore the paper without hesitation. “My sister won’t miss these, and your stomach needs attending to.” Ruby held up a yellow biscuit tin. “It’s even your colour, so it’s your Christmas present now. Just a month early.” She grinned, giving it to Fran. “Happy Christmas. Have some vanilla and coconut whirls.”

Fran took the tin. “Don’t mind if I do.”

They sat munching their whirls for a few moments. Then Fran’s phone flashed. She picked it up.

“The AA man is 15 minutes away.”

“It might be a woman,” Ruby countered.

Fran gave her a look. “I don’t know many women called Mike. Whatever, home should be within reach soon.” She glanced out her window. “The traffic’s moving faster now, too.”

“We’ll be in Mistletoe before you know it.” Ruby grabbed another biscuit. “Are you still in touch with Delilah?”

“We still talk occasionally, but like I said, she’s touring her new album now. She vowed she would keep in touch more, but she’s busy. I get it. I’ve watched plenty of relationships between music execs and artists explode. I know the drill. You just never think it’s going to happen to you. But musicians are single-minded. They have to be to succeed. They’re all about themselves and their careers.” She glanced at Ruby. “I’m sure you’re different. You don’t sleep with groupies. Get your head turned. You’re more grass roots. But the next relationship I get into is going to be with a woman who’s not even a music fan.”

“You wouldn’t last five minutes,” Ruby replied. “You love music. It’s in your bones, just like mine. It must be, or you wouldn’t do the job you do.”

“True. But right now, after Delilah, I am so done. So long as my next girlfriend eats my curry, I’d be happy if she works in a bank. Or a fishmonger. I’ve never dated a fishmonger.”

Ruby raised an eyebrow. “Really? A fishmonger?”

“Think of all the cheap salmon and how healthy my skin would look.” Fran could just imagine the glow. “Have you ever gone out with a musician? Or someone in the industry like me, come to that?” Fran’s eyes widened. *Shit*. “Not that I’m suggesting...”

“A musician, yes.” Ruby gave her an amused smirk. “Someone in the industry, no. Not really my scene. No offence.”

“You know when someone says ‘no offence’, it means they’re about to offend you, right?”

“You know what I mean. Music execs are just in it for themselves. Out to boost their careers. They’re not interested in artistic integrity or in the artist’s voice. They just want to make a name for themselves.”

Wow. Ruby didn’t hold back, did she? “You really don’t have a high opinion of me, do you? At least I gave you the benefit of the doubt. I could have lumped you in with all other musicians, saying you’re all as bad as each other. But I didn’t.” She glanced at Ruby. “Maybe I should have.” She grabbed another biscuit from the tube. “Why are you so down on the music industry?”

Ruby rolled her shoulders and was silent for a few moments longer before she spoke. “Because I had a bad experience. I signed to a label when I was 21, and I thought that was it, that I had the dream ticket. But then they wanted to change my sound and make me more pop, more ‘radio-friendly’. I went along with it because I was 21, but it wasn’t me and I think listeners could tell. The music didn’t sell. The label also wanted me to change my look, “show more cleavage” I believe was the term used.”

Fran winced. “I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I’m not.” She’d heard that story too many times. “It’s one of the things I’m most proud of with our new project, Fast Forward. They’re a girl group, but a new style of girl group. No cleavage required.”

“That should have been their band name.”

Fran gave her a wry smile. “I did consider it.”

Ruby shrugged. “But anyway, I didn’t show more cleavage. It wasn’t me. Then they tried to tour me, but they ended up putting me in the wrong venues and it was a disaster. My worst night was playing a rock club. I was pelted with beer cans and booed off stage. It’s why I don’t like playing bigger venues than a couple of hundred any more. People behave better when they’re not so anonymous. They’re more my people.”

Fran glanced in Ruby’s direction. “I’m sorry that happened to you, but we’re not all the same.”

Ruby shrugged. “But money talks, doesn’t it? When I stopped selling, the label dropped me, and every person I encountered was all about the bottom line and how it could work for them. I was never in the equation. It was a wasted couple of years and I had to start again from scratch.”

“Have you ever taken the time to talk to music people, though? Really understand why they’re doing their job?”

Ruby’s cheeks coloured pink. Fran could see that even in the low lighting of the car. “Nothing in depth, but I know the type.”

“Really.” Fran turned her body to Ruby. “That type is me? Because I can tell you, I love music. My job is to get good music out into the world. The part I play is balancing the artist with what the label can offer, and it’s all part of the creative process. Just like you making music is, too. But I care about my artists and I’m good at the business side.”

Ruby tucked her chin into her neck. The car was silent for a good few moments.

Fran cleared her throat.

Ruby still didn't say anything.

Had Fran gone too far? She thought about it for a few moments, then decided she hadn't. Ruby had made assumptions about her and her career. She was wrong.

"It's the reason I tried to sign you. Because I think you're talented. Because I think your music deserves to be listened to on a much larger scale. I get that you want to help out your family at Christmas, but it's a big thing to put your career on hold for six weeks every year. Most people wouldn't do it, and if you want my professional advice, it's not the smartest career move. Wouldn't you rather be playing a gig that might get your music out there and open doors, rather than selling trees? If it's money you're worried about, you could help your family out far more when your sales go through the roof."

Fran wasn't done. "If you want my professional opinion, it sounds like you're making excuses to thwart yourself. Your family is a great excuse, and nobody is ever going to call you on it. Apart from me. Because I see what you're doing. You're scared of trying, but even more scared of being a success." Fran winced. She hadn't meant to go into a rant, but Ruby had riled her.

She held up a conciliatory palm. "I'm sorry. It's just, I don't like being misrepresented." She held Ruby's gaze. "Also, I don't like wasted talent. It's part of my job to spot it."

However, Fran didn't truly care if she'd offended Ruby. Ruby had offended Fran, and she had to stand up for herself.

Ruby sat up in her seat. "Listen," she said.

But just then, the bright lights of the AA truck lit them up as it pulled in behind them.

Both Fran and Ruby turned into the light, then squinted.

"Saved by the bell." Fran opened her door and got out, then flicked up her hood against the snow which was now swirling.

She wasn't sure her plan of buttering Ruby up had gone all that well.

But frankly, she didn't much care.



MIKE COULDN'T FIX Fran's car. "More than the exhaust," was his not-so-helpful assessment. He'd loaded it onto his recovery truck, with Fran and Ruby riding in his cab up-front.

When they arrived in Mistletoe an hour and a half later, the snow was still falling at a steady rate, and the village was picture-postcard pretty. The journey had been quiet, and luckily the traffic had eased. Fran kept her eyes on the road and her thoughts to herself. She'd avoided looking at Ruby too much. When she had, Ruby's eyes had been closed. Whether she was asleep or just attempting damage limitation, Fran wasn't sure.

As they both lived so close, the drop-off point was the same. Mike gave Fran a number to call to arrange a replacement rental while hers was being fixed. "Although," he said, looking into the sky. The snow swirled around his face. Like someone up there was grating the sky. "If this keeps up, you might not be able to get it."

Fran shook her head. "I don't really need a car while I'm here. I'll just follow up with the garage to see when they can get the car back to me."

He nodded, then drove off.

Ruby stood as the snow fell, her numerous gift bags at her feet.

"You want a hand in?" Fran might still be annoyed, but she was polite.

Ruby shook her head, grabbing all the handles in her fingers. "I can manage." She took two steps, then a third.

Fran kept a narrowed eye on Ruby. She didn't look steady on her feet.

On her fourth step, Ruby wobbled. On the fifth, she lost her footing, and almost in slow motion her right foot slid forward as her body jerked back. She landed with a dull thud on the pavement. Her gift bags scattered across the pavement, presents skidding out. A squashed "Fuuuuck!" escaped Ruby's

mouth.

Fran stood still for a moment, biting down a laugh. Then she clicked into gear, rushing over to her fallen neighbour. She gathered the gifts back into the bags, stood them up, then offered Ruby her hand.

Ruby looked up, grimaced, then took it reluctantly.

When their hands connected, a sudden boom shuddered through Fran's core. It wasn't subtle. It was seismic, shaking her from the inside out. It almost knocked her sideways. She squeezed her toes together and managed to stay upright.

"After three," Fran said, ignoring the ricochets in her body. They couldn't be trusted. "One, two, three."

Ruby held onto Fran tight and heaved herself off the pavement.

When she made it to her full height, they stood facing each other. Ruby a few inches higher, her lips almost at Fran's eye level.

Fran hadn't considered Ruby's lips once in the car. At least, she didn't think she had. Ruby was attractive, but so were many women Fran came into contact with. She was used to attractive singers being in her orbit. It was her world.

However, not many of them caused a mini-earthquake in her with a touch of their hand.

There must be something faulty in her wiring in Mistletoe. Something off. Maybe it was the snow.

She wasn't used to snow.

That was probably it.

"If it's any consolation, you went down with the grace of a top ballet dancer." Fran paused. "Will you accept some help to your front door, now? I promise, as soon as we get there, I'll leave and you'll be shot of this music exec."

Ruby grabbed some bags, letting Fran take some. She gave her a weak smile. "Thanks." She began walking, limping slightly. She glanced across at

Fran, looking like she was about to say something, then didn't.

Fran let it go. "What are your plans for this weekend?"

It was still snowing, and every word Fran uttered was topped with wet snow. It was settling all around her in thick layers.

"It's going to be a busy one," Ruby replied. "The start of December means the annual Christmas Tree Contest & Treasure Hunt, so this weekend is big news in Mistletoe." She flipped her head to the sky. "I just hope this snow, pretty as it is, doesn't cause an issue for this weekend. Otherwise, there might be many furrowed brows in the village. Still, it's nothing we haven't dealt with before."

They walked down the drive to the farm in silence, battling the growing snow storm, Fran swallowing down many flakes by the time they arrived. She didn't have a hat or gloves. Her fingers were numb and her hair frosted. She was sure she had a nose like Rudolph, too.

Ruby was just fishing in her bag for her key when the door swung open. Mary appeared on the other side, her cheeks flushed with warmth. It was in stark contrast to the pair of them. Chipper ran circles around them, jumping up at Ruby.

"Oh my goodness! Get in! Get in! You look frozen!" Mary said.

"Hello, Chipper! Good boy!" Ruby flicked a worried gaze to Fran.

She didn't need to panic. Fran was happy to get as far away from here as she possibly could at the fastest speed possible. "Thanks, but I was just giving Ruby a hand with her bags. Turns out she buys a whole lot of presents."

"That's our Ruby!" Mary took the bags from Fran's hands. "You sure I can't offer you a coffee or a hot chocolate at least?"

Fran shook her head. "No thanks. My dads are waiting for me. I better get home." She gave Ruby a tight smile. "See you soon."

Ruby dipped her head. "Thanks for the lift."

CHAPTER 8



Being woken at 7am and told she had to get up to help the village wasn't Fran's idea of the perfect Saturday. Especially not after the journey she'd endured last night, including a stalled car and a spluttering friendship. Apparently, a siren call had gone out across Mistletoe this morning by text. Like it or not, Fran was part of the village now. She checked in the mirror, wiped the sleep from her eyes and splashed her face. Did she need to apply make-up? Who for? She didn't even know these people.

But she knew Ruby.

Fran pushed that thought to one side and trundled down the stairs, where her dads already had their coats, hats, scarves and boots on. They were Mistletoe-ready.

It was only now she did a thorough inspection of the hallway she took in just how all-in Dad and Pop had gone on the Christmas decorations.

Back in Surrey, they'd been far more reserved. The one thing her parents *always* made sure they had was mistletoe. Her dads had a thing for mistletoe. It was how they'd got together one snowy night in Soho some 40 years ago. They'd been inseparable ever since. Hence, when they'd seen a village in Suffolk named Mistletoe, it had seemed like destiny. Resistance was futile.

Now, Fran took in the Christmas cards on strings and the tinsel on door frames. The fake snow on the window panes. She'd even spied Christmas tea

towels hanging from the Aga last night in the kitchen. They hadn't even bought a tree or really got started yet. She blinked, gave them both a good-morning kiss, then shrugged on her too-thin coat and inappropriate shoes. At least the soles were thick. The clock had barely scraped past 7.30am when they opened the front door. There hadn't even been time for a cuppa.

When Fran walked out, the crisp, dazzling stillness tickled her cheeks and stole her breath. There was something to be said for being out this early. The holly bush had a brilliant snow jacket. The fir tree was majestic. The rest of the plants sported a snow trim. When Fran stepped onto the garden path — which Pop had semi-cleared — the thin layer of snow crunched underfoot. The best part of any snowfall was being the first one to tread in it. It never happened in London. It hardly ever happened in Surrey. But in Mistletoe? She could roll around to her heart's content and still have fields and fields of snow to go.

“Wow. I feel like I'm inside a Christmas card.”

Dad nodded. “Isn't it magical? This is why we moved to Mistletoe.”

Fran couldn't argue with that.

“We've done some fabulous bike rides around these roads and trails, too,” Pop added.

“No doing that in this weather.” When she heard the words, Fran rolled her eyes at herself. When had their roles of parent and child begun to shift?

“Yes, Mum.” Pop gave her a wink.

They walked to Mistletoe Stores, the air so fresh Fran wanted to bottle it. She could make a mint selling it in London. They were silent, the only noises occasional bird song. Fran made sure her steps were small and heavy, as she was wearing shoes with no grip, that weren't made for snow. She'd seen what happened with Ruby last night, so she was taking no chances. There were signs directing people to Mistletoe Farm and the Christmas Tree Contest & Treasure Hunt all along Farm Lane, and a massive one at the junction with Mistletoe Stores. Tall, elaborately decorated trees lined the route. Fran hadn't

noticed them last night, in the snowstorm. Plus, she'd had other things on her mind. Now, she had no idea how she'd missed them.

When they arrived at Mistletoe Stores, they walked around a massive tree adorned with everything Elvis. It even had a sparkly jacket and a quiff. Fran wanted to stop and stare. Get her phone out and Instagram it instantly. However, everyone else took this tree in their stride. Like it happened all the time. Perhaps it did in Mistletoe.

She and her parents headed round the back to The Bar. Outside the back door, around 20 shovels were propped against the wall. Somebody had already been busy. Once at the door, Fran blinked again. The Bar was absolutely packed. She hadn't expected that.

There was barely space for them to squeeze in the door, but the villagers made room, slapping Michael and Dale on the back. The low hum of the coffee machine working overtime mixed with the chatter of the locals filled the air, along with the smell of freshly roasted beans. What Fran would give for a coffee. However, to get there, she'd have to hurdle at least 30 people. She didn't want to come across as a pushy Londoner.

Behind the bar, Fran spotted Mary and Paul, along with Victoria and Eric, doling out the drinks. Scott and Ruby were the other side of the bar, giving out mince pies and chatting with Gayle and Penny. At the sight of Ruby, Fran inhaled a long breath. Ruby was deep in conversation, her face animated and alive. She looked happy. Fran hoped she'd get that version of Ruby today, rather than the spiky one. That they could get over last night and be civil to each other.

Mary checked her watch, then clapped her hands. Silence descended on the bar.

"Thanks everyone for coming at such short notice, and for being such phone addicts that you had your phones on in the first place!"

Chuckles from the audience.

"Also, thanks to OnePhone for providing wifi that can survive a snow

storm. Remember that year we had to go door to door, knocking everybody up by hand?”

“Yes!” came the chorus from the front of the bar, followed by laughter around the room.

“Anyway,” Mary continued, rubbing her hands through her short hair. It stuck up at all angles. It was Mary’s trademark. “The village is looking picture-perfect this morning after all the snowfall overnight. But as you also know, picture-perfect means headaches for us. Especially this weekend, the Christmas Tree Contest & Treasure Hunt.”

“Headaches for us all!” shouted Audrey. “How am I meant to get over to the supermarket to get my shop when I can’t get the car out?”

Audrey was wearing what Fran could only describe as an artist’s smock. It seemed wildly inappropriate for the weather. But then, Audrey was wildly inappropriate, so perhaps it suited her.

“You could always just buy from us at Mistletoe Stores,” Eric said.

“When you start stocking my chorizo, passata and all the other goodies I get from Aldi, we’ll talk.”

Mary clapped her hands. “We don’t have a lot of time, so if I could bring your attention back to the matter at hand. I’ve spoken to the council, and the gritters are already on the case making all the roads passable up to Mistletoe perimeter. I’ve had a cast-iron guarantee on that. I told them we can take the rest.” She paused. “As most of you know, our job today — as it has been every year when this has happened — is to make sure the pavements are passable, the farm is safe, and the Christmas trees scattered all over the village that are taking part in the competition are de-snowed, their clues intact. People will still come if they can drive their cars here, park it somewhere free of ice, walk on pavements that aren’t skating rinks and most importantly, so long as they can see the trees to judge them.

“The forecast is good, there’s no more snow, so let’s give this a positive slant. The snow couldn’t have come at a better time to make Mistletoe as

Instagrammable as possible. Well, perhaps a day or two earlier, but let's not split hairs." Mary grinned. "The village is going to look gorgeous with your help. If we can all pitch in this morning, visitors will rave about our little hamlet, then come back next year. Pavements and trees are the priority. Everybody ready to ensure Mistletoe is open for business?"

The whole bar erupted into applause and whistles. Fran joined in the clapping, somewhat bemused.

"Order! Order!" shouted Paul, as if he was the Speaker in the House of Commons. "See Eric and Victoria over here for the duties we've assigned you. If you have a problem, speak to them, but hopefully everyone will be happy. Over 70s, you won't be shovelling snow, that much we can promise. Not after Norman's back went three years ago."

"I can shovel! I'm fit as a fiddle!" Norman shouted. He stood up to demonstrate the point, waving his walking stick in the air.

Everyone ignored him.

"Tea, coffee and mince pies are on tap here to everyone helping. Take one before you go or come back afterwards."

Fran stood at the back as the crowd chatter filled the room once more. There was a swell to the front to get coffee and duties. Then a slow dispersal as the villagers marched out, mission in hand.

Ruby's brother Scott bustled up, slapping Dad and Pop on the back. "Michael, Dale. You're both fit and able. I've put you two on snow-shovelling duty on the main road into town. You and six others. You should get it done in an hour or so, with luck. Shovels are stacked up outside. That okay?"

Both her dads nodded, puffing out their chests.

Fran suppressed a laugh. Her dads were fit, even though they were both in their mid-60s. Weren't there younger people to shovel snow? Glancing around the room, the answer was no. Her dads were the youngsters in the pack.

“As for you, Fran. I thought the best thing would be to team up with Ruby to get the farm gritted and the Christmas trees around it set for the treasure hunt and judging.” He turned around, just as Ruby approached. “Here she is! I’ve given you Fran to help out. That okay?”

Ruby sucked on her top lip, then nodded. “Of course, that’s great.” Her tone was flat.

So far, this morning was going just about as bad as Fran could have hoped. She’d been hoping for a lie-in, followed by one of Pop’s famous fry-ups. Then perhaps a spot of Saturday Morning Kitchen on the telly, where she could watch people cook food she would never recreate because she didn’t have the time or the inclination.

Instead, here she was.

With Ruby.

Again.

It seemed like their lives were being thrown together whether they liked it or not.

Outside Mistletoe Stores, the snow was already grey and sludge-like from the early morning foot-traffic. It didn’t take much. Fran and Ruby set off down the road back towards the farm. A home they shared. Sort of.

“Seems like everyone’s quite excited about this. They like being woken up early and giving up their Saturday.” Fran was still a mix of perplexed and impressed.

Ruby shrugged. “Community is important around here. The village is important. It’s one of the reasons I like to come home at this time of year, to feel that. It’s why I value community in my music. It’s not all about money for me.”

Another dig at Fran. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

Ruby shook her head, then stopped walking. “I didn’t mean it like that.” She shoved her hands deep in the pockets of her thick coat, glancing Fran’s way. “Look, I’m sorry about what I said yesterday. I was tired and hungry,

but that's no excuse for tarring everyone with the same brush. It was unfair. Not all music execs are born the same, I know that. I wouldn't have liked it if you'd done it the other way around, but you didn't. I apologise." She stared at Fran.

Fran took a deep breath. "I apologise if I overstepped the mark, too."

Ruby shook her head. "I deserved it. Can we start again?"

Hadn't they started again a few times already, yet they always seemed to end up back where they started?

However, when Ruby's green gaze snagged Fran's, her heart sped up. Maybe they could. They should at least try. For the village's sake, if nothing else.

They *had* to start again. Fran didn't have a choice. She nodded.

"Let's put it all behind us. Clean slate. You've got yourself a deal."

CHAPTER 9



When they arrived at the farm, Ruby led Fran past the main house and down to the courtyard behind. Flanking it stood four stone outbuildings that had been painstakingly renovated by her parents over the years, and now housed a cafe, farm museum and gallery, along with space for the seasonal products they sold. There was a wooden stage in the middle that Ruby had avoided singing on ever since Scott and her dad built it seven years ago, along with fire pits and picnic tables. A decorated Christmas tree studded each corner of the courtyard. Apart from everything being covered in snow, the farm was ready for today. The four Christmas trees were the first they had to de-snow, so the contest could go ahead.

Four older villagers — Roger, Betty, Steve and Joyce — were waiting at the nearest barn door. Ruby greeted them, gave them keys for the cafe, and they left.

“They’re making sandwiches, cakes and scones for this afternoon.” Ruby waved a hand around the courtyard. “These four trees are in the contest. There are 38 trees scattered about the village, decorated and ready for judging. It’s the most we’ve ever had in one year.”

Fran was standing next to one of the courtyard trees, sniffing one of its branches. “It smells like Christmas.” She spread her arms wide. “It’s making me feel all warm inside, even though I’m bloody freezing.” Fran shook the

tree. Snow cascaded onto her. She scrunched her face and blew it off.

Ruby could do nothing but laugh. “You need a thicker coat before you do that again.”

Fran wrapped her arms around her torso. “Tell me something I don’t know.” She stared up at the tree. “The theme for this one is Scotland?” The tree was wearing a kilt with a tartan hat on top, along with a bottle of Glenfiddich in its branches. Heather peaked out of its branches, too, and a laminated life-size bust of Rod Stewart hung from its right side.

Ruby nodded. “Well done.”

“I saw the tree at Mistletoe Stores. That’s my favourite so far.”

Ruby grinned. “Victoria is responsible for the Elvis tree. But it can’t win, seeing as we’re running the contest. Victoria’s still pissed.”

“I would be, too. But I can already see there’s stiff competition. Who knew a Christmas tree could be Elvis?”

They crossed the courtyard side by side.

“How does the contest work?”

“Local businesses, charities and families pay to enter their trees into the contest. They get a pot and a location. They buy a tree from our farm, plant it, decorate it with a theme, then write the theme on a card under their tree.” Ruby pushed open the wooden shop door and invited Fran in. “Then people pay to buy a Treasure Hunt map from the store and the challenge is to hunt down all the trees in the village and surrounding roads, write down each tree’s theme, then pick your top three.”

Ruby was so used to the wealth of festive paraphernalia on offer, she didn’t even pause as she entered.

But Fran did. “Blimey. It’s like someone vomited Christmas in here.” She stamped her feet.

Ruby glanced down. Shoes with thick soles, but no grip or insulation. She bet Fran’s toes were numb. “That won’t be our new slogan in case you were wondering.”

However, Fran was right: this shop was a love letter to Christmas. The farm was competing with local garden centres, so it had to be. Festive-themed soft toys, tree ornaments and baubles in all shapes and colours stood to Ruby's right, along with tinsel, tree beads, and tree-toppers. To her left, were the greener options, including wreaths, point setters and a vast range of festive plants. The back wall was full of chocolates and confectionery, along with stocking fillers as far as the eye could see. Plus, if you wanted a Christmas tea towel, mug, wine glass or tin opener, you were in the right place.

Ruby walked over to the till area, leaned down, then came back up with a wedge of paper in her hand. "These are the Treasure Hunt guides, listing the locations of every tree in the village. A committee makes up 50 per cent of the judging — basically, our family, as we run it — and then everyone who pays for a treasure hunt gets to judge the entries, too. The judging takes place over today and tomorrow, then we announce the winner on Sunday at 4pm. All the money collected from the entries and the treasure hunt goes to charity, and the top three get prizes donated by local businesses."

Fran shook her head. "That's an incredible feat of on-the-ground marketing. I'm so used to doing things digitally, I forget it happens in real life."

"Me, too. All my music sales and marketing are online. Scott's trying to get that up and running for the farm as well, and it's working. But the contest and treasure hunt drive people to the village, get them to the farm and hopefully they then spend money and buy trees."

"Who came up with the idea of the contest in the first place?"

"Mum and Dad when the business needed a boost after big shops started selling Christmas trees. We're not all country bumpkins selling eggs from the side of the road." Ruby grinned. "Plus, there's 20% off all Christmas trees this weekend. Our job now is getting the snow off the contest trees so people can see them." Ruby banged her hands together. "Ready to do the treasure

hunt before anyone else?” Excitement coursed through Ruby. “I love this weekend. I haven’t seen them yet, as they’ve all gone up over the past two weeks.”

“Can we get coffee first? It’s still early and fucking cold, even though it’s stopped snowing.” Fran walked up to the large rack of Christmas crackers by the door. She picked up a box. “I like these.”

Ruby walked up beside her.

Fran turned and their gazes met.

Ruby shivered, even though she wasn’t cold. She couldn’t quite make sense of the way her heart began to thud in her chest. Ruby focused on the crackers, not the fact that she was going crackers.

“Mum and Dad have been making them for the past month. It’s their big hope for this year. They’re pretty cool, and the presents are actually things you might want. You should see the spare room, it’s stacked with them.”

“They should stock them in Harrods, they’d make a killing. Double the price, too.”

Ruby laughed. “If you know a buyer for Harrods, do let me know. Mum and Dad would be well up for it.” She gave Fran a Treasure Hunt map. “Here you go — pirate treasure in tree form. We’ll call in at the cafe, grab a coffee, grit the yard and surrounding paths, then tackle the trees. Ready?”

Fran stamped her feet and shivered. “Ready.”

But Ruby shook her head, then frowned. “You know what we have to do before we do anything else at all? Get you a proper coat and boots so you don’t freeze to death today. Fashion trainers and your thin jacket won’t do. It’s a criminal offence not to have the correct footwear and jacket in Mistletoe. Even when the rest of the country has no snow, Mistletoe is often the blind spot.”

“Next you’ll be telling me Santa makes a special stop on his sleigh here, too.”

Ruby gave her an exaggerated shrug. “This is where he refuels, of

course.” She leaned in. “He even gets his tree from Mistletoe Farm. We give him a discount, naturally. We’re not mercenaries.” She tilted her head towards the house, her eyes stuck on Fran. “Enough chat. Let me give you some proper boots, at least. What size are you?”

“Six,” Fran replied.

“Perfect. Mum has boots for every occasion, and she’s a six. She also probably has a spare coat, too. You’ll thank me later.”

CHAPTER 10



Their first job was to grit the paths in and around the farm. Fran got the hang of shovelling grit pretty quickly after Ruby kept shouting at her to “just fling it!” However, Fran had a different method than flinging. She preferred to drizzle. The trick was to get as much orange grit on your shovel as possible, and then shuffle the contents liberally on the ground. Gritting was also a surprisingly good workout once you got going. Fran’s hips hadn’t moved this much since she was... well, since Delilah. Too long ago.

“You’re creating some lovely patterns in the snow.” Ruby put a hand on her hip and assessed Fran’s handiwork. “You’re wasted in the music business. You should clearly have been an artist.”

“I did two years of an art degree.”

Ruby’s features lifted in surprise. “You did?”

Fran nodded. “I never said I wasn’t creative. You assumed that. I just favoured going the business route. But like I told you, that can still be creative.”

Ruby winced. “You’re right. I did assume. I promise I’m going to stop doing that.”

Fran hoped that was true. She let it go.

Once the farm’s courtyard, drive, car park and paths were gritted, the pair cleared up the courtyard trees. The other three trees had themes of love,

home, and Italy. Fran had never seen a tree decorated in dried pasta and red, white and green ribbons before, but there was a first time for everything. She particularly enjoyed the tree ornaments, including some biscotti and a bauble with Pavarotti's face, as well as the pizza tree-topper.

Once the courtyard trees were done, there were four more nearby to clear. As they walked across the courtyard, Fran stamped her feet to keep her blood moving. Her warmth factor was infinitely better than it had been at the start of the day. Ruby had been right — getting a pair of Mary's boots had been a smart move. She'd also accepted a bright pink ski jacket, scarf and bobble hat. She'd have frozen to death by now in what she had been wearing. Her mission when she got back to London was to get all-new outdoor wear and be Mistletoe-proofed.

Ruby took Fran's gritting shovel with hers, stowing them both by the farmhouse front door.

"I just need to check the cafe staff are on-track, then we'll go."

Fran nodded, then blew out a breath. It froze in the cold morning air. It was still only 10am, but they'd accomplished so much. Fran's days were always busy, but some whistled by and she had to think hard about what she'd accomplished. It wasn't like that in Mistletoe. The jobs were tangible. Grit the yard. Bake the pies. Shake the trees. There was none of the ambiguity of modern life. The feeling of accomplishment was on a different level.

She took off a glove and held it between her teeth, the ends of her fingers still numb as she prodded her phone. She asked her dads how they were getting on. They replied almost instantly that they were nearly done, and heading to The Bar for coffee in 15 minutes. She told them she'd meet them there.

Five minutes later, Ruby's voice carried in the air. Fran turned as she strode towards her. There was no doubt about it, Ruby did stride. She looked so at home in this environment, too, which was such a long way from Fran's

comfort zone. She was wearing black jeans, a black Berghaus jacket (“built for warmth” as Ruby had told her before), plus a thermal hat and gloves. She didn’t have any make-up on, but her skin was unblemished and naturally rosy.

Ruby fitted here.

Fran had admired Ruby’s style from the moment they met. It suited her and her music. How was it possible this country-living style suited her, too?

The farm keys dangled from Ruby’s fingers. “You want to come in and get a blast of warmth while I get the food? We’ll do the tree inspections on the way.”

“Sure.” Fran followed Ruby into the house, her senses overcome by the smell of baking as soon as she stepped through the door. “Your house smells like Christmas.”

Ruby turned and gave her a grin, dropping the keys on the table. “That’s why I like to come home. Mum was up at 5am. There’s nothing like waking up to the smell of fresh baking in the morning. Do your dads bake?”

Fran nodded. “They never used to, but now they’re living in Mistletoe, so much has changed. Now, every time I walk into the kitchen, they’re whipping up batches of scones and mince pies.”

Ruby grabbed a couple of tins from the table, lifting the lids to check what was inside. “I challenge them to make them as good as these.” She closed the lids and walked towards Fran. “Can you take these?”

Fran held out her arms and Ruby plonked the tins into them. “Mistletoe will work its magic on them, mark my words. Before they know what’s happening, they’ll be putting on a Santa outfit and eating mince pies at every meal.”

She and Ruby ferried three tins of pies and three plates of sandwiches to the car, putting them on the backseat. Fran slammed the back door, and when she looked up, Ruby was chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“You know what, second thoughts.” She held out a thermal-gloved hand,

and grabbed Fran's arm in her grip. "Let's go see the trees now. You got your map?"

Fran patted her jacket pocket. "Never leave home without it." She was trying to ignore the warmth racing up her arm, emanating from where Ruby was touching her.

"You're a natural at this, London girl."

Ruby threaded an arm through Fran's and together they crunched down the farm's pathway, stopping at the first tree which was 50m ahead. Ruby spread her arms before giving Fran a "ta-da!", along with a broad smile. "This is Mistletoe Farm's entry."

Fran peered upwards, in awe of the tree's height. It had to be at least 20ft tall. "It's wonderful. I love the Candy Canes. It reminds me of 'Elf', the one Christmas film I like. What's the tree theme?"

"The O'Connells." She pointed at a bauble. "See this? It's me, aged nine, the first year we moved here which is when Mum began the tradition." On the front of the bauble was a tiny girl standing proudly next to a snowman. Ruby twizzled it around to see the number nine stamped on the other side. "Mum and Dad got a bauble done of each of us for every year of our lives when we bought the farm. Luckily, the tree's pretty tall, and we have another one inside, otherwise we might run out of branches."

"I never even knew personalised baubles were a thing."

Ruby rolled her eyes. "So much to learn about Christmas."

Never a truer word spoken. To Fran, Christmas was an unnecessary pause in her work calendar. She tolerated it because the Q4 sales were always the best, but she didn't always celebrate it. Didn't always come home for it. Whereas, the O'Connells embodied Christmas. "Do you still get the baubles done?"

Ruby nodded. "Every year. Plus, me, my brother and sister decorate this tree every year. I finished my part at 6am this morning. Scott and Victoria came and did their bit earlier in the week. It's another reason I can't stay in

London around the festive time. We have traditions you can't walk away from, you know?"

Fran nodded, staring into Ruby's eyes. "I'm kinda getting that impression."

Ruby held her gaze Fran's gaze for a beat, then shook her head. "Who knows, maybe Hollybush Cottage might enter a tree next year?" She gave Fran a smile. "And by the way, 'Elf' is one of my very favourite movies. Never trust anyone who doesn't like it. But there are plenty of other Christmas movies you really need to watch, too."

Warmth coated the inside of Fran. Was Ruby offering to show them to her? Perhaps this morning had begun to turn their relationship around. "I'd love to get Christmas-movie schooled if you're offering." Fran scrunched her forehead. "That's a sentence I never saw leaving my lips. Who am I in Mistletoe?" She'd been here less than 24 hours.

"Someone who's discovering their Christmas soul." Ruby reached out and shook their family tree. A mini-avalanche ensued, and Ruby jumped back seconds too late. She took off her bobble hat and shook her head, then gave Fran a grin. "Remember: snow looks pretty, but it can be bruising."

They cleaned up the O'Connell tree, then walked to the top of the farm's drive and turned right, just as they had done a few months ago when Fran first arrived in the village. Then, she'd thought Mistletoe Farm was a little unkempt, a little rough around the edges. She no longer thought that. Plus, somebody had touched up the sign, and it looked good as new.

On top of that, Fran and Ruby's initial war seemed to be ebbing away, and after a morning spent working together, the barriers were down. Now, Fran almost went to bump Ruby's hip when she made a joke. Which was all sorts of weird. Fran didn't do that even with her friends.

They walked up the road towards the store. They'd cleared this path earlier, too, piling up the snow into the ditches. The grit was doing its job. Now Fran understood the contest, she saw the trees in a whole new light.

These ones didn't have lights, but they had tinsel, baubles and strings of gold beads around them, as well as weather-resistant ornaments, visible when you were up close. Fran touched one of the ornaments, a polished wooden horseshoe. 'Anna, will you marry me? Love, Richard x' was engraved on it.

She turned it towards Ruby. "When was this done?"

"The second year of the festival, so 11 years ago."

"Did Anna say yes?"

Ruby laughed. "She did, otherwise we might have taken that down. Anna is now a Beverton, and the Beverton family do this tree every year." She pointed to the pot at the bottom of the tree. "You see the theme at the bottom? Horses. So that's the clue for this one." Ruby pointed upwards. "Also, Red Rum on the top is a bit of a giveaway. Three years ago their theme was London and it won. They went to town with tiny black cabs, The London Eye, Buckingham Palace, every royal figurine they could lay their hands on. Their granddad even made a Tower of London for the top."

Fran grinned. "I love themed trees. They should be everywhere!" She gave the nearest branches a shake, and snow fell off. It didn't need much. This tree was weather-ready. Well done to the Bevertons. This was not their first Christmas tree rodeo.

"You should see my favourite. It's tucked away behind Mistletoe Stores. The theme is Downhill Skier. It's by the local printing company, and they've turned the tree into just that, with skis, a face, even goggles and crazy hair. It's amazing."

The next tree — with a theme of film — needed more work. Ruby shook it vigorously, got covered again, then together they cleared the branches as high as they could go. Fran stood back as Ruby gave it one last shake that dislodged the snow from the clapperboard tree-topper. Luckily, the tree-topper stayed attached. They tackled tree four (theme: wine), before Ruby ticked it off her list, then messaged her brother to see if anything else needed to be done.

His message back was quick, and made Ruby let out a cute bark of laughter.

Fran frowned. Cute? Since when was Ruby's laugh cute? Since now, apparently.

"Scott says to bring the food." Ruby went to walk right, then stopped and hit her forehead. "Shit, I was about to walk. I forgot we need the van." Ruby nodded towards the farm. "Shall we?"

Fran twisted on her foot and walked back down the slight incline, tilting her head to the clear sky above. Everything about Mistletoe was bright white, like someone had just applied a fresh coat of emulsion. The roads, the trees, the houses, the sky. Even the sharp air around her ears crackled white. The stillness was what got her, too. Her dads had said it had taken some getting used to, but now, they slept like gods.

They crunched back towards the farm, Ruby banging her hands on her sides.

Fran walked back past the farm's hedge, which was handily at arm height. Before she knew what she was doing, she reached out and scooped a pile of snow into her gloves. It packed down easily. Then she turned, and flung it at Ruby. It hit the back of her head.

Ruby stopped walking, putting a hand to her hat and turned. She shook her head. "Did you just throw a snowball at me?" Her tone was incredulous. "You, the townie, want to take on the country girl?" Ruby raised an eyebrow, then ran to the other side of the road and scooped some snow. "Big mistake, townie. Big mistake."

Before Fran knew what was happening, a snowball hit her head. Then another. She turned and scooped more snow, but Ruby was on a different snowball-making level to her. For every one Fran made, Ruby made three. Possibly ten. Shit, Fran was buggered, wasn't she?

Her only choice was to run. She broke into a jog, as snowballs hit her back and neck, cold penetrating to her skin. Fran shivered.

“No running! Against the rules!” Ruby shouted.

Fran reached the farm’s entrance, where they’d piled the big mound of snow earlier after clearing the paths.

As Ruby reached Fran, a huge grin on her face, she half-tackled Fran.

Fran wasn’t prepared for this to be a contact sport. She fell sideways into the mound of snow.

Ruby fell on top of her with an audible ‘oomph’.

There was silence as they both lay there, on a duvet of snow, with body warmth alone for heat.

Fran opened her eyes.

Ruby was staring at her, a surprised look on her face.

Fran’s gaze took in Ruby’s rosy cheeks and her sparkling emerald eyes, before dropping to her lips. Ruby’s lips were glossy and inviting.

Fran blinked. That was a new thought in her brain. She shook herself internally, ground her teeth together and flicked her gaze away. Anywhere but Ruby’s face.

Ruby might be attractive and lying on top of her, but this was never going to happen. *It couldn’t*. They’d only just got back on an even keel.

Plus, Ruby was the enemy.

A singer.

Only, with her full weight on top of Fran and a hungry look in her eye, Ruby didn’t feel like Fran’s enemy.

“You know that falling over is conceding, right?” As Ruby tried to get up, she leaned in that little bit closer to get her balance right. As she did, her mouth stopped inches from Fran’s.

Something flickered on Ruby’s face.

Something Fran couldn’t quite work out. However, as soon as it was there, it was gone again.

Ruby took a deep breath and pushed herself up. Then she held out a hand.

Fran took it, then a zap of heat fizzed up her arm. She ignored it, hauling

herself up and brushing herself down. The cold wasn't bothering her anymore. Not now her internal fire was firing on all cylinders.

Ruby nodded towards the van, avoiding Fran's gaze. "Shall we get the food to the hungry hordes?"

CHAPTER 11



“*W*hat about this one?” Dad stood in the Christmas tree barn, next to the tree of his choice. “Does it look good on me?”

Pop laughed. “Like you were made for each other.” He turned to Fran. “What do you think?”

Fran gave him a look. She wasn’t too old to be embarrassed by them. “It’s green and looks like a tree. If you like it, get it.”

Dad shook his head. “Where did we go wrong, Dale? We raised a loving, caring, creative daughter, and then she ran off to London and came back impervious to Christmas or Christmas trees.” He put both hands to his chest, then doubled over. “It’s like a dagger to our gay hearts.”

Pop pouted. “I agree with your dad. A Christmas tree is not just a tree. It’s a family member. A choice. It’s a feeling.”

Fran widened her eyes. “Have you two been drinking?”

“Nope. We just spent yesterday shovelling snow with Scott, and he schooled us. Plus, we live in Mistletoe now. You have to love Christmas and everything about it.” Dad stood up straight, putting his arm around the tree. “So, I ask again. Me and Clarice the Christmas tree. Love match, or not?”

Fran rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help laughing. Her parents were so much more playful since moving here. She liked it. She wasn’t going to stand in their way. “Definite love match.”

Dad gave her a grin, Pop put his arm around her, and together they carried the tree over to the checkout, currently staffed by Mary. The back barn that housed the trees was a mass of activity, showing the Tree Contest & Treasure Hunt had worked their magic. When Fran looked left, Eric was chatting to a family about their tree. Over towards the back, Paul patted a particularly statuesque variety: the Peter Crouch of trees. Fran scanned the rest of the area, but she couldn't spot Ruby. Fran was heading back to London tomorrow. By train, as her car still wasn't ready, and the garage couldn't say when it would be.

Fran would never admit it out loud, but she was sad to be leaving. This weekend had been a case study in community and team spirit, something London was severely lacking. Yes, Mistletoe didn't even have a pub or a restaurant, but it had heart and it had soul. You couldn't buy that.

It also had Ruby, who Fran had woken up thinking about this morning. Who had kept jumping to the front of her mind when her dads made her breakfast, and chattered excitedly about their festive plans. Fran had made the decision not to come home this Christmas. To stay in London and catch up on work. However, now she'd immersed herself in Mistletoe, she was beginning to question her logic. Was work the most important thing? Her dads didn't seem to think so, even though they were being understanding. They always were.

Ruby certainly didn't think work came first.

Fran wanted to find her to say goodbye. To tell Ruby she was starting to thaw towards Christmas.

"Hello, lovely neighbours!" Mary took the tree from Dad like it weighed nothing. She gave it a forceful shake, and some pines fell to the floor. "The classic Norway Spruce, good choice. It's already been through the tree shaker to get rid of any creepy-crawlies, but I like to give it one last go." Mary grinned, then heaved the tree into the netting machine. Dad ran around the other side, before heaving it out and hugging it.

“We’ve called her Clarice. Good name, Mary? What do you think?”

Mary took Pop’s money, giving Dad a smile. “I was just going to say, she looks like a Clarice. She’s going to be a wonderful addition to the family.”

Fran bit down a comment. Everybody in this town was Christmas crazy. It was an epidemic.

“Ruby’s in the barn shop, in case you were wondering,” Mary told her.

Could she read Fran’s mind? She was in trouble if Mary could.

“Great,” Fran replied, like it meant nothing.

“Come along to The Bar later if you’re free and still here? There’s a village drinks as soon as the festival’s over. Everyone should be there by eight. I’ve made more mince pies.”

No doubt Mary was up at 5am again. That seemed to be standard in Mistletoe. Making the most of every day, whatever it threw at you. Her dads had been up for two hours when Fran appeared this morning at 9am. “Country air, makes you want to make the most of it.” Even her hard London heart might be melting a little with the Mistletoe magic.

“We’ll try to stop by.” Fran glanced at her dads. “I’m leaving tomorrow morning, but there’s time for a drink.”

“Always time for a drink with friends,” Mary said, glancing at the next customer who’d just walked up behind Dad. “Don’t forget the Christmas Tree contest ceremony at 4pm!”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Dad replied.



TWILIGHT HAD ARRIVED by the time the contest winner was announced, but that only added to the farm’s atmosphere. Santa was drinking a hot chocolate by the stage. Fire pits made out of old washing machine drums were scattered around the courtyard for warmth. The mulled wine and hot dog stands helped with that, too. Meanwhile, every fairy light in the country appeared to have

got the invite, and the Christmas trees in each corner were working their magic. In the centre, Paul was on stage, microphone in hand.

“Testing, testing.” He tapped the top of the mic. “One, two, Mistletoe.”

Fran had heard many soundchecks in her life, but never one like that.

Ruby rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “He does that every year. I used to get so embarrassed as a kid. Now, when I’m mic-checking, it’s what I do, too. Testing, testing. One, two, Mistletoe.”

“I’ll remember to look out for that at your next gig.” Fran stamped her feet against the cold. When they’d been busy earlier, the cold had been kept at bay. However, standing around was a different story.

Ruby glanced at her, went to say something, then stopped. She bit her lip, then took a breath. “Are you coming to The Bar later? Mum’s made mince pies. Audrey’s made sausage rolls. It’s going to be a spread of beige food, the like of which London would have a cardiac at.”

“We’re coming. Your mum told us about it earlier.”

“Great.”

Fran moved her mouth left, then right. “Who’s won, by the way?”

“I can’t tell you that. Let’s just say, it’s not a million miles away from my favourite. In fact, it might even be that one.” She leaned in closer, putting her mouth by Fran’s ear. “The downhill skier,” she whispered. “But you didn’t hear that from me.”

Ruby’s breath tickled Fran’s ear, and the tingle that ensued zipped down her body. Fran kept a straight face, then mimed zipping up her lips and throwing away the key. Her heart clattered in her chest. Fran just about held it together, pulling her shoulders back to stand as tall as she could muster. A little like a baby Christmas tree.

“Just as a matter of curiosity, what’s the punishment of giving away the result? Has anyone ever done it?”

Ruby grinned. “Mum did once. She was chatting to a customer, and it just popped out. Dad didn’t speak to her for two days. Just tutted at her. So if you

want to avoid Paul's tutting, best to play dumb."

"Gotcha." Fran nodded towards the mulled wine stand. Her heart was still thumping. "Can I get you a mulled wine? Or is drinking on the job discouraged?"

"When I'm not being paid, I make my own rules. I'd love one."

Fran nodded. "Two mulled wines, coming up."



"ANOTHER BEER, MICHAEL?" That was Gayle asking.

Dad glanced over Pop, then at Fran. "Can we stay for one more?"

Fran nodded. "Have another beer." She should go, but she was having a good time. Plus, her dads didn't have to rush home for anything. This was what they'd moved for. Community and a more relaxed way of life.

Plus, Fran was sat next to Ruby, with the warmth of Ruby's thigh seeping through her jeans.

Fran glanced down the bench, checking the space available. Yes, there were four of them sitting on it, but it was plenty big enough. Ruby didn't have to sit this close to her, but she chose to.

Their closeness made Fran's stomach tighten. She had no desire to stop this night, or this whole weekend. Tomorrow she had to go back to London. She didn't want to think about it.

"Did everyone get their crackers this weekend, too? Because we sold out, did we tell you? All that slave labour from your children paid off, didn't it, parents?" Victoria took a slug of her lager and lime.

"It did." Paul raised his pint of Guinness to her. "I hope you're looking forward to making more."

"I got my crackers," Audrey said. "I hope there are some good gifts in there. Not just a nail file or a pack of tiny cards. I want a mini vibrator or a pan scourer. Something useful I can truly use."

Ruby almost spat out her wine.

“Don’t get those two mixed up, Audrey,” Mary said. “Could lead to all sorts of injuries.”

Ruby got her breath back. “Stop it, you two. I need to swallow, not spit.”

Now the whole table collapsed in giggles.

“Honestly.” Ruby rolled her eyes. “You’re all terrible.” She gestured towards Dad. “Michael bought two packs of crackers, along with a gargantuan tree. Looks like you’re going all out for Christmas.”

Dad nodded. “We are. My sister might be coming with her two daughters, but she’s in two minds. Now if we could just persuade Fran to be there, too, it would be complete.”

Fran’s heart constricted. “It’s why I’m here this weekend, because I said I’d work through. You said you were fine with me not being there.” But in her heart, she knew things had changed the moment they moved. Christmas meant more here.

Mary was having none of it. “Francesca.” She turned to her dads. “Do you call her Francesca when she really needs to listen to you?”

They both nodded.

“In that case, I’ll carry on. Francesca.” She reached over and took Fran’s hands in hers. “I know we had this chat once before. But that was when you first arrived. Now, I hope you understand Mistletoe that little bit more. We’re about sharing Christmas. About everyone mucking in and helping out. Family and friends. It’s not just another day. It’s a time when we all get together to celebrate our year and feel the love in the room. You should come home. We’ve only known you for a couple of months, but it won’t be the same without you.”

Fran gulped, as seven pairs of eyes fixed on her.

She took her hands back as Mary released them. A flush started in her core, and worked its way up her body. Fran chewed on the inside of her cheek. The problem was, her new village friends didn’t know her work

commitments. She had so much to get through before everyone else disappeared for the Christmas break. Plus, she'd promised her bosses she'd make a start on next year's plans over Christmas. Her job didn't just happen all on its own. She couldn't change now even if she wanted to. From the mix of emotions swirling round Fran's body, part of her clearly did. This village dream wasn't just pulling at her parents' heart strings.

Fran was about to reply when a warm hand took hers under the table and squeezed.

She froze, her heart kicking in her chest.

The hand was attached to the person on Fran's left.

Either that, or Audrey had freakishly long arms.

But no. The hand was Ruby's.

Ruby was telling her it was okay. That she understood.

In that moment, it meant so much.

Fran gulped again before she spoke, keeping hold of Ruby's hand. It was a welcome anchor in a choppy moment.

"I do understand what Christmas means around here. I can feel it, too. But I've got a lot of work to get through right up until the day and beyond."

"And we totally understand." Dad gave her his understanding smile. "But do think about coming home. Even on Christmas morning if you have to."

Fran nodded. "I will." Ruby squeezed her hand and let go.

Fran shuddered, but didn't dare look at her.

"It was a good job the crackers sold, but the trees didn't move quite as well as we wanted." Paul sighed as he sipped his pint. "I blame Ikea."

"What's Ikea done?" Fran wanted to get the conversation moving again. Away from her.

"Built a store 15 miles away, and offered customers a free £20 voucher if they buy their tree from them for £30. That makes the tree a tenner, and we can't compete with that. The festival was always our biggest-selling weekend of the year until Ikea opened last year. Our sales were down 25 per cent."

“Still, it’ll all work out. We’ve been through worse!” Mary gave the table a decisive nod. “I believe in the power of community. We told enough people today to tell their friends to come to us. Hopefully, the word will get out and that will happen. I have faith.”

“Or people will give all their money to Ikea,” Audrey chimed in. “The coffee’s cheap, too. And the cinnamon buns are delicious.”

“Audrey Parrot! Tell me you didn’t buy your tree there?” The vein on the right of Mary’s neck began to throb.

“Of course I didn’t! What do you take me for? I just go there for all my tealights and kitchen goods. Also, for the cinnamon buns.”



TWO HOURS LATER, Victoria and Eric turned out the lights, and the O’Connells and the Bells walked home together. The Christmas trees lining Farm Lane rustled as they passed. The first thing Fran was going to do in London was buy a better winter coat. Or just a winter coat that covered her whole body, full stop.

They arrived at Mistletoe Farm gates in five minutes. Mary and Paul hugged everyone, as did Fran’s dads. Their respective parents left, leaving Ruby and Fran together.

“No chance I can persuade you to come back and do the gig on the 22nd at The Pennywhistle?” Fran took a gamble. “There’s still a space to fill and you’d be perfect. Great way to showcase ‘Pieces Of You’.”

Ruby shook her head. “I’m in Mistletoe for the season. I told you that, my family needs me. Plus, The Pennywhistle is hardly my crowd. You know my gig rules.”

“I disagree. It’s under new management and they’ve mixed things up. Plus, rules are made to be broken.”

Ruby ignored her comment. “I should be asking you the same question.

No chance you'll be coming back before the end of the year?"

"Not unless something drastic happens. My schedule doesn't permit it."

Fran got caught in Ruby's stare.

Something boomed in her chest, and Fran was taken right back to the hand holding earlier. She wasn't sure what to do with these new emotions. She sucked through her teeth.

"Have a great Christmas. I'll see you in the New Year?"

Ruby nodded, her gaze dropping down Fran's face, before resting back on her eyes. "I guess you will." She gave her a nod, then turned on her heel and walked down the drive.

Fran watched her go. Half of her wanted to walk with Ruby, to keep chatting. She was enjoying their time together. However, Fran's sensible half knew she had to go.

Back to her normal life. Back to work. Back to reality.

She was just about to turn, when Ruby stopped, then turned herself

When she saw Fran still standing and staring, Ruby smiled.

She gave Fran a half-wave. Then stood, just looking.

The world stood still for just a few seconds, the moonlight bathing the pair of them.

Then Ruby turned back, and walked to her front door.

Fran heart stuttered, then she did the same.

CHAPTER 12



Ruby walked up the farm drive the next day. The pile of snow was still there, but the imprint of Fran's body where she'd fallen had gone. It had snowed again overnight, the air icy on Ruby's face. She could still picture the piercing blue of Fran's eyes. The beat of her own heart. Had the surprise of her feelings shown on her face? She hoped not. Ruby was still trying to work out her feelings towards Fran. She'd gone from being irritated and annoyed, to now sad she'd gone? That was even after Fran kept pressing her to play some gigs. Ruby hated being challenged about that. She should have got straight back out there and played bigger venues. She knew that. Now, every year that went by, the fear just got bigger.

Ruby shook her head, and walked down Farm Lane. It was a lot quieter today after the hustle of the contest over the weekend. Now, the roads were clear, and the sky a brilliant white. When Ruby breathed out, she could see her breath in the air. Their gritting efforts over the weekend were already snuffed out with a new layer of fresh snow coating the village. It looked gorgeous, but it wasn't good for business. Ruby had spent a lonely morning in the cafe with a steady trickle of customers. Still, it was only a Monday. Hopefully the week would pick up.

She breathed in the smell of Mistletoe Stores' Christmas tree as she passed it — the Elvis Nordman Fir. Ruby waved hi to Henry who lived down

the road, walking back with a bag of firewood. The bell over the shop rang as Ruby walked in.

Victoria popped up from under the counter.

Ruby's heart vaulted and she clutched her chest. "What the hell are you doing, scaring me like that?"

Victoria grinned. "I didn't mean to. I was trying to rescue a 10p, but it's gone to the under-counter god, and shall never be seen again. When I die and they take this counter out, you'll find riches underneath. It could pay off your mortgage."

"Like I'm ever going to have enough money for a mortgage." Ruby walked behind the counter and gave Victoria a hug. While Ruby was tall and had muddy hair, Victoria was fair-haired and blue-eyed. Nobody could ever believe they were related and came from the same parents, but they were. They shared the same wide mouth, inherited from their mother, but apart from that, the two sisters looked nothing alike. Plus, at 5ft 3, Victoria was a short-arse.

"To what do I owe this honour? I thought your plan today was to flog Christmas trees?"

"Still the plan, but we need milk. We've run out at home, and Mum doesn't want to eat into the cafe stock, just in case we have a mad dash on coffee later. I can't see it happening, but Mum doesn't want to tempt fate. Plus, we're out of cheese, too. Which is an emergency in our house, as you well know."

Victoria walked around the counter and to the fridge, bringing back a four-pint of milk and some Cathedral City, their dad's favourite cheddar. "Do you have a lot of collections tonight?"

Ruby nodded. The farm had a couple of open days during November, where customers could walk the tree fields, then tag and pay for the one they wanted. They then arranged to pick it up on a specified date. The first week of December was a popular collection week. "A fair few. But we also need to

shift the potted trees, plus all the mistletoe, wreaths, all that gubbins. You'd think people would want to come to Mistletoe Farm for their mistletoe, but when Sainsbury's sells it for a quid a sprig, it's tricky to compete."

"I've been sending people your way all day, so fingers crossed it picks up." Victoria put the groceries on the counter, then glanced at Ruby. "While you're here, can you give me a hand with putting stuff on the top shelf? I need to get up on the ladder, but you know I hate doing that."

Ruby grabbed the step-ladder from the back. "Where do you want it?" This had always been her job in the family ever since she was little. Chief getter of things from up high.

Victoria pointed. "Over there, by the baked goods. I want to put up a display, with panettone, crackers, Christmas pudding. The hampers are selling like hot cakes, so they were a great idea."

"Good." Ruby steadied the ladder. "You got the stuff to give me?"

Victoria disappeared, before reappearing with boxes of Christmas supplies.

Ruby climbed four steps, then turned around, bending her knees carefully, hands out.

Victoria began passing mini Christmas puddings up for the festive shelf, which was suspended over the window display with two chains, like a massive swing.

Ruby took three puddings and began to juggle them. Ruby was a champion juggler. She was also a champion sibling annoyer.

Sure enough, Victoria tutted. "No theatrics, thank you. I'd like the display finished today."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

Ruby juggled for a few seconds, then put the puddings on one of the ladder's steps, giving Victoria a bow.

She got an arched eyebrow in return.

Ruby picked up the goods with a smirk, then missed her step on the next

rung. Her heart dropped as she crushed her weight into the ladder to steady herself, the puddings clutched to her chest. She didn't drop one. She never did. Ruby was rock-solid on a ladder. Even when she was a little too big for her boots.

Victoria gave her a stern stare. "Fucking hell, that was close." She gestured with her hand. "Put it on the display shelf, please."

Ruby's heart was still racing. She did as she was told, then took four more and did the same.

"The contest went well, didn't it? Dragged the crowds in, despite the snow."

Ruby nodded. "We could just use another push. It's rough having so much of your money earned in a single month."

Victoria grunted.

It wasn't a new issue.

"How were things with Fran when she left? You two looked like you were getting on better than when she spat her sausage roll on you." There was a smile in Victoria's voice as she spoke.

"It could only really get better from there, couldn't it?"

"That's a hard yes."

Ruby took a fruit panettone from her sister and put it on the shelf. "Did Eric do this?" Ruby patted it. The shelf bobbed from side to side, the chains clanking.

"He did. Very happy with himself."

"I can see why." Ruby took another panettone, then another. "Do people actually buy these?"

Victoria nodded. "They do. Whether they eat them or know what to do with them is another matter. Audrey said she bought one last year but was baffled by it. She was thinking of using it as a small stool." Her sister laughed. "Might be the last Christmas we sell them with Brexit looming."

Ruby harrumphed. "Next year, it'll be suet pudding and other grimness."

Back to the 40s. I've never eaten a panettone. Maybe I shouldn't try, in case I love it and then I can never buy it again."

Victoria made a face, passing her more Italian cakes. "Anyway, back to Fran. You two were working together at the farm on Saturday, weren't you?"

Ruby nodded. "We were. It was a little rocky to begin with. She doesn't trust singers because..." Ruby paused. She'd made a promise not to say anything about Fran and Delilah. "She's had her heart broken before. I don't trust music execs because I've had my trust broken before. We had some hurdles to overcome. But once we did that, it was fine."

More than fine, but Ruby wasn't about to tell Victoria that. Her sister had a way of running her mouth off to their parents. When Ruby was still processing this weekend, the last thing she needed was Mum and Dad's curiosity piqued.

"Is she dating?" Victoria's tone was light, but Ruby knew the question behind it.

"She's not. She's single and happy with that."

A pause, some rustling, then Victoria passed Ruby some packs of Florentines. "Can you put them at the front? I've got some tinsel to pack around it all, too."

Ruby held the display with one hand and arranged the festive treats.

"She's gay, though? I mean, she didn't come out and say it, but I got the impression she was."

"The impression?"

"Yes," Victoria replied. "Just something about her. Plus, she was wearing shoes with thick soles."

This was new. "I don't wear shoes with thick soles."

Victoria waved her hand. "Yes, but you're a musician. You wear all manner of weird and wonderful things and nobody bats an eyelid. Fran, on the other hand."

"Looked like a hipster? Thick-soled shoes are in."

“Not in Mistletoe,” Victoria replied.

“Last time I looked, our little town was not the height of fashion. Or did I miss something? Is Milan planning to forego its slot on the European fashion circuit and base it here instead?”

“It would be a great plan for getting customers to the village year-round.”

Ruby snarked an eyebrow. “If you’re asking is she gay, the answer is yes. At least, her last relationship was with a woman.”

Victoria gave Ruby a wide smile. “You see, I can still pick them. I may be boring and married to a man, but I’m still up on the game.”

“So long as you’re not on the game.”

Victoria slapped her leg.

Ruby grabbed the top of the step-ladder, then steadied herself. “Ow! You really need to treat your unpaid help a little better.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, back to you. Fran is gay, queer, whatever. She likes the ladies. You are queer and also like the ladies. So perhaps there’s something there?”

“Just because we’re queer does not mean we will automatically fall into each other’s vaginas. It’s not how it works, Vicky. I thought we had this discussion when I came out ten years ago.” Ruby had purposely used the shortened version of her sister’s name, knowing she hated it. It was only ever Victoria. Never shortened.

“Less of the Vicky, thank you.” Victoria scowled as she passed up some green tinsel, along with some foam Santas and reindeers, instructing Ruby to hang them from the chains. “You know what I mean. You said yourself you got on. Didn’t you?”

Ruby smiled. In the end, they had. Even had a laugh together. They’d fallen in snow. Ruby had clutched Fran’s hand at the bar.

Her face fell. She’d put that to the back of her mind. But now, standing on the ladder in Mistletoe Stores’ shop window, her heartbeat quickened. It was almost like she was next to Fran again, her leg pressing against hers,

their hands joined. Ruby couldn't say why she'd grabbed Fran's hand. In the moment, it had felt like the right thing to do. To support her. Londoners had to stick together in the face of country folk who didn't understand their world.

And yet. There had been something more to it, hadn't there? Something Ruby had seen in Fran's eyes when she'd landed on her in the snow. Something Ruby had felt in her heart when she had to say goodbye to Fran last night.

Ruby missed Fran. Despite their initial differences, they had a lot in common: a love of music, family, London, Mistletoe, laughing. Ruby missed their chat. Their connection. Fran's smile.

Was she seriously thinking about the smile of a music exec? She needed her head examined.

However, as the image of Fran's radiant smile filled her head, Ruby wobbled. Her body shook. Then she was falling sideways, dropping through the air, landing squarely on a box of Florentines which now might have to be marketed as 'broken but edible'.

"Ruby!" Victoria's voice scratched the air as she smothered Ruby, pushing her sister's hair back from her face.

Ruby winced. Her knee throbbed. Her hand was grazed. Her shoulder was hot. But she was okay. She sat up, rubbing her shoulder with her other hand.

"What the fuck? You never fall. Did you black out? Should we call a doctor?"

Ruby shook her head. "I'm fine. I just zoned out for a moment, then I was on the ground." She staggered upright, a blush rushing to her cheeks. She wanted to get out of there as quick as she could. She didn't want an inquisition from her sister.

"Are you sure? You don't feel light-headed?"

Ruby shook her head, brushing herself down. She glanced at the Florentines. "Sorry about those."

Victoria shook her head. “Eric will be thrilled. He loves them. Now he can have the three squashed boxes all to himself.” She put a hand on Ruby’s shoulder. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Ruby stepped back onto the ladder. There was nothing medically wrong with her. She wasn’t going to tell her sister she’d zoned out thinking about Fran, the very person she’d just told her she wasn’t interested in. The best way to do that was to finish her display and get back to the farm.

CHAPTER 13



Fran twisted in her office chair and stared at Damian. His mouth was full of Double Decker, and he was trying to get her to place a bet on whether it was going to be a white Christmas, as well as the coveted Christmas number one.

“The forecasters are predicting a white Christmas,” Damian said, wiping the side of his mouth. “Stick 50 quid on, you could easily double your money.”

“Or lose it all.” Fran wasn’t all that keen on predicting the weather or the charts, especially when they had skin in the game with Fast Forward. The band had just released their Christmas single, and the next couple of weeks were the big push to get them as close as possible. Top five would be a result. Top three, even better. Number one was the dream. But the main thing was to get their song into the heads of all the teenagers out there, so they’d be streaming it throughout December and beyond.

“Let’s look at the contenders apart from Fast Forward. It could be any of Boy Wonder. They’ve all got their solo albums out, but who will fans pick? The ballady one, the wholesome one or the sexy one who can’t sing and is about as interesting as a cupboard?”

Fran tapped some keys, then pushed her chair back. “Cupboard Boy will walk it. But there’s also the big one from Julia Hewson. Fast Forward have

got a fighting chance if they can stand the heat. But you know what I think about betting. You might as well burn your money in a firepit. At least you'll get some heat."

When Fran thought about a firepit, she was immediately transported back to Mistletoe. To the weekend where she'd drunk hot chocolate, sung Christmas carols and watched as Ruby mouthed the words to them beside her. When she'd asked her why, Ruby said it was best not to sing when you were a singer in real life. People thought you were showing off. Same with karaoke. Ruby avoided it at all costs.

Her weekend with Ruby had been unexpected. Just like the pangs for Mistletoe and its inhabitants ever since she'd come back to London. Where else had Christmas trees dressed as countries or pop stars? Something had shifted inside her. Mistletoe was like a world she'd only believed existed in the movies. But it was real, and it had been living right under her nose all her life. Now, not going back there for Christmas was a decision that was gnawing at her from the inside out.

"Actually, if I was going to put money on a Christmas number one, it would be on that YouTube bloke. The impossibly skinny one with the floppy hair with that novelty song about wheelbarrows. He was having a right old time in the press room when I saw him the other day. He might make Cupboard Boy cry come December 25th."

Damian wagged a finger at her. "You might be onto something there. And if Skinny Boy can make Cupboard Boy cry, imagine what he can do to Fast Forward."

Fran grimaced. "Their song is so much better. They deserve it. But Christmas number ones are all about novelty, so Skinny Boy might win."

"You've got me feeling sorry for Cupboard Boy now."

Fran scoffed. "Don't feel too bad for him. He left Boy Wonder with £25 million and the status of sex symbol, so things could be worse."

Fran's phone began to ring on her desk. She strained her neck to check

the caller. Dad. She grabbed it.

“Hey, how are you? Did you miss me too much already? I’ve only been gone three days.”

There was a pause on the line. Too long a pause. “Listen it’s nothing to worry about, but Pop’s in hospital.”

Fran sat up straight, a shiver running down her spine. “What’s he doing there? What happened?”

Damian gave her a look, before wheeling his chair back to his desk.

“He had a fight with some ice while he was riding his bike, and the ice won. It’s not serious, but he’s broken his leg and bugged his shoulder a bit, so they’re keeping him in as he needs surgery and there’s a bit of a wait. I know you’re busy, so don’t worry. Just send him a text, I’m sure he’d appreciate it.”

Fran’s stomach dropped. What had she told him about being careful on country roads? However, now was not the time for lectures on road safety. The damage was done. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ll see if I can juggle my work schedule.”

“Okay, honey. But your job’s important. We both know that. See what you can do.”

Maybe her job was a little *too* important.

Fran hung up and turned to Damian. “If I pay for you to have a bet on Skinny boy beating Cupboard Boy, can we chat about this week and juggling schedules so I can go home and work from there? My dad’s in hospital.”

Damian’s face fell. “Shit. Is he okay?”

Fran nodded. “Broken leg, but he’ll survive.” She paused. “What’s it going to cost me?”

Damian cocked his head. “£25 each way on Skinny Boy and I’m all ears.”

CHAPTER 14



Fran drove her dad's car back into her parents' drive, and shut off the engine. Surgery had gone well, and Pop had been kept in for observation overnight. He looked battered, too, his face a mass of red marks and cuts. She could tell Dad was just as shook up as Pop. It was often like that — the person left holding the fort was just as affected, sometimes more than the patient. She'd left Dad at a nearby pub tonight, as he'd managed to snag a room and wanted to stay close by. Fran had promised to drive back to and bring them home tomorrow. It had been a stark reality check for her, too. A flush of doing-the-right-thing energy travelled through her.

At times over the past few years, Fran hadn't gone home as much as she should, and that was on her. However, her parents were getting older and they needed her. Could she work the next little while from their cottage? Maybe. Plus, her boss was being sympathetic and Damian was picking up the slack, so there was no need to hurry back at least until after the weekend. Four days away. Being here also meant she could hassle the garage about her car. Their answers so far had been vague and involved the words 'part from Denmark' and 'possibly after Christmas or the New Year'. She knew things worked on a different time frame in the country, but three or four weeks? Fran made a note in her phone to get on their case.

She got out of the car, admiring her parents' mature front garden again,

with its holly bush and real-life Christmas tree. She stopped beside the latter and breathed in the pines. Was there a better smell in the world? The fir tree had a fresh layer of snow on it again. Did it always snow like this in Mistletoe?

This time, however, Fran was prepared for the weather. When she'd got back to London, she'd gone shopping and bought a bright yellow winter coat that came past her knees, along with new gloves, thermal-lined boots and a hat. She'd also bought some more colourful clothing after Ruby's comments. A baby-blue shirt. A mustard top. Dusty-pink trousers. Never let it be said Fran Bell was averse to change. She was far more flexible than most people gave her credit for.

She let herself into Hollybush Cottage, then shivered. It was freezing. She took off her gloves and touched a radiator. Stone cold. Fran prodded the heating control until she heard the boiler fire up. Then she grabbed her suitcase and pulled it up the stairs and into her new room. Immediately, there was that view again, and she was at peace. What was it about this place?

As the train had unzipped the surrounding fields on the way down, Fran had simply sat and watched, transfixed. Fran didn't do that. She was always on. If she was travelling somewhere, she never *just* travelled. She was either answering email, listening to a new artist or reading a business book. But on the way to Mistletoe, she'd just sat, soaking in the surroundings.

Fran opened her suitcase, stashed a few items in her old chest of drawers. Not everything had made it in the move, as her parents had downsized. Fran had been sad to see the back of her dressing table and mirror, along with a bookcase from her old room. But really, she didn't miss them. Her dads were here. Fields were here. Christmas was here. A warm, fuzzy feeling ran through her. She wasn't in London, and already she could breathe better.

What the hell was that?

It felt dangerously close to happiness.

Fran flicked away her thoughts as she lifted her laptop and pressed the on

button. She searched for her parents' wifi, and then tried to connect.

No dice. Immediately, her muscles tightened.

She frowned at the screen. *Come on.* She had work to do tonight. It was the first week of December and she had a stack of emails to answer and meetings to virtually attend over the next few days.

She fiddled with the settings, turned her laptop on and off again, which was normally the magic bullet. Still no go.

Fran sighed, glancing out her window. She checked her watch. Just gone 7pm. The farm would still be open. Perhaps she could work down there for a couple of hours? She could buy a coffee and a sandwich for their trouble.

Plus, she'd get to see Ruby, who'd been pressing on her mind for the whole day. Just to say hi. Let Ruby know she was back. Nothing more.

Making the decision and not second-guessing herself, Fran stamped down the grey carpeted staircase and wrapped up again.

Minutes later she walked down the farm drive, her laptop bag hanging from her thermal-gloved fingers. The farmhouse lights were off, but the main courtyard lights were blazing. It was Thursday, December 6th. Not long until Christmas. The courtyard was busy and the car park was full, with customers carrying trees to their cars. Fran popped her head into the cafe and the shop. They were both bustling, but no Ruby. She walked through to the Christmas tree yard.

Ruby was serving a customer. Her long muddy hair was tied up today, put under a thick Mistletoe Farm beanie, replete with mistletoe knitted into the design. She was wearing blue jeans, scuffed Doc Marten boots and a coat that looked like it had its own central heating system. Standing in a barn open to the elements all day long, Ruby needed it.

Fran arrived at her till just as Ruby finished serving the customer.

"It's a Noble Fir, so non-drop. Pots are in the shop on the way out, as are stands, wreaths and mistletoe. Don't forget the mistletoe. Who doesn't like a kiss at Christmas?"

The couple chuckled at Ruby's joke, and thanked her.

Ruby ripped the receipt from the credit card machine. When she looked up, her smile grew wider as she clocked Fran.

Ruby said goodbye to her customers before addressing her. "If it isn't the Londoner returned. I guess you're back to see your dads don't break any more bones."

"That's the idea, but boys will be boys. Even when they're in their mid-60s."

"My dad's the same. Although I fell off a ladder the other day, so there's an epidemic of clutz around." Ruby's cheeks coloured red.

Fran stepped forward. "Are you okay?"

Ruby shrugged, snagging her gaze. "I'm fine."

Fran saw Ruby's lips moving, and tried not to stare. She failed. Suddenly, she'd forgotten why she was there and what she was meant to be doing. Ruby had started to have a detrimental effect on her ability to go about her daily life.

"I liked your joke about kissing." Had that really just jumped out of Fran's mouth? Apparently, it had.

Ruby blushed a little more, sticking her hands in her pockets. "It's Mistletoe. Gotta give the punters what they want, right?" She paused, looking Fran up and down. "Do I spy a new, more Mistletoe-appropriate coat? And a yellow one at that?"

Fran did a twirl. "You do. The city girl splashed some new colour into her wardrobe. Somebody told me colour affects your mood, so I thought I'd buy a coat of my favourite colour." She grinned. "I bought some new clothes, too." Fran patted her head. "Do you like my new hat and gloves?"

Ruby gave an approving nod. "Very much."

"Plus, I bought some fleece-lined boots. I am ready for the season. No more freezing my tits off."

"Tits are important, so it's a good move." Ruby cleared her throat, then

shifted her gaze to the floor. “How long are you staying?”

“At least until Sunday. Which is why I’m here. My dad’s wife is down. Is yours still working?”

Ruby nodded. “It is.” She fished in her pocket for her keys. “You want to take these and work at the kitchen table? Nobody’s in the house, we’re all working.”

Fran shook her head. “No, that would be weird. I thought I could just sit in the cafe and work there?”

“Be my guest. Joyce is working tonight with Ben. Just tell them not to disturb you.”

“Thank you. Hopefully tomorrow it’ll work again. They said it was a known fault when I messaged them.”

Ruby wrinkled her nose.

Fran fought back the urge to tell her she looked cute when she did that.

Be cool.

“If it’s not working tomorrow, you could use The Bar. It’s free all day long, and the shop has good wifi. I’m sure Victoria wouldn’t mind. That way, you get your own office of sorts.”

“That would be a lifesaver if it’s still down.”

“Leave it with me and I’ll ask.”

“Thank you,” Fran said. “By the way, I love your hat. Very on-brand.”

“That’s me. I’m not a singer while I’m here. Just a Christmas-tree seller.”

More customers approached Ruby.

“I don’t think you’re ‘just’ anything.” Fran pulled her hat further down her forehead. “I’ll see you later.”

Ruby captured her gaze. “You will.”



FRAN WOKE up the next morning to a text from Ruby: ‘The Bar as your office

is go. Just go to the store. Victoria's expecting you.'

She grinned at her phone. Once she'd picked up Dad and Pop from the hospital and settled them back here, she could work there this afternoon. At least then, the time in Mistletoe wouldn't be such a bust. Although the plus point of having no wifi signal was that nobody could get hold of you.

Three hours later and after a lunch with her parents, Fran walked up Farm Lane, nodding at the Red Rum tree, then the Elvis tree, before reaching Mistletoe Stores. Dad and Pop had been so happy to see her this morning, it had made her heart smile. Bringing them home and making them a lunch of toasted tuna sandwiches (Pop's favourite) and strong coffee had made them wildly happy, too. If Fran was being honest, it had done the same for her. These daily pleasures of just sitting and having lunch with her parents was something she didn't do often. When she came home, it was often just for 24 hours at a weekend, and she was always rushing, meeting someone else or checking her phone. She couldn't do the latter here, and she didn't know anyone to meet. In Mistletoe, Fran slowed down.

Fran stood outside the store, admiring the window display. Panettone, Florentines, and those German gingerbread biscuits she loved. She hadn't expected that here. It was mixed in with more local biscuits, Christmas puddings and yule logs. Her mouth watered as she pushed open the door to the shop. She had to buy a panettone. It was one of her go-to Christmas treats.

"Hey Fran! How are you? How's your dad doing after his fall?"

Fran approached the counter and Victoria. She really did look nothing like her sister. "Doing well, thanks. Just brought him home this morning, so I've left them both on the sofa with a Christmas movie. They do love a festive film."

"Who doesn't?" Victoria motioned with her hand. "Come behind the counter. We have a secret door to the bar from here. I've put the heater on, and help yourself to a coffee from the machine. The cups are behind the bar."

Fran followed her through as Victoria hit the lights. The bar looked a lot bigger now it was empty of people. “I really do appreciate this, you’ve no idea. I’ll leave some money for the coffee. Also, I want to buy some panettone and Florentines while I’m here. I love your display, very festive.”

Victoria gave her a smile. “You’re welcome to use the space whenever. It’s just sitting there otherwise. Plus, you’re a local now. In Mistletoe, this is what we do.”

Fran was discovering that.

CHAPTER 15



*I*t was just after 8pm when Ruby arrived at The Bar. She'd been in the Christmas tree yard for 12 hours, and she needed a break. When she walked in, a rousing rendition of 'White Christmas' was underway, with Audrey, Gayle and Penny all in fine voice. They'd clearly been here since the place opened at six. What Ruby hadn't expected was Fran in the middle of them, dressed in her regulation black. She must have worked here all day, and then stayed. Fran was truly turning into a local. That thought made Ruby smile.

"Ruby!" Audrey was on her feet as the chorus kicked in, shouting. "Your new friend is proving herself an asset to the community. She knows all the words to 'White Christmas', along with many other songs. Apparently, she works in the music business, did you know?"

Ruby was pretty sure Audrey knew that already, but had forgotten. It wasn't unusual.

"I told her she has to help with your music." Yup, she was still shouting. "I mean, Fran's in London, you're in London. It could be a good match, right?" Audrey tapped the side of her nose with her index finger and gave Ruby an exaggerated wink.

Ruby walked to the bar, giving Fran a slight wave.

Fran waved back, also miming the words 'help me' to Ruby.

Ruby shook her head. Fran was going to have to get out of this one herself.

Five minutes later, Ruby pulled up a chair and joined the group.

“Is it a bad sign you’re in here when the farm is still open?” Gayle put both elbows on the table, her chin in her palms.

“It’s been pretty busy today, so the lull isn’t unwelcome. Plus, there are still a bunch of staff working, so things are okay.” Ruby glanced at Fran. “Did you get your work done?”

Fran nodded. “I did. I’ve been trying to go home since six, but everyone keeps telling me I have to stay. Particularly since Victoria put the Christmas hits on, and the singing commenced. Any tips on making a great escape? I’ve messaged my dads, but they’ve ordered Thai food and told me I could stay as long as I want.”

“The Bar can do that to you,” Ruby replied. “It can suck you in like a vortex, and in the end, you’re not quite sure what day it is or what your last name is. How many times have you woken up asleep on the sofa over there, Audrey?”

Audrey waved her hand. “Who’s counting?” She gave Ruby a grin. “More than you, but less than Norman?”

“Which is pretty bad, considering you live four doors down.”

“I still look good on it, don’t I?” Audrey gave Ruby her side profile. “Unlike Norman over there, who’s got a face like a dropped pie. Plus, it’s your sister’s fault. She shouldn’t have such comfy sofas, should she?”

All of a sudden, the music was turned up.

Ruby turned her head.

Victoria had a grin on her face. “Come on, little sis.”

Ruby shook her head. “Uh-uh. You know my thoughts about karaoke.”

“This isn’t karaoke! This is you singing in your sister’s bar with a tiny audience of,” Victoria glanced around the bar. “Seven people. Eight if you count Norman, but he’s asleep in the corner. Plus, Fran’s never heard you

sing this song.” Victoria waved her hands. “Sing up! I’m going to put it back to the start.” She pointed. “Pick up Gayle’s empty bottle of Peroni: instant makeshift microphone.”

Gayle passed the bottle to Ruby.

Ruby took it, every inch of her tight as she took a breath. But maybe she should lighten up. Her sister was right. This wasn’t karaoke. It was almost like singing at home. She did that all the time. Ruby pushed the negative thoughts from her mind and took a breath, before starting to sing along with the Wham! Classic, ‘Last Christmas’. As she hit the first chorus, the whole table joined in, Audrey waving her hands in the air, getting the words wrong just like every year.

But what wasn’t like every year was Fran’s eyes on her.

Ruby moved through the chorus and the second verse like hot knife in butter, wrapping her mouth around every lyric. This was the song of her childhood, the song that she and Victoria had sung almost since birth. George Michael was one of their mum’s favourite singers. No Christmas was complete without this song on repeat.

As they hit the final chorus, Ruby turned her head to Victoria. She was knelt on a bar stool, arms in the air, eyes tight shut.

Ruby spun around and clocked the table, blissed-out looks on their faces, belting out the song like they’d written it themselves. Ruby’s gaze stopped moving when she got to Fran.

She was still watching Ruby, a soft smile on her face, head tilted to the side, her blond hair a little messy from her hat.

Fran wasn’t singing.

She simply stared at Ruby.

A fire heated inside Ruby and rushed up her body, from the inside out. She gathered up all her breath to finish strong. She held Fran’s gaze as she hit the final note.

When the song finished, everyone clapped, including Fran.

Ruby dropped Fran's gaze, then scanned the room. It was as if she'd been in a daze. She cleared her throat and painted on a smile.

A searing whistle broke the applause.

Ruby turned. Norman was awake, rubbing his eyes. "I can't think of a much better way to be woken up than with Ruby's angelic voice," he said. "Pint of bitter, when you're ready, Victoria."

"You old sweet-talker, Norman." Ruby swept her gaze back to the table, being sure to avoid Fran.

Gayle patted her on the back. "You're destined for big things. I've always said so."

Ruby's smile tightened. She heard the same thing every year. "Thanks, Gayle."

"I told Ruby the same when I first saw her earlier this year," Fran added, getting nods from the crowd. "But while you were singing, I had an idea." Fran caught Ruby's gaze. "And before you say no, hear me out. Have you ever thought of putting on a gig at the farm to get people to visit and buy a tree, or better yet, order one for next year?"

Panic ran riot inside Ruby. "I told you, I don't do bigger gigs. I like more intimate stuff."

"But surely Mistletoe is the exception?" Fran's face was a question mark. "It's your home town. *Everybody* wants you to do well. It would be the equivalent of singing to an audience of super-fans. You've just sung to us, and you told me you didn't do that. Why not break all the rules this year? Feel the fear and do it anyway. Who knows what might happen?" Fran's words held a challenge.

Ruby's heart sped up. It wasn't that she didn't *want* to. It was just that, it wasn't what she *did*. But maybe it *could* be what she did? After all, she dictated her own career.

"Think about it," Fran continued, her hands animated. "You could do a big festive gig. Invite local crafts people to exhibit their wares. You could sell

all the farm stuff.”

Victoria snapped her fingers at the bar, making Ruby twist around.

“She’s got a good point. You’ve always said you’d do a gig here, but you never have. The stage is already set up. The villagers would love it, as would everyone else. We could put on a bar and do food, too.”

Ruby frowned. “Christmas is nearly here.” She checked the calendar on her phone. “Plus, we couldn’t do the weekend before Christmas, it’s too close. Which means it would have to be next Saturday. A week tomorrow.” But she’d done quicker gigs in London. Could she do it here, too, without her infrastructure around her?

“Would the musicians who play with you make the trip the weekend before Christmas?”

Ruby rocked her head from side to side. “Not sure. If they were free, yes. But I know a few people around here who could fill in if necessary. Eric for one, right?”

Victoria nodded. “He could be your guitarist, no problem.”

Ruby’s body fizzed with excitement and fear. She’d always harboured a secret dream of doing a gig in Mistletoe. But what if nobody came? What if everyone was polite, but they hated her music? She wasn’t worried about flying beer bottles. In Mistletoe, she was worried about the people she loved the most loving her back. But also, of trying something new. What if she failed? Or what if she succeeded?

Ruby stared right at her. Fran was pushing her out of her comfort zone and she had no qualms about doing it. Fran made Ruby nervous. She also made her think. On top of that, she was giving Ruby a look that made her heart thump.

“You could even play Ikea at their own game. Offer people something free if they place next year’s order now. A free mulled wine or sprig of mistletoe. Free kiss from Audrey or Norman.” Fran grinned. “I could help with the marketing.”

Audrey beamed. "I'm in! So long as I don't have to kiss Norman."

Ruby ignored Audrey, still staring at Fran. "I thought you were going back to London?"

Fran shrugged. "I am. But I'd come back for this. Plus, I could maybe do a little more work from here if necessary. Things have changed in the past few days now my dads need a bit of help. Also, I'm a local now, aren't I? I'm invested in whatever happens here. I have experience of digital marketing. You might as well put me to good use."

Fran was planning on sticking around?

"What do you think, Rubytubes? Can we turn this around in a week?"

"We did far more than this back in the war, Ruby!" Audrey told her.

"You're 72 years old, Audrey," Norman piped up, as Victoria delivered his pint to his corner table. "You weren't even born in the war, so stop trying to tell us you were."

"I've read books!" Audrey's tone was incredulous.

Ruby rubbed the back of her neck. "When you're finished debating history, let's get back to the matter at hand. Let's say it's a tentative yes. The community pulled together for the festival. We can leave the trees up and do this, too. Anything for Mistletoe Farm. But you have to promise to cheer when I'm on stage, okay?" Ruby's gaze travelled around the table.

"Of course we will!" Gayle replied.

"Try to stop us!" Penny said.

"Cheer?" Audrey added. "We'll do more than that. We'll raise the bloody barn roof off!"

Ruby glanced at Fran, who was giving her a delicious smile.

Ruby's stomach rolled. She might have just dropped herself in it big time, but Fran's smile was worth it.

CHAPTER 16



Ruby waved Norman off, then zipped up her jacket against the cold.

It was the third different jacket Fran had seen her wear. But at least Fran had one to rival it now.

Ruby glanced at Fran's loaded bag as they left the bar, the last to leave. "You bought some panettone. I was just wondering who did in Mistletoe. But Victoria says it's a hit in the shop."

"I love the plain one, where you shake the icing sugar over it. It's delicious. Not so keen on the one with the candied fruit in it. A little like Christmas pudding and Christmas cake, I give that a swerve."

Ruby pulled the door of The Bar shut, turned the key and gave it to Fran. "You don't like Christmas pudding? Perhaps we can't be friends anymore."

"More for you to have, look at it that way."

Ruby smiled. "Good point."

Fran put the key in her bag, and they fell into stride, walking away from the shop.

"How's your Dad doing?" Ruby asked.

"My Pop," Fran replied. "Sorry, I don't expect you to know that, but I call them Dad and Pop. It's been that way forever."

Ruby shook her head to tell her it was no problem. "How's your Pop doing?"

“He’s okay, being brave, but I can tell being in plaster is messing with his village dreams. I’m spending the day with them tomorrow as I’ve been busy working. It’s Saturday, so I promised. I’m going to cook them dinner, too.”

“Daring after what you told me.”

“It’s my Malaysian curry. Nothing too fancy. I’m thinking a bottle of wine, some hopefully edible food, and then maybe watching Elf to get us in the festive mood.”

“Sounds great, what time do you want me over?”

“Can I take a rain check?”

Ruby nodded. “A Malaysian curry rain check is my very favourite kind.” She paused. “But that’s good you’ve come around to the dark side and are taking some time to be with your family. You came back, too, after saying you couldn’t. I’m impressed. You dropped everything when they needed you. You didn’t put your job first. You’re fooling me into thinking you have a heart.” Ruby bumped Fran’s hip when she said that.

Warmth thundered through Fran, which was bonkers as it was hovering around zero. Being around Ruby did something to her. “I do have a heart, it turns out. It was buried, but I found it.” Fran gave Ruby a grin. “But you’re right. It’s good I came home, especially as I have The Bar to work from. Thanks again for coming to my rescue with that.” Fran shook her head. “Can you imagine that ever happening in London? You just gave me the keys to a bar. I might go in there tomorrow and drink the place dry. But you trust me.”

Ruby shrugged. “We know where you live, so if you do go mad on the Aperol, we can hunt you down and force-feed you Christmas pudding.”

Fran’s laughter shook the air. “The very worst kind of punishment.” She took a deep breath before she continued. The night was cold, and the air was sharp as it made it to her lungs. Fran pulled her hat down further over her ears, grateful again for her new outdoor gear.

“I don’t know what it is about this place, but it’s giving me something I never even knew I needed. Community. Laughter. Relaxation. Who would

have thought I would do such great work in a bar in Suffolk? But today I was focused, and I got loads done. And then the village arrived and we had a drink and sing-song. It was weird, but kinda lovely.”

Ruby smiled at her, then put a hand on Fran’s arm.

Fran looked up, and their gazes connected.

Ruby froze, then dropped their connection.

There was a brief moment where both of them stalled, looking at each other.

Then Fran carried on walking, clearing her throat, her brain stuck on repeat.

You like her. Even though she’s a singer.

You like her. Even though she’s a singer.

You like her. Even though she’s a singer.

That was the thought that was flashing on and off in her brain, like a faulty neon sign.

She couldn’t *like* Ruby. She didn’t need another singer in her life. She had enough of them at work.

Ruby wasn’t like the others though, was she? She wasn’t chasing fame. She wasn’t trying to make up for all the love she never got in her childhood. Ruby came from a loving family. She could sing. She wanted to do it for the art itself. It wasn’t about accolades or sales for her. Ruby was different to every other singer Fran had ever encountered.

“You’re not the first person to ask what it is about this place. Mistletoe holds magical qualities. But it’s not the place that makes it. It’s the people. Even Audrey.” Ruby’s tone held a smile.

“Especially Audrey,” Fran laughed. “Also, I wanted to ask: are you okay with the gig idea? I really do think your home town would love it.” She stopped walking. “But I also know I was probably over-stepping the mark when I mentioned it. It’s a speciality of mine.” She waited for the answer.

Ruby studied her, blew out a deep breath and shook her head. “Strangely,

I am okay with it. Mistletoe hasn't seen me perform, and this is the perfect way to do it. I won't lie, you are tipping me out of my comfort zone. But if it helps the farm, I'm okay with it. Plus, I didn't come up with it. You did. It makes me look like less of a diva that way."

Now it was Fran's turn to shake her head. "You're the least diva-ish singer I know."

Ruby's gaze snagged hers in the darkness. "I think there's a compliment buried in there somewhere."

Fran nodded. "You're the opposite of most singers. It's not all about you."

"Sounds like you really got burned with Delilah."

Fran shrugged. "It's not just her. I've met many singers through my work, remember?" She paused. "Most of them, I wouldn't want to spend much time with. But you're different." Fran hoped Ruby couldn't hear her heartbeat. Fran could feel it *everywhere*. "Anyway, I'm glad you're not angry." Fran carried on walking, every muscle clenched, breathing out.

Ruby shook her head. "Some of what you said was true. I should have played to a bigger audience by now, and I'm not going to get a more receptive crowd than Mistletoe. Nobody's going to pelt me."

"Only with love," Fran replied.

Ruby's breath caught at that, and she stared at Fran. "Where did you come from?" Ruby shook her head and they carried on walking, past two Christmas trees, and then Ruby repeated her actions of the other night. She took Fran's hand in hers and tugged her across the road and down a tiny lane. "I've got something to show you."

Adrenaline surged through Fran at their contact. "Where are we going?" She could hardly see a thing because the lane was narrow and covered by thick hedges on both sides. "Should I trust you?" Fran smiled as she spoke.

Ahead of her, Ruby chuckled. "I think you know the answer to that. Never trust a singer." More throaty laughter.

Okay, Fran deserved that.

“We’re nearly there.” Ruby gave Fran a final tug, and they stopped at a clearing in the shrubbery. In four steps, Ruby made it to a wooden gate set back on the right. It was the width of two cars, the wooden slats reaching chest-height. She beckoned Fran over, then placed her own arms on top of the gate.

Fran did the same. She gazed out across the white field into the inky night.

“This,” Ruby said, “is where I come when I need to think. To get peace and quiet. Just far enough off the beaten track, where nobody I know is going to come and ask me how I am or can I get some milk.” She put a finger in the air. “Can you hear that?”

Fran cocked her head. “What?”

“The sound of silence. It’s the same whenever I come here, day or night. You can’t see its majesty fully at night, but this is the perfect spot to watch the sun rise and set, too. I’ve solved many of my problems leaning on this fence.”

Fran breathed in a lungful of cold, sharp air. It was still new enough to be a thrill. She glanced left at Ruby, staring straight ahead. “Is this where you bring women to impress them?” Fran winced. It wasn’t what she’d wanted to say.

Ruby turned her head, her features blank. “I’ve never brought anyone else to this place,” Ruby whispered. “I’ve never brought anybody back to Mistletoe, full stop. It’s too special. Too personal. But you live here now, so you’re starting to understand.”

Fran held Ruby’s gaze, tasting fear on her tongue. “I’m honoured to be the first.” Fran’s heart began to sprint. There was something in Ruby’s stare that was different to before, when they’d been on the road. Now they were hidden from view, Ruby had changed. Her guard was down. Now it was just Ruby, Fran, and a wide open space.

A smile danced around the corner of Ruby's lips as she turned her gaze back to the field. "Who knows, you might need this place to escape to as well. Especially if you're staying a little longer now your dads aren't 100 per cent." She turned back. "You and me, we're different to everyone else around here."

"We don't live here full-time."

Ruby nodded. "We get both sides of the story. Country life and London life. But it's more than that. I never would have said it when I first met you, but you're not like anyone else I've ever met. You know what you want. You surprise me every time I meet you." Ruby frowned, then turned away. "You know what, ignore me. I'm talking nonsense probably."

Something wet landed on Fran's face. She looked up to the sky, which was brighter than before, despite it being late. She knew why now. It was starting to snow. She glanced over at Ruby. "It's snowing."

Ruby stuck out her tongue. "I can see." She moved along the gate until she was stood right next to Fran, their bodies almost touching. "We should huddle together. For warmth. Mistletoe rules."

"I don't want to go against those."

Ruby's body heat crackled next to Fran. Something kicked in her chest. This was dangerous. However, Fran wasn't moving. The Christmas card they were living in had just become animated. A little like her thoughts.

"How am I surprising you?" Fran couldn't let that comment slide.

"You're making an effort with everyone. You came back. You're *fitting in*. You're not who I thought you were." Ruby turned her head.

Fran squinted in the flakes. "Not such a city slicker?"

Ruby didn't flinch as she replied. "You're infinitely better."

Fran's heart rippled.

Ruby was still staring, her cheeks flushed, her gaze intense.

The wind swirled a little more, sending snowflakes into their faces.

Both Ruby and Fran leaned over, shaking their heads. They stood up at

the same time, turning to each other.

Fran gulped, staring into Ruby's greener than green eyes.

Ruby stepped into Fran's space.

Desire slid down Fran's body. They hadn't kissed, but it felt like they had. Fran was so *aware* of Ruby. She was watching Fran's every breath.

"I could never go out with someone who didn't get Mistletoe, or family."

Fran shook her head. "Me neither."

Ruby got closer still. "I want you to know also, this is not me at all." Her intense gaze was drilling into Fran's soul. "I don't usually act on my feelings. But you're making me act differently."

She was so close, Fran could feel her breath. "I am?"

"First the concert. And now..." Ruby left the sentence hanging as she grasped Fran's gloved hands and kissed them, keeping Fran fixed with her dark gaze.

When Ruby leaned in further, Fran forgot it was snowing.

Forgot it was freezing.

Forgot they were standing on a path, bathed in moonlight.

When Ruby's lips connected with hers, Fran forgot *everything*.

Ruby's lips were glorious. They tasted of hope, of freedom, of *her*. More than that, they fitted Fran's as if they'd been made to measure. No alterations required. As their kiss gained momentum, a glitter-bomb of happiness steamrollered Fran's heart.

Then Ruby's fingers were on Fran, too. Ruby pulled her close, then cupped her face. Ruby was strong and gentle, the perfect package. As the snow continued to fall, the tension spiked, dancing all over Fran's skin. Fran's kisses grew hungrier. Her lips danced across Ruby's. She couldn't get enough.

If you'd asked her this morning if she should get involved with another singer and kiss her in a snowstorm, she'd have told you it sounded like a Delilah song. Or perhaps one Ruby might sing in the future. If this was a

mistake, Fran would happily live with the consequences.

Since Delilah left, Fran had been sad, then wary. Since she'd arrived in Mistletoe, excitement had returned to her life. Fran was tired of feeling like she was always running to catch up. In Mistletoe, she just was. Right now, that involved kissing Ruby like her life depended on it.

Fran moaned as Ruby slipped her tongue into her mouth.

Desire slid down her.

The snow storm picked up, now matching the beat of her heart as it swirled and dived around them. Fran was in no hurry for anything to change anytime soon. Far from needing to get back to London, now the only thing in her mind was how to extend her stay. To be close to Ruby. To her mouth. To her divine kisses. Plus, whatever came after that.

After a few long moments, Ruby broke the kiss. There was a white heat in Ruby's stare that thrilled Fran.

Cold air swirled around her. Snow hit her face.

However, it didn't feel like it had a few minutes ago. Now, she was impervious to its chill. Plus, the heat of Ruby's breath warmed her cheeks, along with the languid smile painted on her face.

"You taste delicious." Ruby licked her lips.

Fran was just about to comment when Ruby kissed her again, this time with more force, more passion.

Ruby wrapped her arms around Fran, pulled her close. It was all Fran could do not to fall backwards in her arms, in the manner of a Hollywood movie.

What the hell was Ruby doing to her? They should have done this sooner.

Had Fran been thinking about kissing Ruby when she saw her on stage the first time? No.

When they broke down? No.

When they fell in the snow? Maybe.

In The Bar? Perhaps.

Eventually, Ruby broke away. This time, her smile was so broad, Fran thought it might break her face.

“You look pleased with yourself.” It wasn’t her best line.

Ruby grinned a little more. “I am. I wasn’t sure we were going to kiss, but I’m glad we did.”

Fran nodded. “Me, too. I could kiss you all night.”

“I’ll hold you to that one day.” She glanced upwards. “But right now, as much as your kisses were divine, you think we can get out of this snow?”

Fran looked into Ruby’s gorgeous eyes and nodded. “Walk me home?”

Ruby leaned in and kissed her lips again. Her touch was feather-light, but its effect was anything but.

Fran shivered once more, as the reverberation landed in her core. “You’re going to be trouble, aren’t you?” She put a hand on Ruby’s cheek as their gazes connected.

Ruby supplied a smouldering look. “I guarantee it.”

CHAPTER 17



Fran woke up the following morning before her alarm went off. Despite her thick, cream curtains, she could still sense the winter wonderland beyond, its power strong. When she got up and pulled back the curtains, she wasn't wrong. A fresh duvet of snow had fallen overnight, now at least 20-tog. If their old dog, Rhubarb, was still alive, she'd have run outside and disappeared. In Mistletoe, every December day was served chilled. However, red-hot nights could also be ordered, as Fran had experienced last night.

That kiss was still alive in her blood stream, in all her senses. Perhaps because it had been so unexpected.

Q4 was for work, for the Christmas sales surge. Everyone knew that.

It wasn't for kissing folk singers on moonlit lanes.

At least, it hadn't been until Ruby O'Connell came along.

By the time they left the bar together last night, there had been something inevitable about the evening. Something film-worthy.

When Fran licked her lips, she could taste Ruby's lips all over again. Her heart surged in her chest.

She'd kissed Ruby.

It was going to be at the forefront of her mind for the rest of the day.

Fran turned to grab her phone. Today was Saturday. If she wanted to get back to London next week, she needed to book a train. Only, she didn't want

to, did she? Maybe she could buy a day or two working from here. With a sick parent, she had the perfect excuse. Today was about them spending time as a family. Something she should have put to the top of her list a long time ago.

Fran scrolled through her phone to get the ball rolling with Damian: it was him her absence affected the most. If he could cover a couple of meetings and gigs, she could phone in to the rest. So long as Fast Forward stuck to their task and performed with no hiccups. But that would also depend on the outside world playing nicely, too.

Fran composed an email to Damian, then clicked send.

It bounced straight back. Mistletoe reception strikes again. Fran sucked through her teeth. She'd have to call him later.

She pulled on some jeans and a sweatshirt with a reindeer on it — a present from her parents — then strolled downstairs. When she arrived, she found Pop sitting at the round wooden table in the country-style kitchen, reading a cookery magazine. His plastered leg rested on the tiled floor, his crutches within easy reach. Dad was at the hob making pancakes.

When he heard her, Dad turned. “Good to see your ability to sniff a pancake at 100 paces hasn’t changed.”

Fran grinned. “It’s my superpower, you know that.” She kissed both her parents good morning, then flicked on the kettle, grabbing a mug and teabag from the cannister on the side. As the water heated, she glanced out the window, her breath still taken by the winter wonderland scene beyond.

“Is this cheering you up?” She motioned out the window as she addressed Pop.

He nodded. “I know I wasn’t in hospital for long, but the view was rubbish. This is much better.”

“It’s cracking,” Fran replied. “I was just thinking about Rhubarb. How she’d have run outside in this snow and disappeared.”

“Then reappeared, her ears like angel’s wings,” Dad added, laughing.

“She loved the snow, didn’t she?” He held up the mixture he’d made in his plastic jug, just as he had her entire life. “I take it you want pancakes?”

“Have I ever been known to turn down a pancake?”

“Not in living memory.”

“Well, then,” Fran replied. “Also, I’m thinking about staying on a bit longer this week. I want to make sure you’re both okay. No more arguments with patches of ice or snow.”

“I thought you had loads of work on?” Pop put down his magazine.

Fran nodded. “I do, but I can work from here for a bit.”

Pop sat back, moving his leg. “Does that mean you’re staying for Christmas? Because that would be really terrific.”

The kettle boiled and Fran made her tea, skilfully avoiding the question. “Do either of you need a new one?”

Pop passed her his mug and she made it.

“We’re still waiting for an answer, Francesca Jane.”

Her full name. Now she was in trouble. “I’m not sure, so don’t get your hopes up. I do have a lot of work on, and I was doubtful I’d be able to do it seeing as the wifi here is terrible. However, now I have The Bar to work in, it could make a difference. I need to check with my colleagues, too. I kinda volunteered to help Ruby do a gig at the farm next weekend, too.”

“You seem to be getting on well after a wobbly start? I’m glad. It seemed a waste that you knew each other, but were keeping your distance.”

“It was a bit weird at first, but things have improved.” Fran sat next to Pop and sipped her tea. Was she blushing? She certainly felt like she was.

“She’s doing a gig next weekend? That’s a lot to organise in such a short period of time. Plus, won’t most people have bought their trees already, the week before Christmas?”

“Most will, some won’t. But it’s about getting people in to see what the farm has to offer. Also, they can pre-order next year’s tree, too.”

Dad put the pancakes on the table, and Fran grabbed the maple syrup

from the cupboard, before tucking in. She smiled as she ate. Pancakes were Dad's speciality, the taste of her childhood.

"Whatever's keeping you here — my fall or Ruby's gig — it makes us happy," Pop said. "We want to see you more. I'm really glad you're getting on with the locals and pitching in. Especially when my involvement in anything this year might be curtailed because of my stupid leg."

Fran smiled at him. "I'll be your representative in the field. I emailed my colleague this morning to see if he could cover some of my meetings. Plus, I've got one of our designers working on some social media stuff for the gig. He does this sort of stuff every day professionally, so it makes sense to ask him. What would take him half an hour might take a day to explain to someone else." She was justifying this too much, wasn't she?

Sure enough, Dad raised his eyebrow at Pop. In turn, Pop squirted maple syrup onto his pancakes, then gave Fran an interested stare.

"Wow, you really are on-board. I'm impressed. You said you had too much work on in London. That doesn't normally shift. Once your mind's made up, there's no shifting Francesca Bell. You're stubborn. You get that from your father." Pop inclined his head towards Dad.

"I am not stubborn!" Dad said.

Both Pop and Fran burst out laughing.

"You're stubborn, Dad, and so am I. Stop being so stubborn and just accept it." Fran had missed this. She glanced out the window, thinking back to last night. Her temperature rose. Was Mistletoe magic real? Maybe it was.

"Is this sudden change of heart and wanting to help out your local community anything to do with Ruby? Is there anything you're not telling us?" Pop couldn't crinkle his forehead anymore if he tried.

Fran shook her head. "No."

But her body betrayed her, with blood rushing to her cheeks.

Her dads had always been able to read her like a book. It was one of their very annoying traits they had. They were both studying her like she was a

prize artwork in a gallery they both loved.

“Nothing at all? Because we are your parents. If you are lusting after another girl, we might be able to give you some wisdom.”

“I’m not lusting after another girl. Sometimes you two being gay is so annoying. These are not the conversations children normally have with their parents.” She sounded like she was 14 again. Trying to deny it for real the first time around. She’d tried so hard to be straight and to fit in at school. At seventeen, she gave in and told her dads what they already knew.

“Yes, but those are people that normally have opposite-sex parents.” Dad gave her a shrug. “Whereas you won the gay parent jackpot. So if you are after another girl — or even a man, we’re not close minded — we’re here for you.”

Pop reached over and put his hand on her arm. “We are, even though I can’t help you get up and run after Ruby. I’m here for you for all other needs, though.”

Fran gave him a puzzled face. “I’ve told you before, I can run my own matters of the heart. But there is no matter of the heart here. I can’t get involved with another singer after Delilah, you know that.”

Her parents exchanged looks over their pancakes.

“Ruby’s hardly Delilah, and I mean that in the nicest possible way. We never met Delilah as that would have made everything too real for her. But Ruby is a real person and she seems lovely. Plus, I prefer her music, too.”

“You haven’t heard it.”

“I have,” Pop said, pulling back his shoulders. “I know how to work Spotify just like you do.” He paused. “Plus, Ruby’s from a lovely family, whereas Delilah’s sounded like a nightmare. These things make a difference when choosing a partner. My parents never accepted us and it leaves a dent.”

Fran knew that. But at least they had Dad’s family who were lovely.

“I know Ruby’s from a good family. But just because of that it doesn’t mean I’m after her.”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much,” Pop told her.

“Me thinks you're quoting far too much Shakespeare at me for one breakfast,” Fran replied. But she knew she *was* protesting too much. She clapped her hands together. “Anyway, let’s eat these delicious pancakes, then I need to make one phone call. After that, I’m all yours. I’m making curry, and I thought we could watch a film this afternoon?”

Pop’s face lit up. “A Christmas film?”

Fran nodded, happy to move the subject along. “I was thinking Elf, or whatever you fancy.”

“Elf sounds perfect,” Dad replied.

Fran glanced up and out of the window again. “Have you thought about getting another dog now you’re settled? It’s been three years since Rhubarb, and Mistletoe is the perfect place for one.”

Pop nodded. “We have. We were thinking of getting a couple of rescue dogs. Older ones that take it easy, and need a place to spend their final years.”

“I love that. Two old dogs for two silver foxes.”

CHAPTER 18



Ruby was at the door of one of the barns towards the back of the farm properties, the wide open Christmas tree fields behind it. She gazed out, taking a deep breath in. The smell of fir trees was the smell of home.

The barn was a huge space, and one of the more insulated barns they had. However, it was still freezing on a December morning. It had been stacked high with Christmas trees, but was now two-thirds empty: proof that sales had picked up over the last couple of days. Maybe this year really would signal a change of fortunes for the farm. Ruby hoped her concert would move the needle, too.

She jogged on the spot for a few moments, then did star jumps to get her blood flowing. She'd done her main vocal warm-up in the house, but decamped to the barn when Mum kept interrupting and commenting on her voice. To finish off her rehearsal, she needed a bit more warmth. She walked over to the barn office in the corner, shut the door, pulled the blinds and turned on the radiators.

Ruby liked to come here when she needed a little time away from the family to play, sing or just be. The office housed two desks and a comfortable red sofa underneath a wall of Christmas tree photos. On the opposite side of the room was a hospitality station with a kettle, Nespresso machine and a fridge underneath. This was where Dad and Scott brought their bigger

corporate clients when they'd walked them around the fields and sprinkled them with Christmas magic. Ruby did a few more warm-up exercises, taking slugs of hot water and lemon from her steel-cased flask to ease her voice back into action.

She cleared her throat, pushing thoughts of Fran and how they'd kissed last night from her mind. She could still feel how Fran had grasped her waist with her strong fingers. Still remember how she tasted. Ruby wanted to taste her again. That thought sent a scuttle of heat down her body. Ruby shivered. She had to focus on the job at hand. She picked up her folder with the song lyrics inside and got on with the job at hand. Being in the moment and singing. It was her speciality.

Ruby called up the backing tracks on her phone, and hit play. She'd just run through 'Winter Wonderland' and 'Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer' when there was a knock on the office door, and Victoria walked in. It was just like their childhood: Victoria knocked, but then always walked straight in.

"Alright, karaoke queen?"

"I hope I'm better than somebody having a go at karaoke." Ruby folded her arms and frowned. "Otherwise it's going to be a very short and grumbly concert."

"You're going to be just fine." Victoria gave her a hug. "Are you singing your own songs, too? Not just Christmas tunes?"

Ruby nodded. "I will be. But I have to sing the classics as well. You don't get Robbie Williams or Michael Bublé doing a gig at Christmas without some festive songs, do you?"

"They are Christmas cabaret, though."

"What am I?"

"You're the local superstar."

Ruby ignored her comment. She was terrible at taking compliments. "Anyway, I will be singing my stuff, but that doesn't need as much practice. I

thought I'd run through the Christmas stuff, and leave my songs until I have some musical back-up. Is Eric going to be around to play for me later?"

Victoria nodded. "He is. He said to get in touch about rehearsing."

Ruby put her lyrics folder down on a nearby chair. She shivered, even though the heat was on. She shouldn't stay out here for too long.

"How are you feeling about the concert? I know there was pressure in the bar, but I'm really excited to see my big-shot sister sing live. I've only seen you play twice before." Victoria's smile was genuine, which only made Ruby more nervous. Was she going to cope with the pressure and make her family proud? There was a lot riding on this gig for her.

"I'm hardly a big-shot. I'm someone who gigs, and teaches on the side."

"Don't be so ridiculous. I'm a shopkeeper. You're a singer. If anyone ever asks me, that's what I tell them." Victoria pointed at her. "You need more belief in your ability. To be less fearful of it all. Maybe then you'd put yourself out there a bit more." Her sister tilted her head. "And yes, I know you're going to tell me you're happy where you are, you get by just fine, but I don't buy it. Neither does Fran, which I love. We both think you should be doing more gigging and recording. You're a born singer. I'm looking forward to seeing you, and so are Mum and Dad. Even Scott."

Ruby snorted. Her brother was not a music fan. "Now I know you're lying. Scott would rather stick pins in his eyes than see me sing."

"He'll be there. If nothing else to admire the stage him and Eric built." Victoria paused. "Talking of Fran, anything to tell me about last night?"

Ruby perched on the edge of one of the office desks, shaking her head. She could do poker face, no problem. "No, nothing."

Victoria gave her a look. "Nothing at all? I thought I picked up a little frisson with you two in the bar."

"You're seeing things that aren't there. Plus, how could you possibly have picked up anything while we were in the bar? There were people all around us fighting to be heard. Norman banging on about his pint. Audrey

being Audrey. It's hardly the place where romance blooms, is it?"

"You can tell me that all you want, but I know subtle looks and smiles when I see them. Plus, you did lock up together. Nothing happened on the way home? No kissing under the snowy stars?"

A jolt of electricity hit Ruby as she recalled exactly what happened under the snowy stars. A snowy kiss that hadn't strayed far from her memory ever since it happened.

"No, no kissing at all." Ruby's stomach did cartwheels as she lied. "Besides, I can't get involved with a music exec. I wouldn't hear the end of it from everyone I know. It's like sleeping with the enemy."

"She's not a music exec when she's here though, is she? She's your neighbour. An attractive, funny, available neighbour."

Ruby checked her watch. "She's coming over later to talk about the gig. Who knows, we might go for coffee afterwards. So stay by your phone for reports of us tearing each other's clothes off in the farm cafe."

Victoria's face lit up. "Some of us are older and married. We have to get our kicks somehow."

"I'm sure the other patrons might disagree."

"I don't know. Everybody needs a bosom for a pillow now and again, don't they?"

Her sister was incorrigible. "Haven't you got a shop to run, Mrs Shopkeeper?"

"You're no fun. You're also very prickly on the subject of your love life."

"I don't have a love life!" Ruby threw up her hands. "Now get lost so I can keep practising in peace."

Victoria held up her hands, palms facing out. "All right, I'm going. Happy singing and let me know if I can do anything. We've got all the stuff bubbling in the background for the food and drink for Saturday."

"Good. We put some stuff out on social media. We're already getting some positive feedback. It looks like I'm really doing it now. Scott reckons

we might pull in as many as a few hundred.” Ruby’s heart flipped at the thought, as it always did. But nerves were good. Just so long as there weren’t too many of them.

“No backing out. The village is going to love it. Our own homegrown singing superstar for one night only.”

“One night only is right, so tell your friends.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

When Victoria was gone, Ruby rehearsed a few more Christmas numbers, before she sat on the red sofa, going through her lyrics. She came across her new song, ‘Pieces Of You’. The one she’d sung a few times in London. Every time she did, the crowd went wild. She’d written it about taking a chance on love. The irony wasn’t lost on Ruby, because she hadn’t done that in quite a while. She hadn’t been in a relationship for two years. Hadn’t had sex in 12 months. She also hadn’t kissed anyone in that time, either.

Until she met Fran. Being around Fran was bringing to mind a swirl of feelings she’d hidden away. Some that she’d wondered if she’d ever feel again.

Ruby scanned the words. She focused on the chorus. ‘Even if the journey seems far, you need to follow who you are, sometimes all you need is a leap of faith.’ Was that what Ruby needed to edge closer to Fran? She’d already kissed her, and that had been the first leap. That kiss had made Ruby’s toes steam. It had lifted her up and opened her up. It had made Ruby want to feel *more*.

Of Fran, but also of herself.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. Ruby fished it out. A text from Fran. Her heart expanded in her chest.

‘I’ve got some social media designs to run by you. Can we meet for a coffee later to chat? Does 6pm at the farm work?’

Ruby stared off into the distance, her body humming with anticipation as thoughts skated around her brain. Every single one had her kissing Fran.

She texted straight back to say that would be fine. Her parents would give her the time off for the concert. That it involved spending time with Fran was an added bonus.

Ruby shook her head. The gig began to pulse in her mind. She didn't have time to sit around and daydream. She checked her watch: 8:30am. Another half an hour before the farm opened to the public, which meant she had another 30 minutes to nail these songs.

She stood up and cleared her throat. She could worry all she liked about the crowd's reaction, but she couldn't control that.

The one thing she could control was her performance.

She had to be perfect for Saturday.

CHAPTER 19



Fran strolled along Farm Lane at 6pm, having escaped The Bar before the locals turned up. She didn't want to get pinned down again. She'd learned her lesson on Friday. Norman drove by in his retro-green Morris Minor, tooting his horn. He lived down the road from the farm, and was probably heading to The Bar for a drink. He seemed like a permanent fixture there.

Fran blinked as her eyes adjusted to being outside and not pointed at a screen. It wasn't snowing, but it was cold enough for it to stick.

Today had been an intense day, and she wasn't sure how it boded for the rest of the week. Fast Forward's single launch had gone well, but they were still far too nervous about all the things that needed to be done. Damian and the rest of the team were doing a brilliant job, but in the end, the buck stopped with her, as Fran's boss had told her today.

Could she buy a couple more days in Mistletoe? Fran hoped so. Her dads were loving having her, and then there was Ruby. Tall, gorgeous, unexpected Ruby.

Every time Fran thought about her, a shiver of anticipation ran up her spine.

That kiss had taken up brain space ever since it happened. How could it not?

Whatever occurred, Fran had to be back in Mistletoe for Saturday night and Ruby's gig. She couldn't miss that, not after suggesting it in the first place. Plus, she had a feeling Ruby was going to need all the support she could get. Fast Forward had a gig and TV appearances on Friday and Saturday, but Damian and the team could hopefully handle the finish if she was there for the start.

Now, it felt like Ruby was her artist, not Fast Forward.

Wishful thinking.

As the farm sign came into view, Fran turned in and spotted Ruby's silhouette walking towards her.

As she got closer, Ruby greeted Fran with an unsure smile.

In return, Fran gave her a small wave.

They were rubbish at this, weren't they? They'd shared one dynamite kiss in the snow, but what was the etiquette now? Did she hug her? Kiss her on the lips? Cheek? Shake hands? Did they do things differently in Mistletoe or London? Fran was in the same country, but life in Mistletoe might as well have been on the moon.

For one thing, she didn't generally run around London kissing women in the snow.

Mistletoe 1, London 0.

"It's good to see you." Fran went with no physical contact and a lame opener. She should never give up her job to do improv. She'd be bankrupt within weeks. Particularly if it involved Ruby.

"You, too." Ruby's face was guarded in the flashing lights of their Christmas tree on the drive.

Fran shivered. "It's so much colder here. I thought I'd hate it, but I kinda love it."

"Especially now you have the right coat to deal with it. Did you get a lot of work done today?"

Fran nodded. "Loads. Also, sorted some stuff out with my colleague, so

now I don't have to rush back, fingers crossed. It's been a good day." She reached over and flicked some snow off a branch of the Christmas tree. It was force of habit now. "It's just a shame I didn't get to play in the snow today. Too much work. I need to make more time for play. I haven't built a snowman since I was 11."

Ruby tilted her head. "Not since you were 11? That's scandalous."

"I know."

"I would say we could play in the snow tomorrow, but we're both working." Ruby paused. "But there's nothing to stop us now."

"Now?" Fran flicked her head skywards. "But it's dark."

Ruby shrugged. "You can still build a snowman in the dark. We did it plenty of times when I was little. Scott and I used to sneak out of the house early and build them in the field around the back of the barn. If you turn the outside lights of the back barn on, it gives you just enough glow. How about you show me your designs, I'll agree with them, and then we can play?"

Fran knew Ruby was talking about building a snowman, but it didn't stop heat flooding her body. Playing with Ruby had just shot to the top of her to-do list. "Can we do the design part at mine, as I need to check on my dads?"

Ruby held out a hand. "Lead the way."



FRAN LET herself into Hollybush Cottage, wiping her feet on the doormat as she did. She pulled off her orange bobble hat, conscious of her hat hair. Was it doing that thing where it stuck up at the back? Probably. She put her fingers through in an attempt to repair the damage. In her heart, she knew it was futile. Fran put her hat and scarf on the coat rack, followed by her jacket. Then she hung Ruby's coat up, too.

Ruby eyed her approvingly. "Nice bright green top," she said, a smile creasing her face.

Fran wriggled under the spotlight. “Thank you.” She pointed down the hall. “Better go and say hi to my dads.” Self-consciousness dug its heels into her skin. What was the hell was this? She felt like she was 14 again, just bringing home her first girlfriend. Not that she’d had a girlfriend at 14. Or been out. She wasn’t that cool.

However, Fran’s toes were curling at the thought of what her dads might say when they saw Ruby was here. They weren’t embarrassing parents — far from it — but sometimes when she brought a woman home, they could be just a little too over the top. *Too* welcoming.

Which was why she hadn’t brought a woman home very often. When had the last time been? Probably over ten years ago. Having gay parents was great, but they were still her parents. Even though she was 36 years old. Did Ruby even count as someone she was bringing home when she was their neighbour? Having told her dads there was nothing going on, this would send their imagination into overdrive.

When they entered the kitchen, Dad sprang up.

Pop reached for his crutches, too.

Fran shook her head, waving a hand at them. “Don’t get up. Ruby’s just come back so I can show her the designs I got today.” That sounded like a line, didn’t it?

Ruby gave them a smile. “Then we’re going to make a snowman.”

Fran shot her a look.

Ruby looked like she wanted to stuff her fist in her mouth. Too late. It was out there now. Two grown women were going out into the twilight to build a snowman.

To their credit, her parents didn’t laugh. Rather, they gave each other that look that parents did. The one that told Fran she was fooling nobody.

No matter. Fran was going to act as if she was a stealth agent. Cool, calm, collected.

“You wanna come upstairs?” The blood rushed to Fran’s cheeks as soon

as she uttered those words. She wasn't going to even look at Ruby, let alone her parents.

"Sure," Ruby replied.

Fran put her head down and walked out of the kitchen. Did Dad just let out a small guffaw?

She wasn't going to focus on that. She grabbed her bag and headed up the carpeted staircase, Ruby's footsteps providing a reassuring beat behind her. Fran shut her bedroom door and let out a breath she'd been holding ever since she left the kitchen. Then she took another deep one as the enormity of the situation crept up on her.

Ruby was in her bedroom. She picked up a trophy Fran won playing pool when she was 15.

"A pool shark. I would never have guessed."

"We had a table at the youth club. I spent a lot of time there."

"Training to be a good lesbian."

Fran smirked. "I even got a trophy for my efforts."

Ruby smiled, then glanced over to the corner. The tell-tale guitar case was propped up against the wall. "You play guitar? You never told me."

"That's because you're a professional musician, and I can't do barre chords." Fran wriggled her fingers. "It hurts my hand too much."

"You get used to it."

"So everyone tells me."

Ruby held up her hand. "My fingertips have been years in the making. Hard as nails, but still soft when they need to be."

"Do you say that to all the girls?" Fran gave her a look.

"Only the ones with guitars." Ruby sat down on Fran's double bed, and bounced a little. "So are you really planning on showing me some designs, or is this just a ruse to show me your bed?" She bounced a little more. "Good movement. Not too noisy. Something we could work with."

Fran wanted to die on the spot, but she managed not to.

Good start.

“That was the idea. Parade you in front of my parents, then bring you up here to have my wicked way with you. It seemed a little obvious at first, but it worked. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this earlier in life. It would have saved so much time and angst wooing women.” Fran grabbed her laptop from her chest of drawers, then sat down next to Ruby on the bed. The warmth of Ruby’s body hit her immediately, and she gulped. They were sat on her bed. This wasn’t a situation she’d considered might happen so quickly this morning. But now, here they were.

Ruby crossed her long legs one over the another. Then she turned her head.

Fran stared at her lips. She’d like to kiss them somewhere warm. Like here.

“You woo women? Is this something I need to know about? Do you have a harp hidden away too that you’re about to spring it on me?”

Fran gave her a slow smile, never taking her eyes from Ruby. “No harp, promise. My wooing skills are pretty average.”

“Unlike your kissing skills, which I recall were way above that.” Ruby’s gaze dropped to Fran’s lips.

Fran’s heart thudded in her chest. “They were?”

Ruby closed the gap between them. “Uh-huh.” Ruby’s lips touched hers.

A spark of electricity streaked down Fran.

Ruby teased her tongue along Fran’s bottom lip.

Fran mentally reclined, ready for bliss.

“Fran!” Dad’s voice cut through the sexual tension in the room. Footsteps on the stairs, then a knock at her bedroom door.

They sprang apart, Fran’s heart falling through her body.

The door opened.

Fran shot up. Her laptop fell from the bed.

Her dad frowned as it fell to the ground with a thud.

Fran snatched it up, cradling it to her chest like her first-born. What the fuck was her dad doing?

“I wondered if you’d like some banana bread and tea before you head out into the cold?” He glanced at Ruby, then at Fran. Could he feel the crackle in the air? Or was he oblivious?

“Sure. Let me just show Ruby these designs, then we’ll be down.” She ushered him out of the room. Then she shut the door and let out a breath.

Fran caught Ruby’s gaze.

She gave her a wide grin.

Fran slid down the door, laughter taking hold of her. “We’re far too old to be living with our parents, aren’t we?”

Ruby laughed, then sat on the floor next to her. “In our defence, it’s not what we normally do. This is a break from our normal lives. We’re in Mistletoe. What happens in Mistletoe stays in Mistletoe.”

Fran paused. Was Ruby talking about their situation, too? It was too early to ask. They’d shared two kisses. One way too short. She’d like a do-over.

Instead, Fran grabbed her laptop and showed Ruby the designs, which she approved immediately. To be honest, Fran could have shown Ruby anything. Neither of them was concentrating anymore.

“Tea’s ready!” Dad shouted up the stairs.

Fran bristled. “It’s definitely a break. Not normality, thank goodness.” She stood up, then held out a hand. “Shall we go and have tea, then go make that snowman?”

Ruby kissed her lips lightly. “I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER 20



Ruby snapped on the light at the back of the barn. A bright yellow hue drenched the nearest part of the field. The Christmas trees stood in lines, spaced out liberally. Her dad and brother dug up alternative trees every year, and left the ones beside them to grow taller. Most households wanted 6ft trees, but hotels, holiday parks and restaurants always needed taller. Mistletoe Farm grew them to demand.

“If you want to build a snowman, the only way to do it is in a field full of Christmas trees. We can use this field, as this isn’t open to the public this year. Your last snowman was built in your garden, right?”

“Most of us don’t have a farm, so yes.” Fran shivered, then smashed her gloved hands together, taking in the scene. “This is pretty epic, though. A Christmas tree forest. Even for this hard-hearted Christmas avoider, you can’t get a better location. Or smell.” Fran took a lungful of the pine air.

Ruby walked up to the nearest tree and checked the tag. It was orange. “See the tag on the bottom? The trees are colour-coded so my family know which to leave, and which to dig up.” She shook some branches and the tree danced side to side. “This one has another year to go before it’s chopped down. It’s currently 8ft tall, and it’ll get to 9ft or nearer 10ft by then. Then it’ll go to a photoshoot next September dressed in its finery, and then onto a hotel or holiday park the month after — spaces that can fit a 9ft tree.”

Fran gave a nod. “Makes sense. I never thought Christmas trees were needed until December.”

“Most people don’t. The first half of the year is spent hand-pruning, shaping and fertilising. The second half is all about getting the trees to businesses, then getting the farm ready for the Christmas onslaught. It’s a year-round business.” Ruby patted the tree fondly.

“You never thought about going into it?”

Ruby shook her head. “I love being around it, especially at Christmas. People are always happy when they’re buying a tree. It’s impossible not to be. Plus, it’s in my blood. But so is music. Dad, Mum and Scott have it covered, so Victoria and I can do our own thing.”

“I love how important family is here. My parents have always been my rock. Perhaps I need to be around for them more, too.”

“Mistletoe has a way of putting things in perspective.” Ruby stared at Fran. Wrapped up in her new gear, she was still sexy. Ruby wanted to kiss her again. But the snowman came first.

“You’re not wrong.” Fran stared right back, then pointed at the quad bikes lined up outside the barn. “What do you use those for?”

“To transport the trees after you’ve chopped them down. And for looking cool to women, of course.”

Fran grinned. “Wear a plaid shirt and I’m surprised you don’t have lesbians queueing up. I’d love to have a go some time.”

“It can be arranged.” Ruby shivered. She could think of ways of heating up.

Fran blew out a frozen breath. “I know this is idyllic, but it’s still a little cold. Can we start our snowman?”

Ruby gave her a look. “I need a little more romance from you, city girl.”

Fran laughed. “Real life is never quite as romantic as the vision in your head. Like having sex on a beach. Great in theory. In practice, sand in your food.”

Ruby shook her head, trying to get the image of a naked Fran on the beach out of her mind. “Fofu? Really?”

“What do you call it?”

Ruby frowned. “Not food. Is this what comes of having gay dads? No woman to tell you appropriate slang for your vagina?”

Fran walked up so close, Ruby could see the whites of her eyes.

“On the contrary, my dads probably did more research on how to be a mother than any mother alive. To say they were paranoid about it would be an understatement.” Fran knitted her eyebrows together. “I have a feeling food was my Auntie Christine’s word. She was around a lot when I was little, playing the female role model.”

Ruby licked her lips, never taking her eyes from Fran. “Have you had a lot of sex on the beach?”

“It’s a one and done kinda thing, isn’t it?”

Ruby leaned in. “I was talking about the drink.” She gave Fran a loaded stare. “When you have sex on the beach, how do you like it? Strong and quick? Or slow and savoured?”

Fran looked her right in the eye. “Depends on my mood. But right now? Strong and quick.”

A spark of desire ignited inside Ruby, and it was all she could do not to throw Fran down in the snow and kiss her into next week. However, a little like sex on the beach, sex in the snow wasn’t advisable. At least the beach had heat. The snow had no saving grace.

“I’ll remember that.” Desire rocked Ruby from her core. She tore her eyes from Fran and shook herself. “Shall we make your childhood dreams come true and set about making Steve the Snowman?”

Fran rolled her eyes. “Steve? Really?” She stamped her feet. “I was thinking more Shantelle the non-binary Snowperson.”

Ruby’s laughter crackled in the air. “Shantelle it is.”

They packed a large snowball each, then began to roll it, packing more

snow around it as they went. Fifteen minutes later, they both had sizable snowballs. Ruby carried on with hers, instructing Fran to roll another. Then she stamped out a patch of snow in between two 8ft Norwegian Spruces, and rolled the largest ball onto it.

“Can you help me lift yours?”

Fran walked over. Together they lifted the body onto the base, then the head onto that.

Fran breathed in again. “I could happily die in this forest, the smell is incredible.”

“Please don’t, your dads would not be pleased with me.” Ruby patted the tree beside her. “The smell comes from the Norwegian Spruce. This is the one to buy if you want the true Christmas feel.” She paused. “Are you getting the Christmas feeling here?”

“If I wasn’t, I might actually be dead.” Fran frowned. “I just thought, though: we didn’t bring anything for the face. It’s a blank snowperson.”

Ruby gave her a look, before shrugging off her small backpack. She took out a carrot and handed it to Fran. “Nose.”

Ruby then produced two shiny buttons. “Eyes.” She grinned. “You can draw the mouth.”

Finally, Ruby took out a hat and scarf. “These are our special snowmen items. We’ve had them since we were kids.”

Fran shook her head. “You really have thought of everything.”

“I aim to please.”

They dressed the snowman, Fran drew its mouth, then they stood back.

“Not bad,” Ruby said. “How do you feel? First snowman since your youth. Your first non-binary snowperson ever.”

Fran gave her a beaming smile. “I feel a sense of accomplishment. Which is crazy, because I just rolled some snow. But it’s so much better than if I finish a spreadsheet and sort out a budget. That’s just something off my to-do list. Something else will replace it, as sure as night follows day.” She patted

their creation. “Whereas, Shantelle? She’s a work of art. We created her from thin air. There’s something to be said for that, isn’t there?”

“It’s what I do every day with music.”

Fran held Ruby’s gaze. “You make gorgeous music, have I told you that?”

Ruby blushed. If she’d heard those words dropping from Fran’s lips a few months ago, she’d have dismissed them as music exec waffle. But now Ruby had got to know Fran, she felt the sincerity behind them. Plus, Ruby had just made a snowman with Fran. Just kissed her. Right now, the pulsing thought in her brain was that she’d like to do it again soon. But preferably, somewhere warm. They’d already had a snowy kiss. She was ready for something different.

“Thank you,” Ruby said. “I’m trying to get better at taking compliments, especially from you.”

Fran gave her a look. “That’s the best you’ve done yet. Much better than your rebuff in the club months ago.”

“I didn’t know you then.”

“You didn’t give me a chance.”

Ruby knew she was right. She held out a hand.

Fran took it.

“Let me make it up to you with some hot chocolate. If you ask nicely, I’ll lace it with rum.” Ruby paused. “I was thinking the barn office? It has heating, a hot chocolate machine and booze. Plus, it’s away from all of our families.”

Fran gulped. “I like the sound of all those.” She dropped her gaze, staring at their joined hands.

Ruby squeezed it tight. “In that case, let’s go.” She turned her head. “See you tomorrow, Shantelle.” Then she pulled Fran towards the barn.



RUBY IGNORED the heavy thud of her heart as she flicked on the office lights and shut the door. She switched on the radiators, quickly followed by the Nespresso machine. Then she grabbed a couple of hot chocolate pods from the stash in the drawer beneath, ignoring the slight shake in her hand.

Fran took in the space, before coming to a stop at the wall of Christmas tree photos. “These trees are so pretty.” She reached out a hand to touch one. “Are these the photoshoot trees you were talking about?”

Ruby nodded. “Yep. These are the 9ft trees. We import them from Denmark or Newcastle when they’re three years old, then we grow them for seven to ten years. We used to name them when we were younger, but we stopped after a while because we got upset when we had to say goodbye. It turns out, you can get attached to trees. I said goodbye to one I really loved earlier in the year. Nettie. She was 12.”

“She had a great life here. Also, Nettie is a great name. You have good taste.”

Ruby raised an eyebrow at Fran. “I’d say I’ve still got it now.” Ruby gulped, then turned her attention back to the drinks. “I’m doing two hot chocolates, unless you prefer a coffee?” She caught Fran’s gaze and every hair on Ruby’s body stood to attention.

“Hot chocolate would be perfect,” Fran replied.

Ruby tried not to focus on the lips that had uttered that.

Focus on the hot chocolate.

Not Fran’s lips.

Hot chocolate.

Fran’s lips.

Ruby took off her outer layers and focused on the drinks. Then she grabbed the rum from Dad’s desk drawer. “My dad keeps this here so he can pretend he’s in one of those old cop shows on TV, where they always kept booze in their desk drawers.” Ruby paused, undoing the cap. “Can I tempt you?” She held up the bottle of Brugal.

“Tempt away.” Fran took off her hat, gloves and coat, then sat on the sofa. She held out a hand to accept her hot drink as Ruby sat beside her.

Fran took a sip, and a sound escaped her mouth that did nothing for Ruby’s heightened senses. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

“I’m fully qualified in hot chocolate and rum therapy.” Ruby’s gaze collided with Fran’s, and Ruby’s heart stuttered. She took a sip of her drink to keep her hands and mouth busy.

“Have you brought many women to this office?” Fran’s stare was uncertain.

Ruby shook her head. “Just like Friday night, you’re the first.” She crossed her heart with her hand. “Not many good-looking, available lesbians travel through Mistletoe Farm, believe it or not.”

Fran’s shoulders relaxed as she laughed. “Okay, I do believe that part.”

“As well as the field, this is where I come to escape the family. I love coming home in December, but living with your parents, as we know, can get a bit intense. Especially when you’re used to your own space.” She tapped the sofa beneath them. “This is even a sofa bed when needed.” She pointed towards the door on the opposite wall. “Behind that wall is a shower room with a loo. Plus there’s a duvet, sheets and pillows in the cupboard. You could live in this office.”

Fran looked up at the massive windows that went from ceiling to waist-height, open to the barn. “It’d be a little like living in a goldfish bowl.”

Ruby got up and dropped the blinds. When she turned to Fran, Ruby could tell she was thinking the same thing.

They had privacy now.

Exactly what they’d been craving since they met up.

Without a word, Ruby put her drink on the nearest desk, doing the same with Fran’s. When she turned around, Fran was standing next to her, want flaring in her crystal-blue eyes. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve been dying to kiss you ever since my parents interrupted us.”

Ruby's bum hit the desk as Fran closed in on her. Now she was sitting, she and Fran were the same height, their lips level.

"Parental interruptus is a real thing. Let's make it a distant memory." Fran leaned in and pressed her lips to Ruby's. Slow, sensual.

Ruby's heart felt like it catapulted through her chest.

Then Fran gently pulled away.

Ruby caught her breath, then let her eyelids flutter open.

Fran's baby blues were staring right at her.

"You asked me earlier if I favoured strong and quick, or slow and savoured."

Fran dropped her hand to Ruby's belt buckle.

Ruby closed her eyes. *Holy shit.*

Fran reached Ruby's zip, and pulled it down. "What about you?"

When did Fran's tone get so low?

"When the mood takes you, do you like strong and quick, too?"

Ruby gushed *everywhere*. "Fuck, yes," she replied.

Fran gave her a sultry grin. "That's what I was hoping you'd say." Then she pressed her lips back to Ruby's and kissed her like there would be no tomorrow.

Ruby didn't care if it was true. At least they had today. Today looked like it was about to take an alluring turn.

Fran slid her tongue into Ruby's mouth.

Ruby's senses exploded. Her fingers reached around Fran's waist and pulled her close. Was Ruby still breathing? She wasn't dead, so she must be. However, Ruby's breath was tangled in her chest, her heart thumping, demanding to be heard.

Fran didn't stop kissing her. This was no-nonsense Fran. The Fran that got business deals done. The one Ruby had issues with.

However, in this situation, Ruby was all for the take-charge-and-get-things-done Fran.

Especially when the thing getting done was her.

That thought sent Ruby's body into overdrive.

Ruby's breath began to sprint as Fran's fingers tackled her belt buckle, then made short work of the button on her jeans. The zip had already been dealt with. Fran reached around and pulled the back of Ruby's jeans down, and Ruby shuffled them that little bit further.

Fran trailed her fingers back up to between Ruby's legs, inserting her thigh there, too, pushing Ruby's legs apart.

Fran parted their mouths, then bent her knees, licking her tongue all the way up Ruby's neck to her mouth.

Ruby shook with anticipation.

"I can't wait to feel you," Fran whispered in Ruby's ear, just as her fingers connected with Ruby's clit.

Ruby dropped her head backwards and took a huge intake of breath. What was Fran doing to her? The first touch and she was almost on the edge? Really? Ruby closed her eyes and focused. She was not going to come within seconds. She wanted fast, but also, something to remember.

Fran was certainly making sure the final part happened.

Fran brought Ruby's head back up and kissed her with hot lips. Fran's fingertips worked in circular motions, until Ruby's vision went blurred. She was so wet. *So ready*. Fran's fingers on her were the *best*.

That is, until moments later, when Fran curled them into Ruby, grabbing Ruby's arse cheek to steady her.

The best just got upgraded.

Fran's touch ignited something inside Ruby, and she clutched the desk under her with her other hand.

As Fran moved into her, tantalisingly slow, she returned to Ruby's lips for a bruising, passionate kiss.

Ruby groaned into Fran's mouth, then spread her legs as far as her jeans would allow. The fire inside Ruby, contained until then, suddenly spiralled

out of control. Her body began to shake. Her breath quickened. It was a personal wildfire and there was nothing Ruby could do.

Nothing she wanted to do.

Fran's tongue was all over her neck now as her fingers caused Ruby's heart to boom.

Ruby grasped Fran's shoulders, her teeth clenched. As Fran's rhythm increased, Ruby's brain buzzed, the fire inside burning bright. Ruby's breath came fast, shredding into the air as she struggled to keep up with the pleasure that was rampaging through her body.

But Fran didn't let up. Her kisses were perfection, her hands exquisite, her touch immaculate. It was almost more than Ruby could take.

Almost.

As Fran ramped up her passion, Ruby squeezed her eyes tight shut. When her muscles clenched, she knew she was close.

With one more exquisite stroke, Fran tipped her over the edge, and Ruby came undone in a torrent of lust, clinging to Fran. Her body lit up with want as Fran ravished her some more.

A few moments later, Fran stilled, kissing Ruby's neck, her nose, her eyelids. Then those gorgeous, soft lips landed back at Ruby's mouth.

Ruby's eyes sprang open, her breathing still irregular. Not a surprise as Fran's fingers were still deep inside her.

Ruby took a deep breath and shook her head, staring into Fran's eyes. "I'd say strong and quick wins the day."

Fran gave her a smile, before withdrawing. Then she kissed Ruby's lips once more. "I'm in total agreement," she whispered.

Ruby turned up her smile. She was still coming down from her orgasmic high. Still floating on air. All because of Fran.

"Wow. You didn't tell me you were such a top."

Fran's gaze dipped and her cheeks pinked. "I'm not, but I have my moments." Now it was over, she was almost shy.

Ruby kissed her again. “Feel free to have those moments whenever they take you. To say you were hot is an understatement.”

Fran responded with the most perfect smile in the world.

Pleasure tiptoed up Ruby’s spine. Everything Fran did from now on was going to be the best thing ever. Ruby was hers, hook, line and sinker.

“What do you want to do now?” Fran eyed Ruby with a hooded stare.

Ruby gave her one right back. “Let’s start by pulling out the sofa bed and getting you out of your clothes.”

CHAPTER 21



Fran woke up the next morning, frowning at the light grey blinds to her right, the desk to her left. Her brain jolted. Where the hell was she?

Then she remembered. They were in the barn office, after a night of incredible sex. She rubbed her right eye with her hand, then tried to breathe without waking Ruby. Her mouth was open slightly, her head tilted on the pillow, her muddy hair splayed down her skin.

Fran had broken her rules, hadn't she? She'd slept with a singer. She took a breath. She'd do it again, too. Perhaps multiple times. Could she be considering a relationship with a singer? She was a glutton for punishment, wasn't she?

However, Ruby was not on her books, like Delilah had been. Plus, she was way more sorted than Delilah. Keeping work and personal life separate was a lesson Fran had learned the hard way. Maybe it was fortunate that Ruby had turned her down all those months ago. She believed in fate. Everything happened for a reason.

A phone vibrated nearby. As slowly as she could, Fran leaned over the side of the sofa bed and reached down to her clothes. She had five messages from Damian. That was never good news, and they were all about Fast Forward. The social media trolling had stepped up a gear. Tenny, in particular, was being targetted because she wasn't as skinny as the rest of the

group.

Fuck this shit. When were people going to get over the fact that pop stars could be whatever they wanted to be, and not purely stick-thin?

But it was the modern world they lived in. Fran would happily go back to the pre-social media days. However, it wasn't going to happen this week, and Fast Forward needed more help than could be provided on the end of a phone.

Fran moved to get out of bed to give Damian a call. It was only 7.30am, but he was already up and working. However, her progress was stopped by a hand grabbing her waist.

Fran turned, then smiled at a sleepy Ruby. Damn, she was gorgeous. Fran dropped her phone back onto her clothes and gave Ruby her full attention. Damian could wait.

“Good morning to you.” She settled next to Ruby, kissing her lips. Ruby even tasted good in the morning.

“Hey,” Ruby replied, her voice sketchy. “I can't quite believe we're waking in my dad's office after our first date. Hardly glamorous, is it?”

“Yesterday was a date?”

Ruby grinned. “Kinda. Then you turned it into an ambush with your silky sex ways.”

Fran threw her head back and laughed. “I think you gave as good as you got.”

“I have my own skills.”

“I'm well aware.” Fran kissed Ruby's lips again. The temptation to fuck her again was strong, but Fran had business to attend to. Even though she hated that, and knew Ruby would, too.

“Where were you sneaking off to, by the way?”

Fran sighed, then sat up. “I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is I've had some urgent messages, and I need to head back to London today. Fast Forward and Damian need me.” She glanced at Ruby. “But it's a

wrench leaving you.”

Ruby furrowed her brow. “Are you going to miss Saturday’s gig?”

Fran shook her head briskly. “No, I’ll get back for that.” At least, she hoped she would if everything went well. But Ruby didn’t need to hear that. Fran took Ruby’s hand in hers. “I wouldn’t miss you being heckled by Audrey for the world.”

Ruby laughed. “Don’t even joke.” She pulled the duvet up her body as she shivered.

Fran jumped out of the bed and put her pants back on, followed by her T-shirt. Then she sat back on the bed. With her naked shoulders and tussled hair, Ruby looked every bit the sex goddess. “Don’t you want to know the good news?”

“I’m still reeling from the fact you’re going to fuck me and leave me.”

Fran’s eyes widened. Shit, was that really what Ruby thought?

But then the edges of Ruby’s mouth softened. She got onto her hands and knees and crawled to Fran for a kiss. “That was a joke, by the way.”

Fran gulped. “I can never be sure. I know you think I’m all business first.”

Ruby shook her head. “Not true. I understand you’ve got work to do. I just think you need to make more time for family and friends. And potential new love interests.” She kissed her again.

A naked Ruby kneeling in front of Fran was somewhat distracting. “I totally agree with that.” Fran kissed Ruby’s breasts. “Don’t you want to know the good news?”

“Apart from you kissing my breasts? Hit me.”

“Damian has got another band on-board to support you on Saturday. They’re called Troubadour, and they’re an up-and-coming folk/pop band who love Christmas and are happy to do it for the exposure. Also, they want to visit a Christmas tree farm.” Fran held out her hands and gave Ruby a wide grin. “So only four of the five messages said ‘get the fuck back to London’.”

“That is good news.” Ruby ran a hand through her hair. “Will you still be able to do all the designs for the gig?”

“Absolutely.” Fran picked up Ruby’s hand again. “But can I ask a favour? Can you call in on my parents, just check they’re okay? I know they’re big boys, but they both looked so frail at times this week.”

Ruby squeezed her hand. “Of course. Mum’s been doing it anyway since the accident, but I’ll check on them, too. They’re part of the village now. We look out for each other.”

“I know. Thank you.” Fran licked her lips, before holding up her phone. “I really need to call Damian. Do you mind if I do it here?”

Ruby shook her head. “Go ahead. I’ll pack up the bed and get dressed.” Ruby was true to her word, getting up right away, avoiding any more eye contact.

Yes, it was shit timing, but there was nothing Fran could do about it. She hoped Ruby wasn’t pissed off with her. She would do everything in her power to get back for Ruby’s big gig, but she loved her job, too. No matter how much she’d taken to Mistletoe, London was where her life was. It was where Ruby’s life was, too. How would they cope outside the Mistletoe bubble?

Only time would tell.

CHAPTER 22



Damian was already at the label's office when Fran arrived the next day. The office was a hub of activity, all the desks full and the Q4 madness in full swing. Phones rang, music blared and tinsel hung from most monitors. In the corner of the office — home to around 50 staff — stood a Christmas tree, decorated with silver and red tinsel, fake snow tinting its branches. Fran stared at it. Was that tree from Mistletoe Farm? Probably not, but wherever it was from, somebody had cared for it. Planted it, pruned it, tended to it, perhaps even named it. She smiled as she thought about a teenage Ruby naming Nettie. Ruby put her all into whatever she was doing: singing or selling Christmas trees. Fran did the same with her work. They had far more in common than either of them first thought.

Fran waved at a couple of colleagues as she sat, dumping her bag on the empty chair beside her. It was already weird being back here, away from Mistletoe. Everything in London was so loud, especially in this office where DJ wars broke out every day. The air was thicker. The expectation heavy. In Mistletoe, only the moment counted. Of late, all of Fran's moments in Mistletoe had been glorious. One particular night stood out as five-star rated.

Damian got up from his desk opposite to give her a hug. "Thanks for coming back." He squeezed her tight. "Sorry to make you, but Tenny's not coping. To be honest, she needs more than me. Maybe more than *you*. Could

we get another singer to have a chat with her? She'll really listen to them. When I talk, she tends to glaze over. The social media stuff isn't helping, but it's more speaking to someone who's been there and done it."

Fran pursed her lips. Maybe that was what Ruby needed, too, to get over her stage fright. Fran was surrounded by singers who hated the big stage right now. "Let me think about it and have a word with Jules." Jules was Fran's boss and the label co-founder. She dealt with issues far better than her partner, Niall, who tended to flip out and create chaos. Plus, Jules would know who might be available this week.

"By the way, I love your outfit. Those colours really suit you." He pointed a finger at her. "You look alive."

Fran glanced down at her mustard top and teal-blue trousers. "Thanks." She bit down a smile. Ruby had said the same just before she left. "How are the numbers looking, if we gloss over Tenny's possible breakdown?"

Damian nodded, walking back behind his desk. "Good. They're neck and neck on sales, and ahead on streams. Cupboard Boy is snapping at their heels, as is Skinny YouTube star, but Fast Forward are holding their own. Top three at least judging on the Monday figures, and that's better than we hoped."

Fran sat down, drumming her fingers on her desk. "Good. They've just got to get through a barrage of press on Friday, a gig Friday night, and a TV appearance on Saturday." She looked up at Damian. "They're not being interviewed on Saturday, are they?"

Damian shook his head. "Purely a single performance, nothing else."

"Okay." Fran paused. "When are they due in?"

"Midday for rehearsals and pep talks."

Fran moved her mouse on her Fast Forward mouse-mat, and stared at the group's faces on the poster stuck to the office wall beside her. They were so young and carefree. Give them six months and she was sure they'd find their feet. They just needed to get through this initial sticky period, and if possible, enjoy it and find their confidence.

Fran blew out a raspberry in contemplation. It was always tricky with new artists. She remembered Delilah being a nervous wreck. However, Delilah always had steel inside her. Even when she was getting flack in the press and getting trolled on social media, she carried on regardless. The press had linked Delilah to a new man every week, which annoyed the heck out of her. It had annoyed Fran, too.

She clicked on her email and swatted a few away. Only 167 to go. Email was the curse of her life. Somebody a few desks away turned a song up and got moaned at for doing so. They turned it down right away.

Then a hush settled over the office.

Somebody clearing their throat made Fran look up.

The hairs on the back of Fran's neck prickled when she saw who it was. Delilah. With her long, blond hair and slender frame, she looked every inch the pop star. She'd been at least a stone heavier when she'd started, but the trolls and the cameras took their toll.

Fran didn't have to look around to know the whole office was gawping. It didn't matter how many times her workmates met pop stars, their fame always rolled out before them and tripped people up. Today was no exception.

Only Fran knew the look on Delilah's face was hesitant. Everybody else just saw the chart-topper.

Fran moved her bag and motioned for Delilah to sit.

Delilah glanced around the office, then did so.

"Everybody will get over you being here in a minute, just sit still like a normal person."

Delilah rolled her eyes. "I am a normal person."

Fran gave her a look. "You were never normal."

Fran hadn't seen Delilah for ages, and she'd wondered how it would be when she did. So far, Fran's heart-rate was steady, her mind calm. It was an improvement on all the times Delilah had made every muscle in her body

tense, and not in a good way. Perhaps having no time to worry about seeing her was one reason. Plus, Fran had moved on. Having someone else meant Fran had let go of the past a little more.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were on tour?”

“We built in a festive break, so I’m done for the year until we start the European leg on December 29th. Plus, this is my label, so I thought I’d stop by and say hi.”

Damian walked over and gave Delilah a hug. They’d always got on when she and Fran were together. “Can I get you both a coffee?”

Fran could have kissed him. Damian always did have superb tact. “Yes, please,” she replied. Then Fran ushered Delilah over to the sofa in the corner of the office.

Delilah sat beside her, kicking her legs out. Unlike Ruby, Delilah’s legs were short. They’d sat next to each other like this a thousand times when they were together. However, now Delilah didn’t need to police her every action around Fran, she seemed more relaxed. Which was more than a little sad.

“How’s the tour going?”

“Really well. The crowds are so responsive, I’m blown away. It’s everything I could have ever wanted, and it’s all down to you.”

Fran raised an eyebrow. “It might have something to do with you, too.”

“You know what I mean. You signed me.”

Fran snagged her ex’s gaze. “Those start-up days were heady, weren’t they? Playing those smaller clubs all around London. Look at you now, playing major venues.”

Delilah nodded. “It’s amazing. Also fucking exhausting. I’ll be glad to just chill at my flat for a few days and do nothing.” She paused. “Maybe you might want to catch up for dinner one night?”

Fran’s bum cheeks clenched. Dinner with Delilah was not a small thing. Paparazzi followed her everywhere. There would be photographs, and she knew how it would look to Ruby. They were still so new. Then again, it

would be lovely to catch up. She'd just have to warn Ruby first.

"I'd love to," Fran said. "Gretchen not around?" Gretchen was the singer Delilah was dating, also still in the closet.

Delilah shook her head. "She's in Canada. Staying there for Christmas, catching up with her folks. She's coming back for New Year." Delilah sighed. "The most trying time of the year is on us again."

"No change with your parents?"

Delilah shook her head. "About as likely as a meteor strike. But you'll be impressed." She took a deep breath. "I've decided I'm going to do the deed this year: come out to them. My tour's wrapped until after Christmas, so my plan is to drive to their place and tell them."

"Over Christmas dinner?" Fran was horrified. "Maybe not the best time."

"Christmas Eve. Don't worry, I have a back-up plan. If they throw me out — highly likely — I'm going to my cousin's. But in the unlikely event they want me to stay, I will. I've done too much avoiding over the past few years, and it's causing me anxiety. Me and my therapist decided to tackle it head-on."

"Therapist?" Fran was amazed. Delilah had resisted all help when they'd been together.

"Yep. I might not have acted on anything you said, but I *was* listening. Everything you said was right. It's time to be brave." Delilah fiddled with her hair. "How are your dads?"

"They're good. They've moved to a small village called Mistletoe. It's like living in a Christmas card."

Delilah spluttered. "How are you feeling about that? Mrs 'Christmas is just an overblown roast dinner'?"

"I said that in the village bar. It didn't go down well."

"I can imagine." Delilah looked her up and down. "What about you? The label going well?"

Fran nodded. She knew where this was heading.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

Fran’s heart boomed. Was she? On their first unofficial date, they’d shagged in Ruby’s parents’ office. It was hardly what she’d call a relationship just yet. “Kind of. Sort of.” Fran threw up her hands. “I don’t know. We slept together on Monday, and then I had to rush back because Fast Forward are having a meltdown.”

Delilah sat up. “Are they? Why? I love their Christmas single.”

Fran shook her head. “They’re new. They’re getting a whole lot of flack on social media because they’re women. Remember what it was like being new to the business and having a vagina?”

Delilah raised both eyebrows. “I do, and I’m still dealing with it every day. They need to get off social media and ignore it, but it’s tough at the start. I wish someone had told me in no uncertain terms.”

“Maybe you could be that person.” A light bulb flickered in Fran’s brain. “In fact, they’re coming in today and it’s the lead singer, Tenny, who’s having the biggest jitters. Would you stick around and talk to her? Damian’s tried, but coming from you, it would mean so much more.”

Delilah checked her phone. “Sure. I’m having lunch with Jules and Niall, but after that?”

“That would be brilliant. Thank you.”

Delilah put a hand on Fran’s leg. “Anything for you.”

Right at that moment, Damian came back with the coffees. He put them on the table in front of them, then ran away.

Fran put a hand to her forehead. “Perfect. Now Damian thinks we’re back on.”

“Sorry.” Delilah put her hands in the air like she was under arrest. “I’ll keep my hands to myself from now on.”

Fran shook her head. “It’s fine.” She grabbed the coffees and gave one to Delilah.

Delilah peeked under the lid. “Damn that boy. He remembered no milk.”

“He’s good. It’s why I keep him on.”

Delilah leaned back on the sofa and eyed Fran. “Who’s this woman you might be having a thing with?”

Fran put her head back, before tilting it towards Delilah. “Ruby O’Connell. Her parents own a Christmas tree farm in Mistletoe, and my dads bought the cottage next door. And yes, I know that sounds like the plot of a Hallmark Christmas movie. She lives in London usually, but she’s back there helping out her parents for Christmas.” Fran paused. “She’s also a shit-hot folk singer who I tried to sign, and she turned me down.”

“Ouch,” Delilah replied. “Before or after you slept with her?”

Fran laughed. “Way before. Seven months ago. Her living in Mistletoe was a head-fuck at first, but we’re over our differences now.” Fran got up and grabbed her phone from her desk, ignoring the interested looks from her colleagues.

“Have you heard of her?” Fran sat back down.

Delilah wrinkled her forehead. “I don’t think so. I’ve been too busy touring to listen to any new music.”

Fran called it up on her phone. “Her new single is incredible.” She hit play and Delilah listened, rapt.

She agreed. “You think this could go somewhere? Not the music, but with her?”

Fran swallowed down a breath. “I think it could. It’s early days, but signs are promising.”

“I’m pleased for you. You deserve love from someone better than me.” She put up her hand. “And before you tell me I wasn’t that bad—”

“I wasn’t going to,” Fran replied.

Delilah mimed a dagger to her heart. “Wow, you’re harsh. But I know I put you through it, so I deserve it. I’m just pleased you’ve found someone who wants the same thing you do. We were wrong time, wrong place.”

Fran nodded. “We were.”

“But we can still be friends, right?”

Fran eyed her, then nodded. Perhaps enough time had passed and they really could be. Like proper grown-ups. “I guess we can.”

“Fabulous.” Delilah sat forward and sipped her coffee. “That single is amazing, by the way. It’s still going round my head.” She got her phone from her bag, called up Ruby on Spotify and hit follow. “She’s still not signed? Doing this on her own?”

“She is. Adamant. She’s been burned by a label before. I’m leaving it for now, but I’d love to see her hit the big time.”

Delilah shrugged. “You can’t force her. People have got to come to it in their own time. A bit like coming out and being yourself.” She eyed Fran. “But I agree. She could be big.”

It was good to hear confirmation of that from Delilah. It made a difference.

“Anyway, as my friend, are you on for dinner tonight?” Delilah asked.

“Only if you’re paying, big shot.”

CHAPTER 23



Scott blew out a long breath as he dropped off a tree at Ruby's checkout. He leaned it against the counter, then gave his sister a wink. At 7ft, the tree was 12 inches taller than him. Scott's dark hair was hidden under his black bobble hat, his cheeks red from the cold.

"The Varnish family tree. They should be around here somewhere?" Scott's gaze raked the barn. It stopped at an excitable young boy running in their direction. "And there's the smallest. I gave him a ride on the quad bike earlier. I'm now his best friend forever."

As if backing up that claim, the young boy ran up to Scott and gave him a super-sized grin. "Hey, Scott!"

"Hey, Aaron." Scott stood back. "Here's your tree. Ready to take it home?"

Aaron's eyes were wide as he nodded, looking at the tree like it was the best thing he'd ever seen.

Ruby couldn't help but smile as his parents appeared, along with an older sister who was far too cool for Christmas. This family were like so many who came to Mistletoe Farm. Choosing their tree signalled the official start of their Christmas. Mistletoe Farm was all about making memories, and Ruby was proud to be a part of it.

"I'll leave you in the very capable hands of my sister, Ruby, to wrap it for

you.” Scott walked away.

Mrs Varnish peered at Ruby. “Are you doing the gig on Saturday?”

A blush worked its way to Ruby’s cheeks. “That’s me.”

The woman waggled a finger between herself and her husband. “We’re coming, and we can’t wait! We used to go to loads of gigs before we had kids. I’ve been listening to your stuff and you’re amazing. I can’t believe you’re serving us a Christmas tree.”

Ruby netted the tree with a smile, clambering over her embarrassment. “I hope you’re happy with the tree and the concert.”

“We can’t wait. We love it here. Any excuse to come back.”

It seemed like the gig was doing its job.

When the family left, Ruby glanced at her phone. No message from Fran yet today.

Fran had sent one when she got back to London on Tuesday, and it had left Ruby in no doubt that Fran had enjoyed Monday night just as much as she had. However, they were still separated by distance this week, and it was gnawing at Ruby. She had to remember she lived in London usually, and after Christmas, she and Fran would both be there together.

If they were an item by then.

That thought made Ruby run her fingers through her hair and pull it slightly. She wanted her and Fran to work more than she’d care to admit. What’s more, if Ruby had made a different decision, she could have been in London with Fran right now.

Somehow, Mistletoe had sucked her back in. But this year was different. She was happy to be helping out and spending time with her family. But something had shifted inside her. Was it time for a change? Could this be the last year she’d be netting Christmas trees? Her dad’s words had got through. Fran’s words had got through. Even the words from her last customer, who couldn’t believe she was serving her. Ruby shouldn’t be here. She should be in London with Fran. In London, working on her career.

That thought pulled her up short. Had Fran had that much of an effect on Ruby?

Ruby needed to get out of her comfort zone. But even as she thought that, Ruby's heart started to pound. Playing here was one thing. Playing to big crowds elsewhere was quite another. She made enough money doing what she did. It wasn't a lavish life, but she got by. Not every artist had to be a big star, did they?

Damn it, she confused herself. No wonder she'd been stalling, unable to move forward.

Fran's words rang in Ruby's ears. *'Putting your career on hold for a month every year is something most people wouldn't do.'* Was she self-sabotaging without realising it? Ruby ground her teeth together. Not only was Fran sexy. She was also shining a light on all the areas Ruby had been steadfastly trying to ignore.

Her phone ringing broke Ruby's train of thought. She glanced at the screen. It was Fran. She looked around the barn. Her mum was to her right, chatting with a customer. "Mum?"

Mary turned.

"Can you cover the till point for five minutes?" She held up her phone. "I just need to take this call."

Mary nodded. "No problem."

Ruby scooted over to the barn office, which did nothing to dispel memories of just how sexy Fran was. She still recalled very vividly two nights earlier, when Fran fucked her against the desk she was now leaning against. She could easily have sat on the sofa, or even in the office chair. But somehow, perching on this desk, legs spread, was her new favourite position.

"Hello to you," Ruby said as soon as the door was closed. "Guess where I am?"

"The Bahamas, sipping a tropical cocktail?"

"Close. I'm leaning against a certain desk in the office barn."

Fran paused for a few seconds.

Ruby was pretty sure she heard her smile.

“Are your legs spread?”

“Don’t.” Ruby closed her eyes, feeling herself getting wet.

“It’s my favourite desk in the whole world.”

“That makes two of us.” Ruby rolled her shoulders to stop herself dropping too deep into the memory. She was working, and this time, the blinds were wide open. She shook herself.

“Anyway, this is a lovely surprise. How’s it going with your indie girl band?”

“A little better. They’re here now, and Delilah is having a chat with them, which should hopefully go a long way to calming them down. If nothing else, they’ll have to process being starstruck, so it’ll take their attention away from their issues.”

Ruby’s jaw tightened. “Delilah’s there? Did you know she was coming?” She tried really hard to stop those words coming out as possessive. She wasn’t sure she succeeded.

“I didn’t, but she’s got a gap in her tour, so she came by the label. She’s really helping out with Fast Forward, and we’ve cleared the air.” Fran paused, clicking her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “Just so you know, I’m having dinner with her later. Purely as friends. We’ve both moved on, and we’ve both met new people. That’s you, by the way.”

Ruby’s muscles tightened, then relaxed a little. She wasn’t sure which part of the previous sentence to focus on. The positive or the negative. “That’s good to hear. Nobody wants to have incredible sex one night, and then hear that person is going out for dinner with their ex two nights later.”

“I know,” Fran replied. “But I promise, this is purely to catch up. Delilah and I are going to cross paths. We work for the same label. So just in case anything gets in the paper, remember that. I can’t wait to come back to Mistletoe and see you again.”

Ruby had no hold over Fran. They'd shagged once. They weren't going out. But Delilah was a megastar, and Ruby was not.

However, Fran's head wasn't turned by fame.

Ruby knew that.

She just had to keep reminding herself.

"The feeling's mutual." Ruby gripped the desk. The edge was now sticking into her leg. It wasn't quite as soft and sensual as it had been.

"How's the gig shaping up? I mailed Scott the designs, so hopefully he's getting the Facebook ads to work locally."

Ruby nodded. "He did, and he's having success. I walked him through the basics and he was awake half the night setting it up. He might become my social media manager after this."

"After your Mistletoe gig when everyone falls in love with you and your sales take off, you should definitely put him to work."

Ruby smiled. "There's only going to be a couple of hundred people. I'm not sure it's going to change my life."

"You never know who's going to be in the crowd. It could be someone big." It's what Fran told all her artists. She'd seen bands who played to five people, but one of those worked for a major label and that was the gig that changed their lives.

"I know. But the preparation's going well. I practised some more today, and we've got posters, flyers, the lot." Ruby dug the nail of her middle finger into the pad of her thumb. "You are going to make it back for Saturday, aren't you? It would feel kinda hollow without you here."

Fran didn't answer right away. "Fast Forward have got a gig on Friday that we're trying to gee them up for, then press and media at the weekend. I shouldn't need to be here and that's my plan. 99 per cent I'll be there. It's my mission, trust me. I'm going to do everything in my power."

It was as good as Ruby could hope for. She desperately wanted Fran to be there. Her world might screech to a halt if she wasn't. "Make sure your

power is super-charged.” Ruby pushed herself off the desk, trying to stay upbeat. “What about Troubadour? When are they getting here?”

Fran slipped back into professional mode. “They’re driving down on Friday with all their gear. They’re staying at my parents’ house, which is all sorts of weird. I’m normally very strict with my boundaries between work and home, but I’m bending them like crazy of late. I’m calling it the Mistletoe effect. Or maybe the Ruby O’Connell effect. I can’t quite decide.”

That perked Ruby up. She couldn’t help but grin as she swapped the phone from one ear to the other. “My support band are staying with your parents? That’s brilliant. Also, really fantastic of them. I’ll tell them thanks when I see them. I called in on them this lunchtime, by the way. Your Dad was baking again and the house smelt delicious. Your Pop was watching a Christmas movie and weeping, although he denied it, telling me he just had something in his eye. I don’t think you need to worry.”

“I’m looking forward to baked goods at the weekend,” Fran replied. “I just want you to know, Saturday is a priority, okay? It’s just, the label have been so helpful with your gig, I want to help them out with Fast Forward.”

Ruby nodded. “I understand. Anyway, I better get back. I left Mum on my till.”

“Me, too. I gotta run, Delilah’s just come back in the office after speaking to the band. Give my love to everyone and I can’t wait to see you at the weekend.”

Ruby pocketed her phone, then stared into space, before dropping onto the sofa. She’d known what she was getting into with Fran. Fran had a big job that she cared about. Those were good qualities in a person. However, if Fran prioritised it over Ruby’s gig, it would irk Ruby.

Scrap that, it would say something about Fran. That she hadn’t changed as much as she claimed. It would show Ruby that no matter what Fran said, her job came first: above friends, family and women she’d just slept with. If that were the case, it would seriously make Ruby question whether they had a

future together.

But Fran hadn't bailed on her yet.

Ruby should give her a chance.

Even if she was meeting up with her ex for dinner.

CHAPTER 24



Fran stared at the poster of Fast Forward on her office wall. If only the reality matched the perception. In the poster, their posture was loose and their confidence couldn't be called into question. What's more, every performance they'd done, they'd smashed it. Getting them to believe they were doing a great job was the trick. Fran tapped her email with the latest charts. They were still number three. They were never going to beat Skinny Boy and his novelty song about wheelbarrows, but Cupboard Boy was there for the taking.

Fran wanted to do it for young women everywhere. To show them they could compete with the boys and achieve their dreams. From being somewhat dismissive of the group at first, Fran was now willing them to succeed. Plus, she'd never had a hand in a Christmas number one. That would be a novel achievement.

A loud cheer from the team across the office caught her attention. She swivelled on her office chair and leaned back. They were unwrapping their secret Santa gifts. A bottle of wine was held aloft, followed by some pink, fur-covered handcuffs, and a tin of biscuits. Quite the combo. Fran pondered the order of use. Post-handcuff biscuits or post-handcuff wine? She'd plump for both.

The biscuits took Fran right back to Ruby. To their ill-fated car journey,

the start of the thaw in their relationship. It was only just over two weeks ago, but it seemed like a lifetime. That contraband biscuit had tasted delicious, one of the few things Fran ate that day. But it wasn't as delicious as what had happened since. Getting to know Ruby and then sleeping with her on Monday. Today was Thursday. Fran could just picture Ruby selling trees in the barn, a blur of people and activity.

She grabbed her phone. Did she have any more messages from Ruby? Nothing since last night, when Ruby had messaged saying Eric wasn't well and they'd had to postpone their rehearsal until today. Ruby was fretting that she wasn't going to be as prepared for Saturday as she should be.

Fran wasn't worried: she'd seen Ruby perform. Ruby had the pedigree, the experience. Yes, she'd had her live performance stresses while she was working with her label, and she hadn't played big audiences since. But Mistletoe was the perfect stepping stone. Fran was sure once Ruby took the leap, she wouldn't stop there. Ruby was stronger than she gave herself credit for. Fran hoped the same could be said for Fast Forward in the months and years to come.

She clicked to her recent calls and dialled home. It was a daily practice since leaving Mistletoe, one that thrilled and bemused her parents. "We're only in our 60s, not heading towards death anytime soon," Dad had told her.

"Hello, daughter dear." Pop breathed out and groaned, which told Fran he'd hobbled to a chair for her call.

"How's your leg?"

"Still attached," he replied.

"I hope you're sitting down when you're in your studio." When he was fit, Pop loved to stride about while creating.

"For the most part. Don't worry, your Dad makes sure of that. How are things going with your girl group?"

"Pretty good, I hope. They might even make number one."

"That would be incredible," Pop replied. "Ruby was here this morning,

checking on us. She's dropping in her chicken and pasta bake later. She said to ask you for the secret ingredients that make it delicious. Do you know them?"

A warmth washed through Fran at how thoughtful Ruby was. "I do. Parmesan and cream. Gird your loins and don't take your cholesterol level the next day."

"My mouth's watering already." Pop paused. "By the way, is everything okay with you two?"

Fran sat up. "I think so. I hope so. Why?" The hairs on her arm stood to attention.

"Because I saw some photos of you and Delilah online today and Ruby looked a little glum when she came round at lunchtime. I didn't say anything, but if I were her, I'd be put out."

Fran winced. She hadn't seen the photos. Even though they'd gone to a small, back-street bistro, it was always a risk they ran. "Shit. I did warn her I was going out with Delilah, but I'll give her a call. We just went out for dinner to catch up. But I promise I was home by ten."

"It's not me you need to tell. A little reassurance never hurt anyone." Pop said something off the phone to Dad, then came back. "Are you still going to be able to make it on Saturday? That would put a smile on Ruby's face, and onto ours. We're used to having you around. It feels wrong you're not here."

That made Fran smile. "Unless something goes drastically wrong, I'll be there. But I don't want to commit totally and make promises I can't keep."

Dad was quiet for a few moments before he replied. "She was quizzing us yesterday whether we thought you'd make it, and obviously we were non-committal. We know your work always comes first."

Ouch. That one stung, even though Fran deserved it. She'd not turned up for her parents too many times. She should change that pattern and commit. Starting now.

"I know this is important and I'll be here."

“It is. Not just for Ruby. For the village.”

Fran didn't even live in Mistletoe, but she was already connected. “I know. I'm committing to you that by hook or by crook, I'll be there. Don't overdo it and I'll see you at the weekend.”

Fran clicked off the call, then put Delilah's name into Google. Sure enough, when she clicked on the Images tab, the first ones to pop up were from last night, with Delilah walking beside Fran. Delilah was turning her head and laughing. Fran winced. Why couldn't Delilah have been frowning? Looking like she wasn't having a good time? At least there was no physical contact. Mainly because there hadn't been. But Fran saw how it might look from Ruby's side.

She opened up Ruby's message again. She needed to reply. Should she bring up the photos and Delilah? Ruby was busy, she might not have seen the photos. Fran hadn't. She decided to ignore it and focus on what was more important.

‘I'm sure you're going to kill it on Saturday. Fast Forward could use a little of your stage magic. I can't wait to see you then. Xxx’

Fran stared at the message for a good few minutes before hitting send. She hoped Ruby knew the effect she was having on her. Ruby wasn't just another girl, or just another singer.

Ruby could be huge professionally. But also, *they* could have something huge, too. Fran was going to make it back for the gig, whatever. Her and Ruby's future depended on it.

Even though she'd have to get the train and it wouldn't stop bloody snowing.

CHAPTER 25



“Let’s go again. From the top?” Ruby clutched the mic and sighed deeply. This evening wasn’t going to plan so far, and it was doing nothing for her nerves for Saturday. She glanced around the empty bar. It was Thursday, but they were opening an hour late so they had time to rehearse. Ruby had no doubt Norman was outside in his Morris Minor, frowning.

“Do you want to take five?” Eric rested his right elbow on the top of his electric-acoustic guitar, currently hanging from the well-worn brown leather strap around his neck.

Ruby shook her head. “No, I have to get this right. I can’t believe I keep fucking up the words to ‘Fairytale Of New York’. It’s a Christmas standard, for fuck’s sake.”

Eric furrowed his brow. “You’re very swearsy today and you’re making me a little nervous.”

Perhaps the tendrils of doubt from yesterday’s call with Fran were beginning to seep through. It hadn’t helped seeing photos of Delilah and Fran together today. Ruby’s mum had helpfully pointed them out to Ruby over lunch. Mum had no idea of Fran and Delilah’s history. Or what their present might be. Ruby, however, was fully aware. Fran had sent a vague text earlier telling her she’d be great on Saturday, but was she even coming? What if Delilah wanted to go to dinner again.

Ruby blew out a long breath. She'd tried to conjure up the feelings from Monday night, but they seemed far away. The more Ruby thought about her current situation, the more glum she got. It certainly wasn't helping the rehearsal.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be snappy." She gave Eric a half-smile. Ruby couldn't quite form a full one. "Ready?"

Eric gave her a less-than-certain nod, and began playing the intro to the song.

Ruby gathered up her strength and began to sing. She got through the first verse, then the chorus, then stumbled over the second verse again. Just like she had done for the last three times they'd tried it. Her nerves were shredded. How could she not remember the words? And if she couldn't remember the words to this song, what about all the others? What if it wasn't just the Christmas songs, but also her own? She'd seen singers hit the stage with lyric sheets on music stands before, and suddenly, she understood.

Or perhaps it was early onset dementia.

Either way, she was screwed.

She let out a yelp of frustration, then stamped her foot. "Sorry, maybe I do need a break." Ruby put her mic down on one of the bar tables and walked over to the corner table normally occupied by Norman. She slumped back, splaying her long legs in front of her.

The door between the shop and the bar swung open. Both Ruby and Eric looked up.

Victoria swept in, giving them both a wide smile. When she saw their faces, she stopped mid-grin and put a hand up.

"What's going on? I swear I just heard the opening bars to 'Fairytale Of New York' a few minutes ago. I was expecting high fives and smiling faces. Instead, I walk in to Ruby slumped in a corner, and Eric fiddling with his capo. Not a euphemism."

Ruby threw up her hands, then rubbed her palms up and down her face.

She needed to put thoughts of Fran aside. She and Eric needed this time to rehearse. If the past hour had taught her anything, it was that.

“Everything’s fine.” Ruby sat upright. “I keep forgetting the words to all the Christmas standards. The gig is in two days. The whole fucking town is coming to see me and I can’t sing a song without bugging it up. It’s just peachy.”

Victoria walked over to Ruby, sat beside her and rubbed her thigh. “You’ve forgotten words before. You’ll be fine on the night. If you’re worried, take lyric sheets on with you and tape them to the floor. It’s always good to have back-up.”

Ruby sighed. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“No need to sound so surprised.” She stared at Ruby. “Plus, you can’t forget the words to ‘Fairytale Of New York’. It’s like forgetting the words to ‘Last Christmas’. You are doing ‘Last Christmas’, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Victoria squeezed Ruby’s knee. “Are you okay otherwise? Everything good in Ruby Town?”

Ruby ducked her head. “Fine.” When she looked up, Victoria was giving her a look.

“What?”

“This is about a girl, isn’t it? Mum said you crawled in early on Monday after spending the night out. I can only assume it was with Fran?”

Ruby’s cheeks flared.

“What happened?”

Ruby slumped again. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s not, but it is.”

“You’re not making much sense.” Victoria paused. “You slept with her on Monday?”

Ruby hesitated, but knew Victoria would see through the lie.

She nodded.

“I knew it!” She glanced at Eric. “What did I tell you?”

Eric rolled his eyes.

“And what was it like?”

Ruby gave her sister a look. “I’m not telling you that!” Ruby glanced at Eric.

Victoria slapped Ruby’s leg. “Eric and I have no secrets. I’ll only fill him in later, so he might as well hear it now.”

Ruby snorted, then relented. “It was great. But now she’s back in London and she might not be able to make it back for Saturday because of her work.”

Ruby wasn’t going to mention Delilah.

Victoria made a sad face.

“Plus, she was out for dinner last night with her ex, which isn’t ideal.”

Victoria frowned. “I thought she was out for dinner last night with Delilah. At least, that’s what I saw in the papers today.”

Ruby watched as realisation dawned.

“Her ex is *Delilah*?” Victoria blinked rapidly.

Ruby had vowed not to say anything, but it just slipped out and then Victoria filled in the blanks. Ruby jumped up, waving her arms in a ‘cut!’ motion. “Forget I said that last bit. Forget I said *anything*. Delilah isn’t out, and this *can’t* get out. I promised Fran.” Horror thoughts ran through Ruby’s mind. Of all the people to tell, she’d told *Victoria*?

“Promise me you won’t say anything to anyone? None of your friends or our family? Swear on Eric’s life.” Ruby gave Victoria her sternest face.

“Of course, I can keep a secret!”

Eric snorted. “She can’t, but I’ll make sure she keeps this one.” He gave Ruby a nod. “Don’t worry.”

It was as good as Ruby could hope for.

“Delilah is gay? Well, shit the bed.” Her sister paused. “Fran has a thing for singers, huh?”

“Hopefully just a thing for me, but the photos of her and Delilah gadding about town have done nothing for my ego.”

“I saw those photos, but just assumed they worked together. She seemed pretty into you, didn’t she?”

Ruby nodded. “She did. And she does still work with Delilah, I know that. Plus, I hardly have any claim over her. We slept together once.” But ever since, every day had dragged like it was a year. Ruby wanted to know what Fran was doing, what she was thinking. The distance, albeit temporary, was killing her.

Victoria gave her a look. “You and I both know that counts for something.”

Ruby pouted. “We only started being civil to each other two weeks ago. It’s too soon to tell.” Ruby’s words were rational, but her feelings were anything but.

“No wonder you’re forgetting words.” Victoria took Ruby by the shoulders. “Fran had to go back to London, but she will be back and you will work this out — whether she gets back for the concert or not. Even if she doesn’t, you’ve got tons of people who are looking forward to it, so you have to push your fears aside and do it. You’re going to smash this, little sister. You know why?”

Ruby shook her head. “I have no clue.”

“Because you’re a superstar! I knew that when Mum and Dad gave you your first microphone, aged three. I still know it today. I’m sure Fran will try her best to make it back, seeing as it was her idea in the first place. She’s invested. But even if she doesn’t, there are still a million reasons to be excited about it. Mistletoe. The farm. The community. The exposure. This is your night to shine and make a difference. Don’t lose sight of the reasons you’re doing it in the first place.” Victoria paused. “It’s all going to work out with the gig and with Fran. I guarantee it.”

Ruby gave her a smile. She loved her sister for trying. “How can you be sure?”

Victoria gave her a wink. “Because you don’t fall off a ladder for just

anyone. You *want* this to work. So, it will.”

CHAPTER 26



Fran stared at the National Rail website: a tree on the line had brought the London to Suffolk line to a standstill. It would probably be cleared by Saturday morning, but could she take the risk? She blew out a long breath and Googled car hire. The prices made her wince. As she'd told Ruby, music didn't pay well. Then again, she was pretty sure Ruby was well aware.

Damian slid into the chair beside her. He spun round once, twice, then let out a long sigh before he stopped, facing her.

“Why the long face?”

“Why the long sigh?”

Damian rolled his eyes. “I spoke to marketing to see if we could get Fast Forward's next single moved up to jump on the success of this one. But the dates don't work, which sucks.” He paused. “Your turn.”

“I was just looking at the trains back to Snowy Bottom on Saturday and wondering if they were going to be running if trees keep tumbling and the snow carries on.” She glanced out the window, where a light flurry was still falling.

Damian put both his palms up and sat forward in his chair. “Can we just take a moment to stop and marvel at the fact you're getting a train in the snow to Snowy Bottom, and then heading to Mistletoe? If I didn't know this was true, I would never believe you.”

Fran laughed. Damian was always good at light relief. “You can’t help but say the names and feel happier, can you? Everyone is happy in Mistletoe.” She thought of Audrey, Mary, Norman and the gang. “Eccentric, but happy. I just hope I can make it for tomorrow.”

Fran also hoped Ruby had remembered her words. She’d texted last night to say she was having issues.

Damian studied her, went to say something, then sat back.

“What?” Fran asked.

Damian shook his head. “Nothing. It’s just... This is about Ruby, right? You really want to get back for the gig. I get it. But you’ve never been like this before with anyone else. Certainly not with you-know-who.”

“I wasn’t allowed to be anything with her.” Fran remembered everything about being in a relationship with Delilah. Most of it was bad. She was glad they could be friends now.

Fran just hoped Ruby felt the same.

“But you’re distracted. You’re different.” He paused, tilting his head. “I think you’ve found someone you really care about.”

Damian was only 29. The same age as Ruby. However, he was wise beyond his years. He’d also been in a committed relationship for three years with a lovely woman named Isla. If anyone was the relationship expert of the two of them, it was him. Damian managed to juggle work and love, a trick Fran had never mastered. Instead, she’d just put love on hold and thrown herself into work. The only reason she and Delilah had met was because it had happened at work.

But Damian had a point. Fran was distracted. She wasn’t focused purely on her job.

Ruby had her attention.

“I like this new side of you, by the way. It makes you seem more human. More vulnerable.”

Fran had watched Brene Brown. She knew vulnerable was all the rage.

However, it wasn't normally her thing. She glanced at her pink trousers. Just as colour hadn't been, until she met Ruby. "Vulnerable wasn't what I was going for, but I'll take your word for it." She paused. "But yes, I would like things to work out with Ruby. But it means I *have* to get home on Saturday."

Damian raised an eyebrow. "Home?"

Fran sat up, rolling her shoulders. "Back to my parents' place. You know what I mean."

Damian said nothing, just shot her an amused smile.

"Stop staring at me like that." Fran checked her phone. No new messages from Ruby since her good morning message today.

What was she doing?

Fran had work to do, and she was fretting over a woman and allowing Damian to see it all.

"You're mooning," he told her.

"I'm going crazy not being able to talk to her. Also, I'm worried that she's seen photos of me and Delilah online."

"So long as Delilah wasn't pawing you like she was when I came in the other day." More eyebrow raising.

"It was a momentary thing and it was hardly pawing." But Damian was right. "Why is real-life dating so hard?" Fran lowered her voice so nobody else overheard the next bit. "Dating Delilah was easy because I just had to pretend she didn't exist."

"It's ironic you're worrying about being seen with her now you can be, isn't it?"

The irony was not lost on Fran.

"If you're going a little crazy, that says to me you're falling for this woman."

Fran's blush began in her toes and hit the very edges of her eyelashes. "It's a bit early for that. We've slept together once." But she already knew there was some truth in Damian's words. She couldn't stop thinking about

Ruby. Their sex had been off the chart. She desperately wanted to do it again. It was another reason she wanted to get back to Mistletoe as soon as she could. London, which had always held such glamour, paled beside Ruby.

Damian shrugged. "I knew the first time I kissed Isla that I wanted to kiss her for a very long time."

"But tell me truthfully: can it ever work with a singer? You're with a teacher. A far more sensible profession."

"Ruby O'Connell is not Delilah." Damian's words hit home. He lowered his voice. "She's as far away from Delilah as she could possibly be. She's sorted and sane. Plus, she has a better voice, but don't tell Delilah I said that."

Fran snorted. "Your secret's safe with me." She closed her eyes and spun in her chair, still thinking. "But I've tried going out with a singer and it was a car crash. I can't escape that."

"Thanks very much," Delilah said.

Fran's eyelids sprang open, and she gave Damian a 'why-didn't-you-warn-me?' look. She jumped up, clutching her chest, her heart pounding. "Where did you come from? Shit. I didn't mean for you to hear that." *Bugger.*

But Delilah shook her head, glancing around the office before she replied. There was nobody close by. "I was a car crash, no need to sugar-coat it." She threw Fran an apologetic look, then glanced at her screen. "Why are you hiring a car?"

"She needs to get back to Mistletoe for Ruby's concert on tomorrow," Damian replied.

Delilah glanced at Fran, then shook her head. "Don't hire a car. Take my Porsche. You're still on the insurance, and I'm not using it."

Fran's mouth gaped. "Are you sure?" Delilah was proving more useful this week than she ever had when they were together.

"Positive. I'll get someone to drop it round to yours later and give you the keys. Just let me know a time."

“That would be perfect, thank you.”

Delilah shrugged. “Happy to help. I just stopped by to check about Fast Forward’s gig tomorrow. I can get there for 8pm, that okay?”

Damian nodded. “I’ll tell security to expect you.”

Delilah squeezed Fran’s shoulder. “Great. Gotta dash, lunch calls. See you tomorrow.”

Fran stared as she left the office. She turned to Damian. “Did that just happen? My ex, who used to cause me no end of problems, is now the expert problem-solver?” Fran’s mind was still whirling.

“Maybe singers aren’t the tyrants you make them out to be,” Damian replied.

Fran shook her head. “Maybe not.”

“Now you can go back to Mistletoe with no worries. I’ll take care of things this end.”

Emotion rose up through Fran. Damian wasn’t just a work colleague. He was a friend, too. She got up and hugged him.

He hugged her right back. “One condition, though,” Damian said. “I want a present from mystical Mistletoe. Plus, I want to come to the Tree Contest next year. It sounded awesome.”

Fran smiled. “You’re on. My parents can put you and Isla up.” She put a hand to her chin. “A present from Mistletoe.” She twisted her mouth. “How about some shit on a twig?”

Damian let out a howl of laughter. “That would be perfect.”

CHAPTER 27



Ruby jumped off her quad bike and grabbed the chainsaw from the back. The Nolan family — two mums and twin girls around seven — stared at her with wide eyes. That it was a queer family made this extra-special. What did the girls call their parents? Mum and Mummy? Mum and Mamma?

Ruby recalled the chat she'd had with Fran about what she called her two dads. It seemed an awfully long time ago. Especially because she hadn't heard from her since yesterday morning, and today was Saturday, the day of the concert. She was still forgetting words. Still googling those photos. Still thinking the worst.

“Okay, I need you to stand back behind that tree with the yellow flag on it.” Ruby wasn't going to focus on Fran. Instead, she was going to chop this tree and start this family's Christmas.

The family moved, then Ruby grabbed the chainsaw and ripped the cord. Power rippled through her. She put her visor over her eyes, then got to work felling the tree. When it collapsed to the ground with a thud, one of the girls grabbed her mum's leg, the other whooped. Ruby had been a whooper as a child, following her dad around the farm like he was some kind of Christmas magician. Now, she held the magic.

“See you back at the barn in half an hour to collect your tree!”

Ruby had one more tree to cut before she made her way back. That was

going to be her final one for the day, before she headed back to the house and started getting ready for tonight. A gig it looked like Fran wouldn't make it back for. The trains weren't working, and Fran was clearly too busy. Chopping down trees had helped Ruby to rationalise it a little.

But this was showbiz. The show must go on.

The buzz of another quad bike approaching made Ruby look up. She waved at her dad, but didn't recognise the person he was giving a lift to. However, she recognised the yellow coat. Her dad cut his engine, and the passenger hopped off.

It was only when the woman removed her helmet that Ruby's heart boomed.

Fran. She'd made it back.

Ruby's body flooded with nervous energy, her temperature spiked.

"You got any more to do before you go back?" Dad asked.

"One more," Ruby replied, keeping one eye on Fran.

"Okay. Do that, then give Fran a lift back to the barn. Scott can take over from there. You need to get ready!"

Her dad hauled the Nolan's tree onto his bike. "See you later." He put his helmet back on and rode off.

Ruby gazed at her dad's departing bike, before turning her attention to Fran.

She clutched her helmet in her hand, but looked anything but comfortable.

"Of all the forests in all the world," Ruby began. She walked nearer to Fran. "Why didn't you let me know you were coming back? I thought Fast Forward and Delilah had won."

"I'm sorry I didn't let you know." Fran winced. "Yesterday was manic with the gig, then I was going to tell you on the drive here, but my phone ran out of charge. So I thought I'd make it a surprise."

"It's certainly that," Ruby said.

They stood awkwardly looking at each other. Ruby couldn't quite work out what the next move was.

Fran took a lungful of air. "Have I mentioned the smell in this forest is still insane."

Ruby eyed Fran. "Once or twice."

"The courtyard looked busy. How's business?"

Ruby went with it, although business wasn't at the forefront of her mind. "We've had a good week. We're expecting a big crowd for tonight, too."

"It's why I'm here. I told you I'd try my hardest." She paused, spreading her arms wide. "Here I am."

"I'd resigned myself to you *not* coming after I heard about the trains. How did you get here?"

Fran looked down and dug her hands in her pockets, before catching Ruby's gaze.

The way the sunlight caught Fran's face and hair through the trees was stunning. Fran was so beautiful. Why hadn't Ruby told her yet? Why hadn't they touched? Because they were still sussing each other out. Ruby's heart bookmarked this moment. She wanted to get back to this feeling soon.

"Delilah lent me her car and I drove over." Fran sucked on her top lip.

Delilah. There was that name again. Ruby's defences rose. She pulled her shoulders back. "I need to cut down one more tree. You want to jump on the bike and do it with me?"

Ruby didn't want to dwell on Fran's words. Actions would make them go away.

Fran nodded. "Love to."

Ruby put on her helmet and jumped on the bike, waiting for Fran to do the same.

When Fran's body cosied up to Ruby and her arms wound around Ruby's waist, Ruby could hardly breathe. It had only been five days since they saw each other, but it felt like longer. So much had gone on since then. Fran had

lived a whole other life with a pop superstar. Ruby couldn't match up to that. Ruby had no idea if *she* was who Fran still wanted.

However, having Fran's arms around her felt *exactly* right. Like this is where Fran should have been the whole time.

Delilah wasn't going anywhere. London was where they all lived come January. There had to be room for all three of them in such a vast city.

Ruby fired up the bike and turned to Fran. "Hold on tight!" she shouted over the engine noise.

Fran nodded, then clutched her tighter.

Ruby concentrated on driving, but it wasn't easy.

They rode down the line of trees, colour-coded with orange tags that meant they weren't going to be chopped for another two years. Ruby had a dream to have a house big enough to fit a 10ft tree one day. She wanted to put it in her hallway so everyone could comment on her tree from Mistletoe Farm.

Ruby pulled up at the next tree to chop, and waited for Fran jump off. Ruby grabbed the chainsaw from the back. "You want to chop a tree down?"

Fran looked horrified as she shook her head. "No, I'll leave that to the experts." She took off her helmet. "A chainsaw suits you. You wield it well."

If that's what Fran thought, Ruby was going to put on a show. One that told Fran she was a better bet than Delilah. Even though she couldn't give her a car, or any other riches. Ruby fired up the chainsaw and approached the bottom of the tree. She cut at an angle, and within minutes a dull thud and boom reverberated around the forest as the tree hit the ground. Ruby put the chainsaw back on the bike, then flipped up her visor. "Was it as good as you'd hoped?"

Fran smiled. "It was better."

Ruby wanted to say something cool and effortless in reply, but nothing came to mind. There was an awkwardness to their speech and movements, like they'd never met before. They were laboured. Ruby was desperate for

something to ease the gears and for them to click again, but it wasn't coming easy.

"How did the gig go last night?" Ruby decided to stick to safe ground with Fran. Work.

Fran nodded. "The girls overcame their nerves and did a great job. Delilah helped out, too." Fran winced. "Sorry, I seem to be mentioning her name a lot, but she's just been around a lot this week unexpectedly. She's been really helpful with the band, and lending me her car."

Ruby ground her teeth together. It was still a little hard to swallow. "You worked out your differences with her? I saw the photos of you."

Fran gave her a steady stare. "It was just dinner with a friend, like I told you. She's coming out to her parents over Christmas, so it's a big deal. I think the thought of losing her current relationship spurred her into action. She knows she fucked up with me." Fran's gaze never wavered. "But we're in the past. I'm looking to the future now and I hope you're in it."

"I hope so, too." Ruby breathed out frozen air and banged her gloved hands together. Her heart was pounding. That was good news, right? "Can you give me a hand getting this onto the bike?"

Fran nodded and together, they heaved the tree into position.

Fran stood one side, Ruby stood the other. Six feet and a hundred pines of separation. "Before we head back to the barn, can we clear the air. Things don't feel settled between us and I really want them to be."

Ruby was still holding back. She was still annoyed at this week. Mostly at herself for how jealousy had crept up on her. Fran had been honest with her. She shouldn't be holding a grudge.

"No better place to clear the air than here."

Fran took in her surroundings. "You're right," she said. "I want you to know that I hated being away this week. Especially after Monday." She paused. "I've been replaying Monday night in my head a lot. It's helped me get through this week."

Ruby broke. "I have, too." She gave Fran a smile.

Fran's shoulders sighed in relief. "I've hated not being able to chat properly, with me being busy, and the barn reception so iffy."

"Me, too." A gust of wind sailed through the forest. Ruby glanced at Fran. "It wasn't easy seeing photos of you with Delilah. I've got no hold over you, you're not my girlfriend. We never spoke about anything beyond Monday. We slept together once. Yet, it felt like more. Which scared me a little."

Fran walked to her, then put a hand on her arm. "I missed you, too. And it *was* more." She put a hand over her heart. "I felt it right here."

Ruby's breath caught in her throat. "I'm glad it wasn't just me." She glanced up at the sky, the bluest of blues. "But you scared me." She brought her eyes back level with Fran. "When you said you might not make it back. I thought you didn't care as much about us. About the gig. About Mistletoe."

Fran shook her head. "I was covering my bases. But I shouldn't have. I should have committed. To you, to my parents. I know that now. I'm sorry I've come off a bit flakey this week. But the thought of seeing you again today has been keeping me going."

"Even though I'm not a superstar or vying for the Christmas number one?"

Fran shook her head. "I'm not after that, I never have been. You're a star in your own right. I hope you know that."

Fran really thought so? Ruby's heart thundered. "I don't quite believe it yet, but I'm going to fake it until I make it." At least having this heart to heart with Fran was taking Ruby's mind off the gig. Hundreds of people staring at her.

"You're going to be great. And you know what the best thing is? They're here to see *you*. This isn't a rock club and nobody's going to heckle or boo you off stage. Just remember that when the lights come on tonight."

Ruby blew out a breath, nodding. "I'm glad you came back."

Fran took Ruby's gloved hand in hers. "I'm glad, too. It was good reconnecting with Delilah. It made me see how unsuited the two of us were. And how suited *we are*. What we might have going forward. We can be neighbours. Friends. Lovers."

Ruby shuddered. "I hate the term lovers. It sounds like all we do all day is shag."

Fran gave her a look. "And that's a problem because?"

Ruby let out a bark of laughter. "You know what I mean." She pulled Fran closer. Now, from not quite knowing what to say or what to do, Ruby knew exactly what to do.

"What term would you prefer?"

Ruby hesitated, then decided to be brave. "Girlfriends?"

Fran's smile grew wider. "I was hoping you'd say that. I'm sorry if I made you doubt me this week."

"Are you coming back for Christmas, too?"

Fran nodded. "I can't miss my first Christmas in Mistletoe, can I? It would be nearly as bad as missing my girlfriend's big homecoming gig." Fran pulled Ruby closer and pressed her lips to hers.

Red-hot desire throbbed through Ruby. She kissed Fran back, emotion swirling inside. When they eventually pulled back, her heart thumped.

"I better get this tree back to base, otherwise we're going to have a riot on our hands. Jump on the bike?"

Fran nodded, wrapping her arms around Ruby once more. Only this time, it was perfect. This time, their bodies slotted together like they were meant to be. Ruby turned the ignition under her hand and revved the bike, careful to go slow so the trees didn't fall off. When they went over rougher terrain, Fran grabbed her tighter, which made Ruby want to do it more. They pulled up outside the barn minutes later.

Scott ran over and grabbed the tree, giving them both a grin.

Ruby took off her helmet and shook her hair. Her skin prickled. She

threw her helmet onto the back of the bike and did the same with Fran's. Then they stood looking at each other, a shy smile on Fran's face.

"That was pretty cool. This morning I left London a little uncertain and praying I made it back. Now I've got a girlfriend who can wield a chainsaw and ride a quad bike. I feel like all my lesbian Christmases have come at once." Fran ruffled her hair and moved closer to Ruby. "Thanks for believing in me."

Ruby's smile was tight. "I had my doubts this week, but you're here and that's the main thing. But I need to get ready. Walk me back to the farmhouse?"

Fran threaded an arm through Ruby's.

They walked through the tree barn, busy with Saturday buyers, then out into the equally buzzing courtyard. Ruby's feet crunched on the grit her parents had put down this morning, just in case.

"Have you remembered the words to the Christmas hits yet?"

Ruby shook her head, eyeing the stage as they passed. "Don't." She walked up to it, nodding at the stage floor. "Victoria came up with a wicked back-up plan." Laminated lyric sheets were already stapled to the floor. "Just in case stage fright renders me numb." They carried on walking towards the house. "Tonight's sold out," Ruby added. "The weather's good, so it's going to be in the courtyard. 500 tickets all gone. There aren't many gigs around here, so people are really coming out."

Fran squeezed Ruby's arm. "They're also coming to see *you*. Because you're amazing."

Ruby took the compliment on the chin. It was a perfect winter's day, that would hopefully lead into the perfect winter's night. Crisp, clear, a success.

They pulled up outside the front door.

Fran dropped Ruby's arm.

Ruby already missed her. "Stop by the barn to say hi beforehand if you like." She tried to sound casual, but she wasn't sure it worked.

“I don’t want to ruin your preparations.”

Ruby leaned forward and kissed Fran’s lips. “I promise: you being there won’t ruin a thing.”

CHAPTER 28



Fran walked back down the farm drive a few hours later with her parents: it hummed with activity. She could taste the anticipation in the air.

From being sure about Ruby, now Fran had nerves on Ruby's behalf. However, nerves were good. Fran had worked with enough acts to know that. But tonight was different.

This was Ruby getting over her personal demons, as well as performing to all the people she loved the most.

The crowd ahead was already thick, and Fran had to shout to clear a path for her Pop. He hobbled towards the stage on crutches, Dad guiding his every step. They were so sweet together, and they'd been the perfect role models for Fran. She wanted that in her relationship, too. She hoped she might have found it with Ruby.

They located the elevated seats Mary and Paul had reserved for them, and Fran got her parents settled.

"We're in the VIP section by the look of it."

Dad and Pop allowed themselves a smug smile. "It pays to be in with the farm owners."

"Beer? Mulled wine?"

Dad shook his head. "Mulled cider. Paul introduced me to it this week

and it's delicious."

Pop gave him a look. "I'm surprised you're going back in after the way you felt the morning after."

Dad gave him a shy grin. "I'm not planning on drinking quite as much tonight. I was just excited on Wednesday." He paused. "Can you get us a couple of buttered pretzels, too?" He rubbed his hands together. "I love living near a Christmas tree farm. Christmas treats on tap!"

The queues at the bar were minimal, and Fran got a hug from Victoria when she got there.

"So pleased you made it back, I know it means the world to Ruby. Especially after this week and everything that went on with..." Victoria eyes widened. She dropped Fran's gaze and cleared her throat.

"Everything that went on with what?" What had Ruby said?

Victoria shook her head. "Just the gig, her forgetting her lines. It's been a stressful week." Victoria's cheeks bruised purple. "Have you seen Ruby yet?"

Fran let it go. What Victoria knew or didn't know wasn't important tonight. "Not tonight. I saw her earlier. I'm going to try to poke my head around if there's time."

A strum of an electric guitar made them both turn their heads. The support band were tuning up. The gig kicked off in ten minutes.

"I know she'd appreciate it." Victoria ladled three mulled ciders from her massive steel urn, putting lids on the cardboard cups to keep the heat in.

Fran took them, breathing in the scent of orange, cinnamon and spices. The smell of Christmas. She made her way back through the chattering crowds, the buzz in the air heightening. To her right, a fire pit crackled in the corner, and Paul was holding court around it. She delivered the drinks back to her parents, then headed out again to the pretzel truck which was doing a roaring trade. She got three, then brought them back to eat with her parents just as the support band began. Fran had seen them play before, so her focus

was more on the crowd. How attentive they were, because that would affect Ruby, too. The answer was, very. Even her parents, who were average music fans, were rapt by song three.

Fran took the opportunity to slip away, rounding the bottom of the stage and slipping past the pick-and-mix truck, and one selling posh socks. She shivered as she approached the barn, then walked through the yard to the office she was very familiar with. Ruby was inside, blinds drawn. Fran could hear her doing her scales.

She hesitated once, then knocked lightly on the door.

Ruby opened the door in seconds. When she saw Fran, she tried a half-smile. It almost worked.

Fran's heart lurched. She wanted to wrap Ruby up and protect her, but that wasn't what she needed.

"Hey." She went to step inside, but Ruby shook her head.

"I was just coming out anyway. I need to hear a bit of the band, feel the crowd." She took a deep breath and shut the door.

"How are you feeling?"

Ruby blew out a breath. "Nervous as hell, but that's normal."

She walked on her tip-toes, faster than normal.

"You're going to be great."

"Ruby!" Mary waved from the other side of the barn. She raced over and gave Ruby a bear hug. "You're going to be brilliant." She kissed her cheek. "I gotta run, people are still buying Christmas trees. But this is the last sale, then I'm taking my place." Mary checked her watch. "Twenty minutes!" Mary pressed something into Fran's hand, then ran back to her station.

Fran opened her palm. Mary had given her a sprig of Mistletoe. She raised an eyebrow at Ruby. "I've no idea what your mum's suggesting."

Ruby took it from Fran's hand and held it above their heads. "Maybe this?"

Fran didn't need a second invitation. She reached up on tiptoes and

pressed her lips to Ruby's. Lust rippled through her. She snaked an arm around Ruby's neck and pulled her lips closer.

When they parted, Fran stared up at her. Ruby didn't know how gorgeous or talented she was. That was part of her charm.

"Can you believe it took us this long to kiss under the mistletoe in Mistletoe?"

Ruby laughed. "My *mother* had to step in."

"Let's keep it between you and me." Fran smiled. "It was worth the wait."

"It was."

Outside, Troubadour finished a song and the crowd whooped and clapped. "We've got two more for you until you get the woman you're all her for. The incredible Ruby O'Connell!"

This time, the cheering and applause were so much louder.

Ruby's face dropped a little.

Fran took hold of both her hands. "Listen to me: you're going to be great tonight. I'm not your label or your manager. But I am your girlfriend." She touched Ruby's cheek with her fingertips. "If you'd let me, I could be your biggest cheerleader. This is your gig. Your hometown gig. Your big moment. I can't wait to hear you sing 'Pieces Of You'. I can't wait for your hometown to realise how great you are." She kissed her lips a final time. "And who knows? Bigger things come from this."

When Fran pulled back, Ruby's green gaze was on her. "Let's deal with this gig for now. One step at a time. Maybe in six months I might feel differently about being a big star, who knows? For now, I'm happy being a small fish in a small pond." Ruby kissed Fran again.

Fran's head span.

A wolf whistle split the air.

Fran glanced up to see Victoria and Eric walking towards them, Eric with his guitar aloft.

“Get a room, you two!” Victoria shouted.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “I apologise for my family.”

“Never apologise.” Fran narrowed her stare, then stepped back. “You look every inch the superstar, too, by the way. Now go out there and break a leg.” Fran tilted her head. “Not literally, of course. One of those in the family is quite enough for one year.”



RUBY STRUMMED HER GUITAR TWICE, then stepped up to the mic. “One, two, Mistletoe!”

The crowd roared back their approval, and a shiver of pride rolled through Fran. Her girlfriend was on stage. From the look on Ruby’s face, she was loving it.

Fran breathed out a sigh of relief.

And relax.

“One, two, Mistletoe!” Ruby said again.

This time, someone in the crowd shouted it right back. Fran scanned the front couple of rows for the instigator, even though she recognised the voice.

Audrey. Sure enough, in seconds Audrey was on her feet, hands in the air. “Everybody!” she shouted. “One, two, Mistletoe!”

Ruby repeated it, then tuned her guitar.

Meanwhile, the crowd, led by the unstoppable Audrey, slowly began to chant. “One, two Mistletoe! One, two, Mistletoe!”

Beside them, Paul and Mary’s faces were a picture. “That’s what I say!” Paul shouted at Fran’s parents. But he also chanted it right back at his daughter.

“Thank you so much, Mistletoe! This is my first time playing for all the people I love most in the world.” Ruby’s gaze landed on the elevated seated section to her left. She blew them a kiss. “I hope you enjoy my Christmas

set.”

She launched into her first song, and the crowd began to jig along, hips swaying, voices loose. Right there in that first song, Ruby came alive. It was as if she'd been given permission to flourish, to showcase herself, to have fun. She was going to do just that.

Fran could do nothing but stand and grin, just like the rest of Ruby's family and friends. The looks on their faces were priceless. They knew what Ruby could do, but they almost never saw her perform. Tonight was the culmination of all those gigs Ruby had done, all the hours of practise she'd put in. Even the gig where it went so wrong. It hadn't diminished her. Ruby was born for the bigger stage. Bigger than the one she was on.

Five songs in and the crowd were going wild, Audrey now silenced, everyone hanging on Ruby's every word.

“Thank you so much!” Ruby shook her head as she scanned the courtyard. She looked like she couldn't believe where she was. She also looked the most content Fran had ever seen her.

“I cannot believe I'm playing the courtyard where I grew up. I've built snowmen on this ground. I've scraped my knee, drunk too much mulled wine. I think I may have even thrown up in that corner over there. Don't worry, Mum made me clean it up.” Ruby waited for the laughter to die down. “I want to say thank you to you all for being here, and for supporting Mistletoe Christmas Tree Farm. Please order your trees for next year. But mostly, thank you to the people who made this all possible. My parents, my brother and sister, my wonderful band, and also to Fran Bell for dreaming it up in the first place.”

Fran stood stock still. She hadn't expected a shout-out. She glanced at her parents who were giving her wide puppy eyes. Happiness danced through her, a smile shone from her face. Ruby was so far from Delilah, just like Damian had said. With her, Fran could be out, be herself. She wasn't a dirty secret with Ruby. It made all the difference.

“Now, I’d like to play you my new song which is very special to me. Very personal. And I want to dedicate to a very special person in the crowd. She knows who she is.”

Fran’s stomach rolled. She gritted her teeth and held it together. Ruby dedicated her new song to her. Emotion bubbled up inside her. Fran wasn’t a crier, but if she had been, this would have been the time. Instead, she grabbed her phone from her pocket, turned it onto Ruby and hit record.

When Ruby began to sing, the crowd hushed. By the middle eight, she had them in the palm of her hand. When Ruby hit the high notes, Fran swooned. Everyone was glued to Ruby’s every breath. Fran made sure her hand was steady, as she got every note of the song, plus the crowd’s reaction when it ended.

Fran knew stardom when she saw it. Ruby had it, the elusive ‘thing’ that all labels looked for. She could be a folk/pop crossover like so many before her. But she had to want it.

Fran glanced down at the video, then shared it on her Instagram feed.

If nothing else, her followers could hear it and marvel, too.



THE CROWD WERE STILL BASKING in the afterglow of the gig, and her public weren’t keen to let Ruby go. She’d threaded her hour and 20-minute set with her own songs, a smattering of Christmas favourites and some folk classics, and it had gone down a storm. Ruby had hugged Audrey and Norman, chatted to farm staff and locals alike, and now she was with her family.

Fran let Ruby’s parents hug her, then her sister, before Ruby greeted Fran, Dad and Pop.

Her parents couldn’t wait for their hug.

“Ruby, you were incredible. Fran told us how good you were, but that was such a performance. Fran was right, you should be a megastar!”

Ruby cast her gaze to the floor, then shook her head. “My hometown made it easy.” She glanced at Fran. “But without your daughter, it wouldn’t have happened.”

Fran shook her head. Ruby was too quick to attribute her success to others. It was time she owned it. “This wasn’t me. This was all you.”

Ruby glanced at her parents. “Do you need me to do anything else here?”

Paul shook his head. “I want you to do nothing here. The cafe staff are going to take down the stage. We’ve got the food and drink stands covered, and our Christmas tree pre-orders are through the roof. One thing, though. Everyone has demanded another concert next year, so can we make this an annual event?” He paused. “I should let you know, I’ve already said yes.” He walked over and put an arm around Ruby, kissing her cheek.

“I would love to,” Ruby said. “From being scared stiff, it’s turned into the best night of my life. I could feel the love from the crowd. If you have that, you can’t fail.”

Fran shook her head. “You can’t.”

“By the way,” Paul added. “That ‘one, two, Mistletoe’ chant got me a little jealous. Nobody’s ever chanted it back at me before.”

Ruby laughed. “I’ll credit you next time, Dad.”

Paul smiled. “It’s my gift to you.” He kissed her cheek again. “Now, go. Why don’t you and Fran have a drink and we’ll join you later when we’ve cleared the farm. Don’t argue. We’ve got enough staff here to help, so just go and relax.”

Ruby glanced over at Fran. “Can I interest you in a mulled wine and a mince pie by an open fire?”

Fran nodded. “It sounds perfect.”



“YOU REALLY WERE INCREDIBLE.”

Ruby squeezed Fran's hand as they walked through the farmhouse front door. Chipper greeted them, jumping up at Ruby and pawing Fran.

"Hey boy, good dog!" Ruby ruffled his fur, before ushering him through to the lounge. Then she shut the door.

"Aren't we going in there?" Fran inclined her head.

Ruby shook hers. "I've been thinking about you all week, wanting to kiss you without an audience. Just me, an audience of one." She wrapped her arms around Fran and pulled her close so their bodies were touching. Then Ruby pressed her lips to Fran's.

Fran's toes danced in her boots.

"I haven't shown you my room, yet. Plus, there's nobody in the house right now. How about a mulled wine afterwards?"

"Fuck the mulled wine."

Ruby shook with gentle laughter. "You're my kind of woman."

Ruby tugged Fran's hand and they walked through the kitchen and up the stone stairs, the carpet frayed. Fran focused on the rich thud of her heart, stirring her insides with style.

Ruby opened a door on the right: her bedroom. It housed a double bed with a white duvet and pillows. The walls were white, the two chests of drawers the same colour.

"You like white." *Shut up, Fran.*

The room could have been painted neon pink for all she cared. It didn't matter.

What mattered was the electricity in the room, so raw, so wired, about to ignite.

Ruby reached for her, but stopped when she touched Fran. "You're shaking."

Fran's breath quickened. "It's what you do to me." She raised her head and caught Ruby's gaze. "It's what you did to all those people out there tonight. You dazzled them. You're dazzling me now."

Ruby shook her head, her gaze steady. “You dazzle me. I haven’t stopped thinking about you all week.”

Fran shuddered. “What were you thinking about specifically?”

Ruby’s eyes smouldered. “Your body. Your skin. You.” Ruby put a finger under Fran’s chin, and tilted her head upwards until their lips met again.

A firework exploded in Fran’s soul.

Hot damn.

Ruby slid her tongue into Fran’s mouth with the surety of a lover who’d done this many times. It already felt like that. Like Ruby knew Fran. Like they’d done this many times before. But also, like this was the first time. They kissed and moaned, then moved towards the bed.

Ruby pulled back, eyeing Fran.

Fran’s breathing was ragged. They both had too many clothes on. She hoped her gaze told Ruby that.

Apparently, it did.

Fran didn’t protest as Ruby deftly undid Fran’s buttons and slipped her top from her shoulders, tossing it onto a nearby chair.

Fran did the same for Ruby, kissing her skin beneath the buttons as she went. They both shed their bras, never taking their gazes from the other.

Fran brought Ruby’s hand to her lips, kissing the tips of Ruby’s fingers one by one. “I can’t believe I’m getting to touch the hot star of the moment.”

Ruby guided Fran onto the bed, then made short work of stripping her jeans and underwear. When she took Fran in, Ruby shook her head. “I can’t believe I get to be here with you,” Ruby said. “I need to feel you.”

Ruby kicked off the rest of her clothes in a hurry. She lowered herself on top of Fran, their groans connecting at the same time as their lips.

When Ruby slid her tongue into Fran’s mouth again, desire drenched her. It was too much. She’d watched Ruby all night long. Now she wanted to *feel* her.

“I want you inside me.” Fran’s voice came out fractured. Her feelings were anything but.

Ruby bathed Fran with her olive-green stare, darkening by the second. Ruby then raised two fingers to Fran’s mouth.

Fran’s heart pounded as she opened her lips, and sucked Ruby’s fingers inside. She never wanted to let her go.

Ruby moved her mouth to Fran’s ear. “I know you’re probably wet enough,” she whispered. “But just in case.”

If Fran wasn’t soaked before, she was now.

Ruby’s wet fingers skated down Fran’s body, then slipped into her with liquid ease.

Fran’s mind went blank as Ruby did just what she asked, and more.

Fran’s hips bucked and she closed her eyes.

Ruby’s tongue caressed her collarbone. Hot breath pleased Fran’s earlobe. Her salmon-pink nipples went rock hard as Ruby sucked them into her mouth.

Fran tried to catch her breath, to remember anything. It was impossible. She gave in, and fell under Ruby’s spell.

Fran’s heart thumped a steady beat as she spread across the bed, her body an invitation, with Ruby the honoured guest. Fran’s fingertips danced across Ruby’s back as she arched up into her.

Ruby licked Fran’s neck, and thrust into her with exquisite precision.

“There?” There was a hesitation in Ruby’s voice.

Fran had already closed her eyes, shivering at Ruby’s low tone.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Just there?”

“I promise you, yes.”

Satisfied, Ruby relaxed into her rhythm, before connecting with Fran’s clit.

Fran pressed the back of her head into the pillow as pure heat spread

through her. It wasn't just today or this week she'd wanted Ruby, ached for Ruby. Having Ruby inside felt like something she'd been waiting for her whole life. Like they were two parts of the same puzzle. As if Ruby had been missing from her life all this time.

Ruby's lips came back to Fran's, pulling her mouth into a searing kiss that scrambled Fran's brain. Then Ruby upped her home advantage.

Fran's brain exploded, passion drizzling down her body. She clung to Ruby's shoulders as they moved as one.

The passion roaring within took hold. All the colours behind Fran's eyes turned to red. Her heart beat faster. Her pulse sprinted. Her thoughts fell to dust.

Fran came undone in a blur of movement and sensation she'd never experienced before. Ruby's fingers were buried deep inside Fran, Ruby's whispered words urging Fran on. The light flashed once, twice, three times before Fran stilled Ruby's fingers, whispering to her "enough, enough." Fran didn't want to, but she had to. For now.

She pulled Ruby close as her pulse raced. Fran was on the podium, the race won, champagne popped. She wallowed in the glory, soaked up the applause. It wasn't hard. Ruby made it easy.

As Fran floated back to reality, she kissed Ruby's lips, then cracked open an eye.

Ruby stared at her, a languid smile on her face. "You're delicious, you know that?" She paused. "Terrifyingly so."

"I could say the same for you." Fran blew out a long breath. "You think everyone's still out?" She pressed her face into Ruby. "If your parents heard me come, I'm never leaving this room."

Ruby hitched an eyebrow. "There's an invitation."

Fran's laugh was deep and guttural. "This is all your fault." She kissed Ruby's lips. "You strut around on stage outside, holding the village in the palm of your hand. Then you bring me in here, pull me into the bedroom and

seduce me. How could I resist? It's my duty to womenkind."

Ruby snorted. "Your duty? Wow. Women have described sleeping with me before as many things, but never as 'their duty'." She quirked an eyebrow. "Their pleasure, maybe."

Fran grinned, then put a hand on Ruby's face, stilling the chat. A rush of desire raced through her. She reached around and squeezed Ruby's bum cheek. "You're a little smug, you know that?"

Ruby tilted her head. "Which bit of what just happened was most smug?"

"All of it." Fran smiled. "You're annoyingly talented in all departments."

"You're not so bad yourself."

Fran wriggled her hips. "I'm glad you remember." She reached down and trailed her fingers through Ruby's core.

Ruby's eyes closed. She shuddered at Fran's touch.

"You're so fucking wet." Fran rolled Ruby off her and reversed their positions. She pressed her naked body into Ruby, before trailing her fingers up and down the inside of Ruby's thighs. Fran locked eyes with Ruby, then slid right inside her. Fran let out a moan of pleasure. "Now, show me how quick you can come."

But Ruby shook her head, then touched Fran, too. "Show me how quick we can *both* come."

Ruby's words made Fran quiver as another orgasm thrummed inside her. She slid onto her knees and opened her legs wide, making it easy for Ruby.

Fran curled her fingers into Ruby, hitting her high and making her cry out. Fran's other hand found Ruby's clit, and Ruby squirmed beneath her.

Fran's movements became frantic, as did Ruby's.

Their rhythms merged as they both became more vocal, until Fran could hold off no more. She soared, then began to fly. In seconds, she came hard, just as Ruby's insides clutched Fran's fingers and shuddered as one. They both kept their rhythm, coming together in one earth-shattering moment.

When they could take no more Fran slumped on top of Ruby and their

racing heartbeats merged, only skin and bone separating them.

Fran said nothing, the only sound their breathing returning to normal.

Eventually, Ruby looked at her. “As girlfriends go, I think we’re going to be a good fit.”

Fran burrowed her cheek into Ruby’s neck and laughed.

She had the biggest smile on her face.

CHAPTER 29



Ruby crept out of bed the following morning, threw on her jeans and a sweatshirt and slunk downstairs to get coffee and toast. She needed sustenance this morning, having been up all night with Fran.

She boiled the kettle, then cut thick slices of tiger bread and put them in the toaster. Ruby buried her head in the fridge for milk and butter. When she popped out, her mum was behind the fridge, her hair sticking up, her dressing gown pulled tight.

Ruby jumped out of her skin. “Don’t do that!”

Her mum hugged her, Ruby having to bend down as she was so much taller. She didn’t mind. She breathed in her mum’s smell, still the smell of home.

When they pulled back, her mum got another mug and added a teabag to it.

“Sorry I bailed on helping out last night.”

Her mum raised an eyebrow, then indicated Ruby’s two mugs. “You had other things to attend to.” She paused. “Is Fran still asleep?”

Ruby nodded, embarrassment seeping up her body. Having a woman in her Mistletoe bedroom was a first for both of them. Ruby buttered the toast while Mum cleared some plates from the side into the dishwasher. Mum hadn’t tidied up last night. She must have been tired.

Ruby put their breakfasts on a tray and picked it up. "I'll see you in a bit."
Her mum laid a hand on her arm.

Ruby stopped.

"Just so you know, you did so well last night. You were incredible. I just want you to know, we're very proud of you."

Ruby flushed. It was always nice to hear. "Thanks, Mum."

Back in the bedroom, Fran was awake, checking her phone. When Ruby walked in, she looked up and gave her a wide grin, before pulling the duvet up to cover her breasts.

"Don't do that on my account." She gave Fran coffee and toast.

Fran made a famished sound. "You've no idea how hungry I am."

Ruby sat on the bed. "I do, because I'm the same."

"You okay with crumbs in the bed?"

"So long as you're with the crumbs, I'm good." She ate her first piece, savouring the flavour. "By the way, I forgot to ask. Did Fast Forward make number one?"

Fran shook her head. "Beaten by the skinny YouTube kid. But we made number two, and there's still one more chart before Christmas, so who knows. I checked my messages, too, and yesterday went well for them." She ate some more toast. "So I can relax. But it's interesting working with Fast Forward. They could be really big. Girls and boys like them, so the sky's the limit. Plus, the lead singer's getting over her fears. A little like someone else I could mention."

"It was only a first step, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Ruby said. "Remember, I'm still me. I don't do massive shifts in momentum. I'm a tortoise, not a hare. Slow and steady wins the race." She paused. "Although, I better make sure I service my music mogul before she hits the big time and leaves me for the lead singer of Fast Forward, hadn't I?"

Fran chuckled. "Have you seen her? Tenny's 19. I'm 36. I could be her mother."

“Stop it,” Ruby replied.

“Have you seen your streaming numbers this morning, by the way? I bet they’ve gone up overnight. I posted a video of you singing ‘Pieces Of You’ and it’s got a couple of hundred likes already.”

Ruby turned her head. “You did? I must watch it back.”

“You should. You’re incredible *and* sexy. Buy one get one free. You’re my favourite BOGOF.” Fran smirked at her own joke, then kissed Ruby’s lips. “Good morning, by the way.”

Ruby kissed Fran’s shoulder. “It certainly is with you in my bed.”

Fran gave Ruby her phone and clicked play on the video.

Ruby watched a minute of it, then clicked off. “It feels weird watching it now. Like masturbating in front of you.”

Fran gave her a look. “I find both of those hot, so feel free to act anytime you want,” she replied. “Do you believe me now when I say you’re more than just a normal singer? That you’re a superstar?”

Ruby sighed, but happiness spiked her body. “Of course not.” She put down her coffee and sat up on the bed, taking Fran’s hand in hers. “What I know is that you spur me on. Like you said last night, you’re a great cheerleader. I appreciate that. I’m going to write a song for you one day.”

Fran put a hand to her chest. “Nobody’s ever done that for me before.”

“I better get there before Fast Forward lady does then, hadn’t I?”

“Talking of Fast Forward, I still really need to go back to London this week. It’s our Christmas party tomorrow night, and I still have the final week to wrap up. Which I could do without, but I need to go. Plus, I need to deliver Delilah’s car back to her.”

“I was hoping for a spin in the Porsche.”

“We can still do that. I don’t have to leave until later.” She put her coffee down and crawled on her hands and knees to Ruby.

Desire slid down Ruby. She reached down and cupped one of Fran’s breasts, before kissing her hard on the mouth. “I wish you didn’t have to go. I

wish we could have the most perfect Christmas week.”

“We will,” Fran replied. She knelt in front of Ruby, wrapped her arms around Ruby’s neck and kissed her. “I’ll be back for Christmas. You can trust me on that.” Fran cocked her head. “Do you trust me now? Have I done enough to let you know I may be a music exec, but I also have a heart and a soul?”

Ruby nodded. “You have. I trust you.”

“Good, because I’ll be seeing Delilah again this week, but you need to remember I’m your girlfriend, okay?”

“I’m the only one you’re getting naked with?”

Fran cocked her head. “If we discount Fast Forward lady.”

“Touché.”

“If you miss me, just remember this moment. Me naked in your arms. And if this isn’t proof of what Mistletoe has done to me, I don’t know what is. When did I turn into such a cheesy romantic?”

“It was always buried within. I just coaxed it out,” Ruby replied.

CHAPTER 30



“Wow, you look hot.” Damian put a hand to his mouth, frowning at his own words. “And I can’t quite believe that just came out of my mouth. I apologise. I will file that under ‘things never to say again to your boss’.”

Fran looked down at her outfit. She’d decided to wear the blue suit she bought for her cousin’s wedding two years ago that had sat in her wardrobe ever since. She’d teamed it with some navy heels and a crisp white shirt. “Thanks, I think. Although is now the time to tell you I’m gay?”

Damian opened his mouth wide. “Stop, you’re killing me.” He waved a hand. “But seriously, you look... I don’t know. I’m not going to say hot again.” He stared at her, then clicked his fingers. “You look like someone who got laid at the weekend. Am I right? Is that what I’m picking up?”

Fran willed her cheeks not to colour, but she was pretty sure they had.

If they hadn’t, her silence was deafening.

Damian grinned at her. “I’m right, I know it. Good decision for you to go home, then?”

“Great decision. The gig was a hit and I have a new girlfriend.”

Damian put both his hands in the air like he’d just scored a goal. “OMG! That’s fantastic. Is she signing with us, too?”

“That was not in the criteria of her being my girlfriend.” Fran hadn’t even

thought about that the whole time. She must be smitten.

“You’re slipping,” Damian said, laughing. “But looking like that, you’re going to draw attention at tonight’s Christmas party, mark my words.”

Fran grimaced. “I hope not. I plan to have a couple of drinks, grease a few palms and be home before I lose my shoe and need to be rescued.”

“That’s everyone’s plans until the shots take hold.” Damian paused, straightening his party shirt. “Anyway, everyone smashed it at the weekend. Fast Forward killed the performance, in a good way. I watched that video you posted, too.” He shook his head. “That song needs to be heard. Ruby was amazing.”

“Wasn’t she?”

Damian nodded, then checked his watch. “We better get to the marketing meeting and then to the party.” He slicked back his hair. “How do I look? My make-up on-point?”

“To die for,” Fran replied.



THE LABEL PARTY was in one of those old warehouses in East London that used to be a huge wasteland of space, and was now a huge wasteland of space that had been swept twice and had a bar installed. It was freezing, but the amount of booze on offer was the way to stay warm. Fran stalked the room, waving at Jules and Niall, and heading in the direction of Fast Forward’s lead singer, Tenny. It wasn’t usual for stars to come to label parties, but this year, Dronk Records had invited everyone on their roster — from interns to superstars. Even Delilah was coming. Everybody was under strict instructions to take no photos or videos.

Fran recalled Delilah getting drunk at her very first Christmas party, when nobody knew who she was. In fact, it had been the Christmas party where they’d first kissed. Fran didn’t want any walks down memory lane

fuelled by a heady mix of tequila and nostalgia, hence she was sipping sparkling water. She was a taken woman now.

She passed a chocolate fountain, with sugary donuts and marshmallows to dip. She got out her phone, snapped a photo and tapped out a message to Ruby.

'I'd like to cover something else in chocolate and lick it off. I'll leave your imagination to figure out what. Miss you x'

Fran hit send, pocketed her phone, and carried on walking until she landed next to Tenny. "Hey you," she said, nudging Tenny with her hip.

Tenny gave her a hug, before taking a swig of her beer. Something about her stance had always tweaked Fran's gaydar, and tonight was no different. Can someone hold a beer bottle in a gay way? If it was possible, Tenny was doing it.

"Great to see you. Great party, too."

Fran nodded. "It is." She paused. "Are you performing later?"

"We are." She gave Fran a tight smile.

"Are you feeling more relaxed about it?"

Tenny shrugged. "I wouldn't say relaxed, but at least this performance won't be judged by the public or by the music press. This is just playing for our label, so the pressure's off."

A little like Ruby's performance at the weekend.

"Don't be fooled, this lot are savage," Fran said, laughing. "What about social media? Has that calmed down?"

Tenny's facial muscles tightened.

Fran hated to see it. She wanted to protect these young women from the trolls and the haters, but it wasn't possible. This was the world they all lived in now.

"Susie and Sam are on it and are sifting through most of them before they get to me. Blocking, deleting, but it's a full-time job. Damian told me not to look, to just ignore it, but it's hard. Sometimes when I wake up, I scroll, but it

always gets me down.”

If Fran could get hold of these keyboard warriors, she'd love them to see how they made women feel. Then again, they might be proud of it. She put an arm around Tenny's shoulder and squeezed. “Damian said the weekend was fantastic. You're doing brilliantly. Just keep going, and that's the very best way to answer the haters. They're doing nothing with their lives. You're doing *it all*.”

Tenny gave her a tense smile. “Thanks. I wasn't sure I was ready for the exposure, but the team have shown me I can do it. I just needed to believe in myself a little more, and cut out the noise — from my past and my present.”

Which sounded all too familiar. It's what Ruby needed to do in order to get over her fear of success. Because that's what it was. All these women had trained themselves to think they were one thing, because society told them they were. In actual fact, they could be anything they wanted to be. They just needed to believe it. Fran was pretty sure that Ruby's weekend gig, plus her spiralling streaming numbers were the first step to her rebirth. Fran wanted to be there for all of it.

Tenny slipped away some minutes later to get ready to play.

Fran stood at the back waiting for them to appear when Delilah rocked up next to her. She chatted at speed in Fran's ear about some producer she hated that Niall was trying to get her to work with.

“Can you have a word with them?” Delilah swayed as she spoke. “You're the only person in the world who gets me, Fran. Nobody else does. Nobody else ever has.”

Fran's defences went up as she glanced at Delilah. “Have you been drinking?” She already knew the answer.

Delilah shrugged, then held up her right hand, indicating with her thumb and index finger to Fran 'a little'. “I needed something to take my mind off the fact Gretchen hasn't been answering my calls this week. Probably another relationship I've fucked up. First you, then her. I'm doomed to singledom.”

Fran grabbed her shoulder and moved Delilah to the side of the room. “What do you mean? You haven’t broken up, have you?” She spoke slowly and at high volume, to make sure Delilah understood her over the music.

Delilah shook her head. “No, we haven’t. But why is she ignoring me?”

“She’s probably busy with her family. The whole world doesn’t revolve around you, Delilah.”

“Easy for you to say, with your new, talented girlfriend.” Delilah pouted. “Did she like that you posted that video? Is she getting more views?”

Fran didn’t like Delilah’s tone. “She is, but she’s still nervous about it.”

Delilah got out her phone and called up the video. “What if I post it on my socials and tell everyone to go and listen? That would get her noticed.”

Fran shook her head. No, she didn’t want Delilah to do that, but she had to handle it delicately. “That would be great, but I’d have to get Ruby’s okay, first. She’s nervous about exposure and what it would mean for her career. She likes to be in control. She’s been burned before.”

Delilah waved her phone in the air. Her eyes were glazed. She might be more drunk than Fran had first thought.

“But it might be what she needs. When everyone sees this, hears her vocals, they’ll lose their shit.”

It was Ruby losing her shit Fran was more worried about. Especially if Ruby’s big break involved Delilah.

“No posting.” Fran’s tone was stern. “Let me ask her first. I don’t want to rock the boat. Delilah, look at me.”

Delilah squinted.

“This is really important, okay?”

Delilah gave her a slow nod. “No boat rocking. I promise.”

A tap on Fran’s shoulder made her turn. It was Damian.

“Our girls are on in five. You want to come and stand at the front with me?”

Fran nodded, glancing at Delilah. “Sure thing. Let me just get this one

settled on a sofa first and I'll be with you." Fran guided Delilah to a sofa on the far wall, then knelt beside. "No posting any videos, got it?"

Delilah tried to focus by placing a hand on Fran's cheek. "None at all. Or Fran will be very angry with me. Must not make Fran angry."

CHAPTER 31



Ruby jumped off the quad bike and heaved the Christmas tree off the back. It was a 6ft job, so relatively easy to carry. She always said December was the month she truly got into shape. Who needed the gym when you had a Christmas tree forest? She delivered the tree to her mum and the excited family. Ruby went to leave when something pulled her back. When she turned, a small hand had attached itself to the sleeve of her thick coat.

“Were you the singer from Saturday?” The young girl of the Christmas tree family stared up at Ruby.

Ruby squatted down, nodding. “I was,” she replied. “Were you there?”

The young girl nodded. “You were my favourite.” She reached into her small black rucksack and pulled out a notebook and pen. “Can I have your autograph?”

Ruby glanced up at her mum, then back to the young girl. “Of course.” This wasn’t the first time she’d been asked for her autograph, but it was the first time outside a gig venue. This was significant. “Who should I sign it to?”

“Me,” said the girl, pointing at her chest.

Ruby grinned. “What’s your name?”

“Kerry.”

Ruby did just that, and Kerry gave her a shy smile. “When I grow up, I want to be a singer, too.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for you in a few years’ time, then.”

Ruby said her goodbyes, then slid into the barn office and fired up the computer. She logged into her music account and waited for the dashboard to load up. Her streams were off the scale. How many did it take to get in the charts? Ruby had no idea. All she did know was this time last week, she had less than 100 streams a week. Now, she had 50 times that, and it had truly gone up overnight.

She leaned back in the office chair. She had no idea what had gone on, but she had a strange feeling in her stomach. Could it be things were finally happening, all from one gig? She found it hard to believe. What’s more, she had a ton of messages to reply to, including a few from labels and venues she recognised.

They weren’t for today, though. Ruby had work to do. Plus, she’d responded to labels too quickly before and got burned. She had to remember she was the artist, the one with the gold. If they wanted a piece of her, they’d have to wait.

The office door opened and her dad walked in, whistling. This was a new thing, too, and Ruby loved it. Over the past couple of years, her dad’s worry lines had got more pronounced. But this year, with pre-orders up and the crowds swarming in, he had a new spring in his step.

“Rubytubes! What you up to? I hear you’ve been asked for an autograph in the barn!”

Ruby looked up. “Bit crazy, isn’t it? I just looked at my streams, too. They’ve been going mad since Saturday, and even more overnight. It seems bonkers one gig could do that.”

Her dad parked his bum on the sofa, letting out an “ooof!” as he did. “No surprise. You were magnificent.” He paused, tilting his head. “It only made me realise, this has to be your last year working at the farm. Your mum and I

appreciate everything you've done for us over the past few years. Coming home, putting your career on hold year after year. You are a very special daughter."

Ruby swallowed down emotion, covering it up with a shrug. "It's what we do, isn't it? Christmas is not Christmas without selling trees."

"But it should be for you." Her dad looked her in the eye. "The farm is finding its feet again. The pumpkin patch, the contest, your gig. Saturday night really brought it home to both your mum and I. You need to put you first. You were incredible. You should be incredible everywhere."

Ruby glanced back to her streaming dashboard. Belief surged through her. Could next year really be her year, just as Gayle had predicted?

"Have you been talking to Fran about this?"

Her dad frowned. "No. Should we have been?"

Ruby shook her head. Everyone in her life agreed. But Ruby still wasn't sure she was ready to take the next step.

Coming back to Mistletoe year after year, she was able to hide, to pull back. If she put her music first and really committed, what happened when it all went wrong? Or, more to the point, what happened when it all went right? Was Fran right? Was Ruby scared of success?

"What I'm saying is, we're all paid to be here. This is going to be Scott's business if he wants it. Your Mum and I, it's what we do. It's not what you do. You're destined for bigger things."

Ruby stared at him. If she didn't have to come back to Mistletoe for six weeks and effectively take two months off her year, she could put so many more things into motion. She could make that video she'd been promising. Finally record a few more songs solo and with Franklin. She could open all the emails and messages she'd been avoiding forever. She could really plan ahead.

Was she ready for it? Ruby knew what Fran would say: yes.

"If you give me one thing for Christmas this year, I'd like it to be you

putting your whole self into your career. Will you do that for me?"

Ruby was just about to answer when Victoria burst into the office, out of breath. She'd clearly been running. Victoria hated running.

"Great, you're here. I've been trying to call you, but you're not answering."

Ruby shook her head. "My phone's over there charging." She pointed towards the drinks station where the coffee machine was unplugged to juice Ruby's phone. "Where's the fire?"

"On Instagram. On Delilah's Instagram, to be precise."

Cold fear slid down Ruby like someone had just dumped a bucket of ice on her. Had Fran and Delilah been photographed again? She jumped up and grabbed her phone, then called up Instagram. She'd been tagged. By Delilah.

A part of Ruby said this was good news. A chart-topping pop star had tagged her.

But the other half told Ruby this was bad. That Delilah was trying to ingratiate herself to Fran.

Fran was Ruby's girlfriend. The sooner Ruby got back to London to press that home to Delilah, the better.

Ruby clicked on the tag and blew out a breath.

"What is it? What's going on? And who's Delilah?" Dad asked.

Victoria threw her hands in the air. "She's a major-league pop star, Dad! She's had a few number ones. She's a big deal, and she's posted a video of Ruby singing on Saturday night on her feed!"

"That's brilliant news!" Dad looked from Ruby to Victoria, taking in their stern faces. "Isn't it?"

Victoria looked at Ruby. "I'm not sure, ask her."

Ruby should be thrilled, but her emotions towards Delilah were all mixed up with her emotions towards Fran. Did Fran know about this? Had the two of them discussed Ruby? Why wasn't Delilah back on tour? Because she still harboured feelings for Fran?

Ruby scrolled down Delilah's Instagram feed. The next photo was a shot of Delilah, Fran and Damian. Ruby's insides churned.

She walked back to the monitor. Her streams were going up. The comments were rolling in. Her inbox was busy. This explained it all. It wasn't about Saturday night. It was about Fran posting her video. Then Delilah taking that video and running with it. Ruby could already feel the control of her career slipping through her fingers.

Ruby's heart raced as her stomach fell. Had Fran planned this with Delilah? Had she been scheming to force Ruby's hand, then play the hero by signing her? Had it been about business all along? Ruby had told Fran she wanted to take it at her own pace, but Fran had ignored that.

Ruby felt like someone had just put on size ten boots and stamped out her insides, leaving her hollow. Had Fran betrayed her, after everything?

"Isn't Dad right, though? Isn't this good news?" Victoria put a hand on her hip. "Your music's finally getting out there."

Ruby gritted her teeth. "But I wanted to do it on my own terms. To get into the spotlight through working, through my songs, through gigs, word of mouth."

"You've built that already," her dad said. "This is a helping hand."

"From my girlfriend's ex."

"Does it matter who it's from?" Victoria asked.

Ruby glanced up and held her gaze. "It does to me." Disappointment rippled through her, along with red-hot anger. Could she trust Fran? Was she going to run to Delilah with every part of Ruby's career?

She stood up and grabbed her phone. "I need some air."

Ruby ran out of the office and through the barn, out into the Christmas tree fields. She wanted to run into the rows of Nordman Firs, lie down and hide from the noise. But she couldn't. She had to speak to Fran. Who might at this moment be all over Delilah, thanking her for this generous act. The thought made bile climb up Ruby's throat.

She took some deep breaths, thinking back to where it had all started with Fran. The snowman they'd rolled among the trees. The snowball fight. The incredible sex. But if she couldn't trust her, did it all count for nothing? It was the music exec thing rearing its ugly head again, wasn't it? Creativity versus commerce. The old struggle. The two butting heads. Would they forever be butting heads? Could Ruby and Fran navigate their way through, even if they cleared the ex-girlfriend hurdles?

Ruby turned and jogged towards the house. She ignored her mum's wave. She didn't want to be near people right now. She wanted calm. Silence. She had a feeling she wasn't going to get it.

She was steps from the farmhouse when her phone. She looked at the screen. It was Fran.

Ruby's heart froze. She stopped dead in her tracks. Did she want to talk to Fran? It would certainly clear up a few things. She decided to be brave.

"Thank goodness I caught you. Listen, have you seen your Instagram feed yet?"

"I have." Ruby's tone was steely.

"Shit." Fran paused. "I need you to know, I asked Delilah not to post anything until I okayed it with you. She promised, but then she had a bit too much to drink last night at the office party and she did it anyway. I had no idea until I woke up this morning. By that time, it'd been viewed by thousands of people, so there wasn't much I could do. But I want you to know, I didn't ask her to do this. I know it would freak you out."

"You're right about that." Ruby let herself into the house.

Chipper barked and jumped up. She walked into the lounge and followed him in. She loved this room, but she hadn't spent hardly enough time in here this year. There had been too much to do, with working, preparing for the gig and spending time with Fran. This year had been the best Christmas run-up she'd had in ages. She should remember that. Fran wasn't the enemy. Or was she? Ruby had no idea what to think.

“Can Delilah take it down?” Ruby closed her eyes and massaged her temples with her fingertips.

Fran was silent for a moment. “Do you really want her to? Yes, it’s not ideal that she did it without asking, but it’s publicity that most artists would kill for.”

“I’m not most artists.”

“I know that.”

“You’re not in my brain, Fran. I always told you I wanted to do this my way. At my pace. But you had to get involved, didn’t you?”

“I asked her not to post it. This isn’t my doing.”

“But you showed her the clip in the first place.”

“Because you’re amazing. Because I’m proud of you. Because I’m your girlfriend.” She let out an exasperated sigh. “You know, I already did this with Delilah. With her, I wasn’t allowed to be me, to even exist. Now, you’re asking me to play you down, to not show everyone how brilliant you are? I can’t do it. I have to tell people how great you are. I didn’t tell Delilah because I wanted to cash in on your fame. I did it because we’re friends. She posted it because she was drunk. I’ll confront her, but she’s not answering her phone right now. Probably too hungover to talk.”

Ruby’s stomach churned some more. What Fran was saying made sense. But then again, Ruby’s past label experience was like an open wound that had never quite healed. Could she trust Fran? Ruby couldn’t stop the gnawing feeling Fran had been planning this all along.

“It’s not just a ploy to get me to sign with you? Has our whole relationship been about that? It’s what you wanted from the start, after all.”

Silence on the other end.

More bile travelled up Ruby’s throat. A neon red sign flashed in her mind. *Oh, fuck.*

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Ruby knew they were the wrong ones.

That Fran wouldn't do that.

If Ruby could take back that sentence, she would. But her insecurities had taken over and run riot. She'd never quite dealt with her past, and now it was trampling on her future.

"Fran," Ruby began again.

But Fran cut her off.

"You know what, I don't have time for this. I've got artists getting shit thrown at them online for no reason other than they're young and new. But at least Fast Forward are putting themselves out there, taking a chance. You need to get over yourself. Get out of your own way. Realise the talent you've got. Because if you don't, maybe you're always going to be looking for someone else to blame as an excuse for you to do nothing."

Fran paused. "If you're really blaming me for this, thinking there's some grand plan, maybe we'll never work out. And you know what? That would be a crime because we're good together. *Damn good*. I'm not out to get you, Ruby, and I can't believe you would think that." Fran drew in a shaky breath. "Plus, you know what the real kicker of this is? You're so hell-bent on doing everything yourself, you don't realise a label could help you, take the weight off. The *right* label this time. People who get you. You can't do it on your own. Whether you want to admit it or not, you're going to drown trying."

Ruby hated every second of this call. "I don't think you're scheming against me—"

"You just said you did! You accused me of getting you publicity for my own gain. Which is just ridiculous. But fine. Go ahead. Blame me for getting eyeballs on you. On the contrary, I think you're hellbent on sabotaging yourself. But if you think this is all one elaborate ruse to get you to sign with me, then fuck you, Ruby. Maybe we should call it quits."

Fran hung up.

Ruby stared at her phone. If she thought she'd been hollowed out before, she certainly was now. Her skin sagged. Her bones buckled. Her heart

slumped on the floor.

Holy fucking hell.

What the fuck had she just done?

CHAPTER 32



Fran slammed the phone down and leaned back in her chair. What a week. First the Christmas party. Then the Delilah storm. Then her break-up with Ruby. And now, more social media trouble for Fast Forward, who were getting death threats. What was it with successful young women that threatened people? She had no idea.

“Did you sort it out?” Damian poked his head around his monitor.

Thank goodness for Damian, otherwise Fran might well want to jump off a cliff at this point. She nodded. “Yes, got the accounts blocked, reported them, had a word with the team about how it got through in the first place. These girls are dealing with enough sudden fame, they don’t need this shit.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” Damian carried on staring at her. “Any Ruby news?”

Fran let her eyes flicker shut, then reopened them. She had Christmas presents at her feet. New bakeware and gardening stuff for Dad. Jo Malone candles for Pop. Also, presents for Ruby she’d bought before their phone call last week. She still planned on taking them back to Mistletoe, just in case.

Today was Christmas Eve, a week since they’d spoken. Fran had decided to put Ruby on pause, to try to work out her own feelings and make sense of what had happened. Every brain cell in her head told her Ruby wasn’t ready for a relationship, never mind a rocket up her career. However, Fran’s heart

was singing a different tune. It still recalled the way Ruby had made her feel. It still wanted to believe they had a future together.

“I dunno what to think. She’s sent me a dozen messages and voicemails saying she’s sorry, but I don’t know if it’s enough.”

Damian tilted his head. “Isn’t it? You look pretty sad for someone who’s thinking of giving her up.”

“Is there a future if she doesn’t trust me? If she always thinks I’m out for myself? She has a paranoid hatred of business.”

“She’s been burned before. You’re the one in the firing line. It was the same when my older brother met his wife. He thought she was going to do the dirty on him because that was his experience with women. When she turned out to be a lovely person, he wasn’t quite sure whether to believe it or not. It took her threatening to leave and my mum telling him to stop being such a twit for him to wake up. But he nearly lost her. They’ve got three kids together now and everything’s fine.”

“I don’t want three kids.”

“Just have two and a dog, then.” Damian grinned at her. “The key thing is, Ruby is reacting because of past experience and fear. You’re in a position to help her. Don’t give up on her. I don’t think you want to, either.” He paused. “Plus, you’re going home to Mistletoe today. Isn’t it against the law to be unhappy there at Christmas?”

Damian had a point.

“Would you like another random Mistletoe fact?”

Fran smiled. “I would love one.”

Damian held up his hand. All of his fingers had far too much hair on them. “Mistletoe has been associated with kissing since the 1500s. If that’s not a sign that you need to kiss someone when you get back there, I don’t know what is. Also, the berries are toxic to humans, so don’t eat them.”

“Do some snogging, don’t eat the berries. Got it. Are you going to your parents?” Fran had been so preoccupied with her own disaster week, she

hadn't asked Damian yet.

He nodded. "We're driving over for lunch on Christmas Day, then we're going to Isla's parents for the evening. So by Boxing Day, I will be the size of a cow."

"A lovely, wise cow." Fran sighed. "I thought my parents moving to Mistletoe would mean an idyllic Christmas with lashings of snow and no drama."

"You've got the snow." Damian pointed out the window where snowflakes were falling. "And you might still get a drama-free Christmas. Although, drama-free Christmases are over-rated if you ask me." He paused. "Have you checked the trains, by the way? The snow's affecting them."

Fran clicked her jaw left, then right. She hadn't. When she did, there were a raft of cancellations on her line. *Of course there were.* She spun around in her office chair, keeping her focus on the silver tinsel to her right so she didn't feel sick.

"How you feeling, Delilah?" shouted someone in the office.

Fran sat up, her eyes scanning the space until she fell on her ex walking towards her.

"Better than Tuesday!" Delilah shouted back, and the whole office laughed. Delilah was getting good at laughing at herself. Wonders would never cease.

When she got to Fran, she held out some keys. "I come bearing gifts. A grovelling gift to say sorry again for Tuesday's fuck-up. I've been given another car, and I know you need one over Christmas. So here are the keys to the Porsche." She held up a finger. "No arguments, I know the trains are shit." She paused. "Think of it as an indefinite loan." She leaned in and whispered in Fran's ear. "Let's just say it's yours if you want it. But if it causes issues with your new girlfriend, you don't have to keep it." She pulled back. "Will it at least help you out today?"

Fran looked down at the bags of presents at her feet, and her suitcase.

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Good.” Delilah pursed her lips. “Can I have a ‘you’re forgiven’ hug? Even if it’s half-hearted?”

Fran smiled. Ruby’s reaction wasn’t Delilah’s fault. She hadn’t committed the crime of the century. If Ruby couldn’t see that, then fuck her. Although, Christmas was going to be all sorts of awkward.

Fran got up and gave Delilah a hug.

Delilah hung on for ages. “Also, and I know you probably won’t take me up. But if Ruby needs someone to talk to — someone who’s been there — call me.”

Fran snorted. “You’re right, she probably won’t, but thanks.” She paused. “Are you leaving for home soon?”

Delilah nodded. “Into the lion’s den. Wish me luck heading to my worst Christmas yet.”

“It might not be so bad.”

Delilah cocked her head. “Stop it with your glass half full, you’re freaking me out.” She kissed Fran’s cheek. “Have a great Christmas.”



FRAN GOT BACK to Mistletoe around 7pm. Her parents wouldn’t stop hugging her.

“We haven’t eaten yet, we’ve been waiting for you. Dad made your favourite: salmon en crouete!” Pop’s face was a picture as he leaned on his crutches. Dad stood next to him, his festive apron covered in flour. Fran hugged them again. Her love life might be up the spout, but she could rely on her parents to put a smile on her face. Also, the dinner smelt incredible. She already knew there was an obscene amount of butter in Dad’s pastry.

“It smells delicious and sounds heavenly. Let me put my stuff upstairs, freshen up and then I’ll come down for a glass of wine and some food.”

Fran hung up her coat, scarf and hat, then followed her dad upstairs, after he insisted on carrying her case. Left alone, she changed, then gave herself a pep talk in the mirror about not spoiling her parents' Christmas Eve and putting on a brave face. She was ready to do just that when she walked down the stairs, smoothing down her light grey jumper. Christmas face on. She'd deal with tomorrow when it happened.

Fran was on the bottom stair when there was a knock at the front door.

She opened it with a smile that was soon wiped from her face when she saw who it was.

Ruby.

Fran gulped. She wasn't prepared to see her yet. She had a speech written in her head for tomorrow, a list of how their relationship could and couldn't work.

But now Ruby was in front of her, all that was out the window. Looking into Ruby's green gaze, Fran recalled how dark her eyes got when she was aroused. How sparkly they got when she spoke about Christmas. How just being this close made Fran's pulse sprint. These were the factors she couldn't account for on paper.

"Hi," Ruby said. "I thought I'd take a chance and see if you were here yet. Then I saw the Porsche. I've been waiting all day, hoping you'd message. I don't deserve it, I know." Behind Ruby, the snow had stopped, but the night was still freezing.

"Who is it, Fran?" Dad called, before appearing in the hallway.

When he saw it was Ruby, he raised both eyebrows. "I'll leave you to it." He disappeared at speed.

Fran had given him skeleton details on the phone earlier in the week.

"Come in." Fran shut the door when Ruby was inside.

"I've never seen a parent disappear so quickly."

"Sometimes, they're well trained. Most of the time, they're not." Fran stared. "You want to come up?"

Ruby nodded. "Sure." She took off her boots and coat, then followed Fran upstairs.

This was the second time Fran had invited Ruby to her bedroom, but this time, annoyance pulsed inside her. Fran had no idea how this was going to go. Ruby had broken their relationship, and Fran had no idea if it could be fixed. The doctors had mended her pop's leg with a cast, and time. Fran was sure if their relationship could heal, it would also take time. The first move would determine their future, and it was Ruby's to make.

Fran cleared the bags of gifts from her bed and invited Ruby to sit. Her parents had left her fresh towels, along with a sprig of mistletoe. Fran frowned. She wasn't sure that was going to be needed. She moved them to the opposite side of the bed.

Ruby smoothed down her jeans as she sat next to her.

Fran stared at Ruby's gorgeous face, her shiny lips. The same ones that had accused Fran of using her.

Fran wasn't going to be won over so easily.

"I just want you to know that I'm sorry. *Really* sorry. I reacted badly, and I accused you of something that was a little ridiculous."

"A lot ridiculous."

Ruby hung her head. "Okay, a lot. I know this is my stuff, it's just been a lot to deal with this week."

"I bet." Fran wasn't budging just yet. Ruby spoke a good game, but words were cheap.

"I saw Delilah lent you her car again."

Fran stiffened. If she was about to have a go about that, it would be the final straw. "She did. She gave it to me, actually. As a thank you, and a sorry."

"She gave you a Porsche?"

Fran nodded. "She did. She also told me I didn't have to accept it if it was going to cause issues with you. But if you can't take me being in contact with

exes who are still my friends, then we're not going to work." She hadn't planned to say that, but it was true. Delilah was in Fran's life, like it or not.

Ruby stared at Fran. A good few moments went by before she spoke again.

"Look, I know you're pissed off with me and you have every right to be. You're not trying to manipulate me. I get that. Delilah did what she did, and in the cold light of day, I'm grateful. I'm getting so much interest, it's blowing my mind. My song is in the charts. I'm making money. That's amazing."

Fran kept her game face on. "It is." That Ruby was acknowledging that was a good thing.

"I've only glanced at the emails quickly. I've been too busy here. I'm not making any decisions yet because it's Christmas, so they can wait." Ruby looked Fran in the eye. "I know I messed up, but I really want to try again. I missed you so much this week. I missed *us*." She paused. "If you're willing, I'd love for you to look at these offers with me. To give me some advice. You know the business better than anyone and I'd love some help to make the right decisions." She took Fran's hand.

Ruby's lip trembled.

Fran's heart lurched. Confusion rippled through her body. Ruby might be the biggest bundle of insecurities she'd seen in such an accomplished artist, but it came with the territory. All artists were a curious mix of arrogance and self-doubt. Ruby just needed to work on the arrogance to balance things out. Ruby was tough enough. She just needed belief. Fran could help her.

What's more, holding Ruby's hand sent Fran's heart into overdrive. Whatever they had was still there, beating loudly inside her. It hadn't gone away in a week. Perhaps their relationship did just need a cast, and some time.

"I'm not sorry about that video going viral."

Ruby shook her head. "Neither am I."

“Good. Also, just to be clear, I don’t want to sign you, either. You’d be a nightmare. I already have enough of them on my books.”

The corners of Ruby’s mouth twitched at that. “We’re on the same page, then.”

“I charge a £500 a day consultancy fee,” Fran added.

Ruby’s eyes widened. “Oh. I…”

“I’m kidding.” Fran finally allowed herself a half-smile. “Damn, you’re easy to wind up.”

Ruby’s gaze was uncertain. “And you’re very forgiving.”

“You’re not forgiven quite yet. I want to know that any advice or nudging I give you, you’re not going to throw the ‘pushy music exec’ line at me? I am who I am. I want to help make you a star.”

Ruby nodded. “I know that. I promise, no music exec jibes. They’re banned.” She squeezed Fran’s hand. “Just know, this week has been hell. I’ve been arguing with you and battling with myself. I’m my own worst enemy, I know that. But time away from everything has given me perspective. I’ve talked to the trees and they think I should get out of my own way. Even my dad told me he doesn’t want me back here next year helping out. He wants me to forge my path. Pursue my goals.” Ruby gave Fran a grin. “Feel the fear and do it anyway, as someone wise once told me.”

Fran held Ruby’s gaze, hope blooming in her soul. “They sound very wise.”

Ruby nodded. “Heart-stoppingly beautiful, too.” Ruby’s gaze sunk to Fran’s lips.

Fran snapped her fingers. “Stop looking at my lips. We’re not done.”

Ruby sat upright.

“I need you to mean what you’re telling me. To stop hiding behind being a vocal coach. Hiding behind limiting excuses. You could do many things, but the one you’re best at is being a singer-songwriter. Lean into that one. Be a bonafide star.”

“I’m starting to believe that.”

Fran put a hand to Ruby’s face. Then she went to take it away. Was it too soon? Should she make Ruby wait longer?

But Ruby didn’t think so. She caught Fran’s hand as she moved it and pressed it to her cheek. “I want to pick up where we left off. I want to give us a go back in London. I want your professional help, too.” She paused, fixing Fran with her stare. “I’m sorry for this week, more than you can imagine. When I said I want to start making the right decisions, this is my first one. Also, my most important.” Ruby took a deep breath. “What do you say? Clean slate from now on?”

Fran moved towards Ruby before she could stop herself. In seconds, her lips were inches from Ruby’s. “I’m still fucking mad at you.”

“I know.”

“But you’re asking for help. Finally.” Fran shook her head. “So let’s try a clean slate. Don’t make me regret doing this. Although, I don’t want to wipe out certain memories we’ve made together.” Fran flicked her gaze to meet Ruby’s own.

Ruby smiled. “Those memories are burned into my mind forever.” Then she moved forward. “Can I kiss you now?”

Fran stared into Ruby’s vibrant eyes. Then she leaned forward and their lips met. The bubble of resentment and worry that had built this week inside Fran burst on contact.

She didn’t want to be angry at Ruby. She wanted to be her girlfriend, and for them both to be happy. One of the ways that could happen was by Ruby kissing her exactly as she was at that moment. A kiss that spoke of their future together. One filled with passion, romance and love. Ruby’s hand pulled Fran closer, and Fran didn’t resist. She didn’t want to. Now she’d given in to her heart, she was ready to embrace the next stage. Ready to embrace Ruby.

When they pulled apart, Ruby’s eyes were misty. “I wondered all week if

I'd get to do that again."

"Me, too." Fran kissed Ruby once more. "But I have a first test of your commitment to us. I promised my dads I'd have dinner with them."

Ruby stood up. "I'll leave you in peace."

But Fran shook her head. "That's not what I'm saying." She took Ruby's hand. "Would you like to join us for a spot of salmon en croute? My dad makes the best one ever."

Ruby's smile was so wide, it almost took up the whole room. "I would absolutely love to."

CHAPTER 33



Ruby woke up the next day with cramp in her foot. The pain snagged her attention, and she sat bolt upright as her foot contorted. She tried to straighten it, but knew she was fighting a losing battle. When she glanced right, Fran was already awake, sitting up in bed, phone in hand. Her face wore a frown.

“Are you okay?”

“Cramp!” Ruby reached down and massaged her foot. This was not the alluring posture she’d been hoping to showcase on Christmas Day. Her face creased in pain.

Fran tried not to laugh. She waited until Ruby got her breath back and sat up the bed again, her back against the padded grey headboard. “Better?”

Ruby nodded. “Yes. Although I’ve just realised it’s Christmas Day and I don’t have any presents for you. They’re back at the house, so you’ll have to wait until later.”

“You mean Santa didn’t come?” Fran pouted.

“He came to the farmhouse,” Ruby replied. “It’s your first year here. He’ll know for next time.”

Fran jumped out of the bed and rustled in one of her bags. “In the meantime, I have something for you.” She sat back on the bed with a gift in her hand, neatly wrapped in gold paper with a matching bow.

However, Ruby's attention was snagged by the mistletoe on Fran's chest of drawers. She got up to get it, then sat next to Fran, holding the sprig over their heads. "Here's my first present to you." Ruby pressed her lips to Fran's, and Christmas Day just got that little bit brighter. "Happy first Christmas, new girlfriend." Ruby gazed into Fran's eyes. "I'll never get tired of kissing you."

"You might, you've only been doing it a few weeks." Fran gave her a wicked grin, then took the sprig from her hand. "Open your gift, please!"

Ruby laughed, kissing Fran's naked skin. "You're very demanding." She tore open the wrapping paper to reveal a red box. When she opened that, she pulled out an intricately made shiny golden star.

"I saw it and thought of you, because that's what you are: a shining star." Fran paused. "But now you're holding it, I'm worried you're going to think I'm being pushy again—"

Ruby silenced Fran by kissing her again. Ruby's fingers clutched the star as her lips slid over Fran's, and Ruby's heart swelled in her chest. When she pulled back, she smiled at Fran. "I don't think you're being pushy. I get it. I know you want me to embrace whatever happens, and I'm going to try. To be brave. With you beside me, it's going to be a whole lot easier." She held up her present. "I love my star. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Fran blushed bright red.

She was adorable.

"Thanks for last night, too. It was fab having dinner with your parents. They're so cute together."

Fran smiled. "They are, aren't they? I've neglected them over the past few years, but I'm not going to do that anymore. Especially now we're together. I was thinking this week — before your threw a huff at me — that if you do have to go away for festivals or to tour, I could take some of my holiday and come with you. I never take time off, but that's going to change."

"You're getting a bit ahead of yourself. My bookings at the moment are

both in small pubs in London. No time off needed.”

“I’m thinking long term. Your song’s in the charts now, right?”

Ruby nodded. “Amazingly, it is. I’m being interviewed on national and international radio this week. My inbox is overloaded. All thanks to you and Delilah.”

Fran shook her head. “I think it’s down to you.” She kissed Ruby again. “But back to my point. You’re stuck with me now. We’ve shovelled shit off the pavements together. Got drunk in the world’s smallest bar. Built a snowman. Had sex in a barn. There’s simply no way you can escape now.”

Ruby laughed. “There’s no way I would want to, either. Not after the barn sex. Although having sex in a bed is way more comfortable.

“Where’s your sense of adventure? Honestly, pop stars these days…”

“I’m not a pop star yet!” Ruby rolled her eyes.

“You will be. If Taylor Swift can do a country-pop crossover, why can’t you do the same with folk-pop?”

“Because she’s Taylor Swift?”

“And you’re Ruby O’Connell.”

Ruby pulled up the charts on her phone. Her song, ‘Pieces Of You’, was at number 15. She still couldn’t quite believe her eyes. She scrolled down to the number one slot, occupied by skinny YouTube star. Fast Forward were at number two.

“Sorry you didn’t get your Christmas number one, by the way.” Ruby flashed her phone screen at Fran.

Fran shook her head. “Fast Forward have done amazingly well. We can build on it. Plus, I got the number 15 star naked in my bed. I’m pretty pleased with my work.”

She took Ruby’s phone from her hand and pushed her back on the bed, climbing on top of her.

Ruby groaned as their skin connected. She could happily stay like this all day, but her parents might not be so happy.

“By the way, did your dads make you a cool Christmas card like you told me all those months ago?”

“I climb on top of you and you start talking about my dads?” Fran gave her a crazed look, then a kiss. “The short answer is no. The leg break derailed their plans. They just watched a lot of Christmas movies, baked and had fun.” Fran grinned. “When we get back to London, I want to have fun and go on an official date with you. Take you out to a restaurant. Wine and dine you, instead of just falling into each other’s beds. What do you think?”

Ruby laughed. “I never realised you were so conventional. It’s not what pop stars do.” Fran’s lips were so close to Ruby, she could feel her breath.

“No? What do pop stars do?”

“This.” Ruby kissed Fran’s lips. She didn’t see a time she’d ever tire of it.

Fran slid down Ruby’s body, kissing a path from her neck to her belly button.

Anticipation danced on Ruby’s skin. “Can one of our dates be you cooking me dinner, too? Because I’ve wanted to taste your Malaysian curry ever since you told me about it when we broke down.”

Fran parted Ruby’s legs and slid her shoulders between them. “You’re thinking about eating right now?”

Ruby grinned down at her, licking her lips. “In a way.”

Fran licked her lips, too, hot breath hitting Ruby’s centre. “Happy Christmas, my shining star.”



“SOMETHING’S BURNING! What’s burning? Not the turkey again. Paul!”

Victoria rolled her eyes at Ruby as their dad ran to the oven and grabbed the handle.

“Argh!” he cried when he forgot the handle would be hot. He grabbed a tea towel from the counter, and opened the oven door at the second time of

asking. Grey smoke billowed from the oven. Her dad's glasses steamed up so he couldn't see a thing.

Ruby tried not to laugh. It was the same every single year. Dad burned the turkey. Mum shouted at him. Everyone ate the turkey and made reassuring noises that it wasn't dry. It always was.

"What do you normally do at Christmas when you haven't just moved to the madness that is Mistletoe, Michael and Dale?" Victoria handed them both a glass of Merlot as requested.

"We normally see Michael's parents or his sister and her family, but they've taken themselves to the Caribbean this year. I think they'd always wanted to and us having other plans was the excuse they needed."

"Particularly good now our families are joined together in a new way." Victoria bumped Ruby's hip with her own. "I called it when I first met Fran, but Ruby was very insistent that just because they were both lesbians did not mean they were going to get together."

"To be fair, when we met here, I did vomit sausage roll onto her slipper, so it wasn't the best start."

"Isn't that how all the best love stories start? With some sort of mishap? Then they morph into something beautiful." Michael's face went all dreamy.

"Ignore him," Dale said. "He's been overdosing on far too many Hallmark Christmas movies."

They made way for Audrey, who bustled in waving her cracker. "I want my hat. It's not Christmas without a silly hat. Who wants to pull me?"

"There's an offer you don't get every day," Victoria said.

Audrey ignored her. Her gaze landed on Fran, and she pointed at her. "You can pull with me, seeing as you look like a Christmas cracker in your green top and red trousers. Ready?"

Fran grabbed the end of Audrey's cracker and pulled.

It snapped, and Audrey came away with the winning end. She fished out her silver hat and put it on, then waved around her prize: a mini pot of Mary's

home-made gooseberry jam. “Delicious! Ready for the joke? What kind of motorbike does Santa drive?”

Nobody offered an answer.

“A Holly Davidson.” Audrey shook her head. “That joke was terrible, Paul. It’s got you written all over it.”

Mary clapping her hands got their attention. “Can everyone please sit down and pull your crackers. I’m not responsible for the jokes. To save arguments, I’ve put name tags on everyone’s places, so play nice and sit where I put you. That includes you, Audrey.”

Audrey clucked like she’d never dream of doing anything else. She stalked the table until she found her place. She sat next to Norman, rolling her eyes. “I can’t believe you put me next to Norman.”

Norman, used to Audrey’s lip, roared with laughter. He put an arm around Audrey and kissed her cheek. “Merry Christmas to you, too, Audrey Parrot.”

Mary caught Dale’s eye. “Dale, I’ve put you on the corner to give you room for your cast.”

Ruby sat in her place — Victoria on her left, Fran on her right. Her new love, and her sister, also her best friends. Ruby glanced around the table: she had so much to be grateful for. A loving family, food and drink to celebrate, and Fran. The Christmas gift she hadn’t ordered, but the one it turned out she wanted the most. So much so, she was willing to turn her life upside down for her.

It was about time.

Ruby put a hand on Fran’s thigh under the table.

Fran turned and gave Ruby a wink, before accepting the tray of roast potatoes from her dad.

Ruby had never had Christmas with someone special at her family table before. She’d never even imagined it. But now it was happening, it felt exactly right.

Fran and her parents were the perfect addition to the O'Connell family Christmas. The previous owner had lived in Hollybush Cottage for eight years and never come to dinner once. The Bell's had lived there for three months but it might as well have been forever.

A warmth burrowed its way into Ruby's thighs. She looked down to see Chipper's pleading eyes staring up at her. It was the same every dinner, every day. Anyone would think the dog never got fed.

"Chipper, in your bed."

Chipper didn't move.

Ruby got her firm tone out and repeated the instruction.

Chipper slunk away.

"Glad to see you've got turkey and ham on the table, Mary and Paul," Audrey said. "Not bending to the London types who want tofurkey."

Ruby laughed. "I'm still not vegan, Audrey."

"Ridiculous," Audrey muttered, piling turkey onto her plate. "Shall I do yours, Norman?"

"Careful," Norman replied. "People will think we're a couple."

In response, Audrey shoved the plate into his hands. "Second thoughts, do it yourself."

A tapping of metal on glass stilled the chatter and clatter of plates being filled. The whole table looked up.

Dad stood at the end of the table, glass raised.

"Before we all eat this delicious turkey that I lovingly cooked, I just wanted to say how grateful both Mary and I are. To our family, to our friends old and new, and to the community of Mistletoe. We came together like we always do this year, and the farm has had a great festive period that will hopefully set us up for years to come. Mistletoe Farm is a destination, a place to make Christmas dreams come true, a place to make Christmas memories." He glanced at Ruby. "Our wonderful daughter gave us a lasting Christmas memory this year, and we're so proud she's finally getting the recognition

she deserves.”

The whole table broke into spontaneous applause.

Ruby blushed the colour of Santa’s suit.

“But today is all about being together with the people who matter most, and I’m glad to say we’ve achieved that. So raise your glass with me to the true spirit of Christmas, before we all eat far too much food than is good for us.” Paul raised his wine glass. “To Christmas in Mistletoe!”

Ruby’s heart burst with happiness as she raised her glass. “To Christmas in Mistletoe!” she chorused with everyone else. Then she looked at Fran. “And to my first Christmas with you,” she whispered in Fran’s ear.

“The first of many,” Fran replied, kissing Ruby’s lips.

EPILOGUE



*T*wo years later...

“RUBYTUBES! You made it back! How was Rome?” Dad and Chipper greeted Ruby at the farmhouse door. Chipper, now ten, wasn’t quite as jumpy as he used to be.

“Italian.” Ruby bent down and rubbed Chipper behind his ears just the way he liked it, then gave her dad a hug. She walked through to the new kitchen and stopped in her tracks. She hadn’t been home since the summer, and things had changed massively.

“Am I in the right house?” Ruby glanced at her mum, stood with a massive grin on her face by the sink. “This new kitchen looks incredible. You’ve gone from country crumble to country slickers.” Ruby leaned against the island. “An island, too. Your dreams have come true, Mum.”

Mary walked over and hugged her tight. “To have you both home for Christmas is my dream coming true.” She paused. “Where’s Fran?”

Ruby indicated with her head. “Michael and Dale were out in the garden, so she was hijacked by them. She’ll be over in a bit. We met their new rescue dogs, Cagney and Lacey. They’re adorable.”

Mary nodded. “Cagney is blind in one eye, but they’re so sweet. They’ve

found a wonderful home for their final years.”

“Looks like it,” Ruby replied. “I’m going for a shower as we’ve been travelling for what seems like forever. I swear, the dirt is ingrained.”

“Take all the time you need. The Christmas gig’s not for another,” he checked his watch, “eight hours. Plenty of time.”

“Paul! The girl’s just walked through the door, let her relax.” Mum put a hand on Ruby’s arm. “This kitchen is all because of you. The amount of fans coming to the farm to see where Ruby O’Connell is from grows every time you release a song. They’re all buying coffee, scones, wreaths, the works.” She shook her head. “Good job you’re not out there selling trees, you’d be knee-deep in autograph hunters.”

Ruby was just about to brush her mum’s comments off, but then she remembered what Fran always said to her: take the compliment and be gracious. Ruby had learned so much from Fran since she’d given up her job to become Ruby’s full-time manager. The pair of them were now travelling the globe touring. It was tough work, but it was so rewarding. Ruby got to play to crowds there just for her. It was everything she’d never dared to dream of.

“I’ll go out there in a bit, sell a tree for old time’s sake. Test your theory.” Ruby picked up her suitcase, snow glistening on top.

“You will not!” Mum replied. “Go get cleaned up. I’ve made sausage rolls, turkey and stuffing bites, cranberry and brie parcels. Plus, mince pies, of course. All the Christmas favourites. Fill you up before you go on stage.”

Ruby smiled. It was good to be home.



“THERE SHE IS, my sister, the superstar!” Victoria and Eric hugged Ruby and Fran, before handing over their daughter, Eleanor.

Fran and Ruby had met the baby once before their tour schedule whisked

them away.

“She is so adorable.” Fran held Eleanor up in the air.

Eleanor gurgled and grinned as if on cue.

“Couldn’t you just eat her up?” Victoria grinned. “She was very excited about seeing her Auntie Ruby sing tonight.”

Eric nodded. “Wouldn’t stop going on about it earlier.” He turned to Victoria. “Or maybe that was you.”

Victoria drew herself up to her full 5ft 3. “I’m unashamedly proud of my sister, so sue me.”

“You should be,” Fran told her. “She’s been killing it on tour.”

“We’ve been killing it on tour,” Ruby corrected Fran.

Fran rolled her eyes. “Please take a compliment! She’s a bloody nightmare.”

“We’ll leave you two to fight about who’s the best. See you out there.” Victoria squeezed Ruby’s arm. “Break a leg.” She took her daughter from Fran and kissed Eleanor’s chubby cheek. “Come on, my little munchkin. Let’s go and let the whole village coo over you. Try not to cry when Audrey holds you as you do every single time.”

The new family left the barn office, and then it was just Fran and Ruby.

Fran walked up to Ruby and pushed her back against the desk, a smirk on her face. “Remember this move?”

Ruby coughed. “How could I ever forget? The first time you fucked me was in my dad’s office. That’s a country song if ever I heard one.”

Fran laughed. “Begging to be written.” She kissed Ruby’s lips. They were still her favourite place in the entire world.

“Did I tell you my parents gave me my Christmas bauble this year, and it’s a photo of the two of us, not just me?”

Fran sucked in a breath, then clasped her hands over her heart. Coming home to Mistletoe was always special, because all the people she loved most were here. Even Damian and Isla were in the crowd tonight. In the VIP seats

right next to her parents, who they were staying with again.

“I love that more than I can say. I think that means your parents approve of me, right?”

Ruby kissed her. “How could they not?”

Fran hugged Ruby tight, squeezing until Ruby coughed.

She pulled back, laughing. “Talking of parents, my dads are livid, by the way. They entered a tree in the contest again this year. Second year running they didn’t win. As someone who has a hotline to the O’Connell family, they wondered if you could put in a good word.”

“They should speak to Victoria. She hasn’t won either after years of trying.” Ruby’s lips quirked into a smile. “She never will, either. It’s a Mistletoe scandal.”

But Fran’s attention had moved on. She held Ruby’s stare, then slipped a hand between her thighs. “Back to me, you and the desk. How about it? For old time’s sake?”

Ruby was just about to reply when there was a knock on the door. “Ruby! Fran! Can I come in?”

Fran grinned, then stepped back. “Parental interruptus strikes again.”

Ruby laughed, then smoothed down her favourite tweed suit, normally too hot for indoor venues. For tonight, though, it was perfect.

Fran opened the door to find Paul standing there. “I brought some special guests.” He stepped back to reveal Delilah and Gretchen. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Delilah and Gretchen gave Fran a hug, closely followed by one for Ruby.

The farmhouse kitchen wasn’t the only thing to alter drastically in two years. Delilah, Gretchen, Ruby and Fran were now good friends.

“You’ve got some top security out there, beefy blokes,” Delilah said. “Bet it wasn’t like that when you played two years ago.”

Fran shook her head. “Back then, we wondered if anyone would turn up. Now, we’re squeezing 1,500 in and we could have sold the place a few times

over.” She pointed at Delilah. “Imagine if you were on the bill, too.” A plan began to form in Fran’s mind.

Delilah pointed at her ex. “I can see pound signs in Fran’s eyes. Can you see it, Ruby?”

Ruby nodded. “Tell-tale signs. She’s gone quiet and her face is a little pale.”

Fran pursed her lips. “Mock all you like, but who’s got the best manager?”

Delilah, Ruby and Gretchen all pointed at Fran.

“We could put on a festival with an all-female line-up.” Fran pointed her finger at the performers one by one. “You, Delilah, Gretchen, Fast Forward. Do your parents fancy starting the next Glastonbury?”

Ruby made a face. “I think they’re more interested in retiring. But we could ask Scott. We’ve got the extra land.” She held up a hand. “But can I get tonight ticked off first, please?”

Fran nodded. “Of course you can.” She glanced at Delilah. “Any shift this year from your parents? Are they still saying you’re going to hell?”

“Last time I checked.” Delilah put an arm around Gretchen. “But *they* can go to hell for all I care. Gretchen and I are getting married, my fans and career are intact, and my life is actually better without them. I don’t have to look over my shoulder anymore. I should have come out years ago.” She smiled at Fran. “But you knew that.”

“I’m thrilled for you,” Fran replied.

“We just came to say hi and we’ll stick around after for a drink.” Delilah fist-bumped Ruby. “Looking forward to your set.”

Fran waited for them to leave, then resumed her position. She took Ruby’s hand in hers and kissed her knuckles one by one. When Fran raised her gaze, Ruby’s eyes were on her.

“You’re beautiful, have I told you that lately?”

Ruby smiled. “Once or twice.” She kissed Fran again. “Have I told you

lately that I love you?”

Fran shook her head and frowned. “Not for a good two hours. You’re slacking, O’Connell.” She winked, then slapped Ruby’s bum.

“By the way, I’ve got a surprise for you tonight.”

Fran gulped. “What kind of surprise.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to propose at a gig.”

“I would absolutely kill you.”

“I know.” Ruby laughed. “But I do have a new song in the second half of the set. One I wrote just for you.”

Fran’s heart pulsed with love. “Oh, fuck. Are you going to make me cry?”

“Happy tears, I hope.”

Fran stared at Ruby, then shook her head. “You really are something, you know that? I’m so proud of you.” She checked her watch, then snapped into professional mode. “Ten minutes to the anniversary of the gig that changed your life.”

Ruby shook her head. “You changed it,” Ruby replied. “You change it every day. I love you, Fran Bell.”

Fran pressed her lips back to Ruby’s. Her heart swooned. “One, two, Mistletoe,” she said, kissing Ruby once more. “I love you right back, Ruby O’Connell.” Fran took Ruby’s hand in hers and pulled her towards the office door. “Now, let’s go and wow your hometown all over again, shall we?”

Ruby took a deep breath. “Let’s do it.”

FROM BEST-SELLING LESBIAN ROMANCE AUTHOR

CLARE LYDON

♥ The Christmas Catch ✈️



Merry Christmas!
I hope this one is your best yet.

CHAPTER 1



“*W*hat is it you want this project to do for the company, Cinnamon?”
Every time Morgan said the woman’s name, she craved a cinnamon bun. Like, seriously. However, she was in the middle of a work meeting. It wasn’t the done thing.

She glanced at Cinnamon, her face folded in thought. With her blonde hair, white skirt and white jacket, she looked like you could pick her up and put her on top of your Christmas tree. All she needed was a pair of wings. However, in this meeting, she’d displayed admirable fighting qualities. There was no way Cinnamon would allow herself to be a tree-topper. She preferred to be on ground level, in the thick of it.

“I want it to get our name out there. To truly make this the brand on everyone’s lips.” Just like the taste of those rich, sweet buns were on Morgan’s.

Cinnamon raised her left eyebrow, asking if that was the right answer.

Morgan adopted her best poker face. She wasn’t here to give answers. She was here to facilitate. At least, she was for the next seven minutes and 54 seconds.

“And you, Antonio. What is it you want?”

Antonio shot Cinnamon a withering look, then turned on his charming smile for Morgan. “I also want what’s best for the company, just like my

colleague.” He kept his eyes firmly on Morgan. “But if we do it my way, we’ll get quicker, more agile results.”

Morgan had to hand it to him. Antonio knew the right buzzwords to use. But it wasn’t going to win any points in this room.

“Agile results?” Contempt laced Cinnamon’s words. “This is what I’m talking about. Stop speaking in riddles, Antonio.”

Morgan raised a hand, looking from one to the other. “We’ve only got a few minutes left, and I think you’ve had time to air your points of view. You’ve both got valid concerns, but let’s leave it there. You can each write the three things you’ve taken away, and the three things you want to keep discussing. Then we’ll move forward and see if we can conclude when we get back in January.”

Cinnamon drew in a long breath and shook her head. “I’d rather get this sorted before the Christmas break so it’s not bugging me all holiday long.”

Morgan folded her arms across her chest. “You can, if you both do the homework and get in a room without me. In fact, there’s nothing I’d like more.”

“We tried that before you stepped in to mediate. There’s a reason you’re here.” Antonio gave Cinnamon a pointed look.

“Maybe you’ve come further than you think in the past three days we’ve been talking,” Morgan countered. “Maybe you could work it out just the two of you now.”

Cinnamon sighed. “You’re asking for a Christmas miracle.”

The timer on Morgan’s phone buzzed, and she stabbed it with her index finger to silence the beeping. “Okay, that’s time. Great work today. If you two could find it in yourselves to work out a compromise, it would make everyone in this office believe in Christmas magic. Including me. I’d love to stay around and help,” (she was lying), “but I have Christmas plans, and I have to get all the way home to Devon to do them.” She picked up her grey leather backpack and began packing up her laptop, wires and notepads. “If

you manage it, you're doing me out of work, but it's money I'm prepared to lose." She paused. "Why don't you go for a mulled wine together and hash out the details?"

A strangled sound emerged from Cinnamon's mouth. "Is that an approved tactic from the mediation handbook?" She didn't look convinced.

Morgan gave her a sweet smile. "Nope, it's a life tactic. A glass of wine makes most things better." She shrugged on her navy-blue peacoat and pulled back her shoulders. "Merry Christmas, you two. I hope to not see you in the New Year."



MORGAN STRODE DOWN ARGYLE STREET, then pulled her scarf closer around her neck. The wind had teeth today. Would it be any better back home? It had to be. Four hundred and eighty-two miles, plus a few curled vowels and strident consonants separated Glasgow and her home town of Dartmouth in Devon, but it might as well be another galaxy. Yes, she'd grown up there, but Morgan hadn't lived in Devon since university. But she was going home for Christmas, just like always.

Ahead, an illuminated reindeer towered over last-gasp shoppers determined to find that perfect gift. Morgan could feel their panic as the days to buy diminished. Conversely, all her shopping was done. What had her school report said all those years ago? 'Morgan is always prepared, always ready'. Not much had changed in the two decades since. Was that a sad state of affairs? The jury was still out.

Morgan breathed in the smell of roasted chestnuts from a cart across the street. She stared up at the liquorice sky, the surrounding air crispy. The forecast was for light snowfall. She screwed up her face as her stomach twisted tight. Light snowfall she could deal with. Heavy snowfall that would ground her plane? Not so much. It happened often enough in Scotland for it

to be a concern. But she wasn't going to focus on that. The power of positive thinking was what she preached in her job. That would get her home, too.

She shifted her bag on her shoulder and felt in her coat pocket. Her phone was still there. She'd lost it twice this year, having never misplaced it before in her life. She had no idea what she'd done to offend the phone gods, but the upshot was she constantly checked her pockets now. She wasn't going to lose another one. If nothing else, it was a mighty expensive habit to foster. She took her hand away, and her phone vibrated. She retrieved it. Her sister's name flashed up on-screen.

"Hey sis." Morgan walked left to avoid an oncoming loved-up couple who weren't going to unlink their hands for anyone. What was it on pavements with couples and their territorial rights? It always irked her.

"Hey yourself," Annabel replied. Morgan could picture her younger sister at their parents' large marble kitchen island, her dark hair tied up in a messy bun. She also knew her sister's belly would be touching the counter first, too. "Just calling to check everything's still okay for tomorrow? Mum is beside me, making pastry for mince pies and fretting. She wants to check you haven't agreed to fix the problems of any more companies as you normally do?"

Morgan smiled. Her job was relentless and there were always more relationships to be fixed and training to be given, but she'd carved out this Christmas holiday and made it clear to everyone that she wasn't available from today. She was having a proper festive break. What's more, she was going to spend the first week solely with her family. She couldn't wait.

"Nope, no last-minute Christmas emergencies. Only that I still haven't got a present for Josh. What would he like?" Her sister's husband was a cycling freak, but Morgan had exhausted most cycling paraphernalia on previous birthdays and Christmases. A bike-wheel clock. Personalised bike tool kit. Leather, monogrammed bike coffee holder. Plus, there were only so many cycling-related socks, mugs and T-shirts a man needed.

Annabel sighed. “Nothing. He knocked me up and now my ankles are like puff pastry tarts, so he deserves nothing. Gruel. A vasectomy. You choose.”

Morgan smiled. Her sister was never one to mince words. “As a relationships specialist, I have to tell you that’s not a great starting point for a happy home.”

“Bite me.”

“Okay, a bottle of whisky it is.” Morgan knew that would make Josh smile.

“And he still gets to drink,” Annabel huffed. “Pregnancy is a special form of torture, you know that? Whoever thought it up had just been dumped in the worst way by the worst woman ever. And it was definitely a man.”

“But in the end, you get a cute little bundle of wonder. Did I mention I’ve bought lots of presents for Bump?”

“Aww,” her sister replied. “I would say you shouldn’t have, but I’d be lying. Buy Bump another gift and forget Josh. That’s my vote. Or buy him whisky and I’ll drink it once I’ve birthed said bundle of wonder. I’ll hide it under the bed. The whisky, not the baby. You are in the right place to bring me the best, after all.”

“You see? I knew you’d find the silver lining.” Morgan looked left, then right. Both sets of lights were on red, and the main road was clear. She made a dash for the cab rank on the other side.

Just as she moved, she saw something dark moving towards her out of the corner of her eye.

She stopped, then focused fully right.

By that time, the cyclist was almost on top of her. No lights on, and the rider wearing no hi-vis clothing.

Morgan jerked backwards as the cyclist swerved around her. She just about avoided the collision, but in the melee, her phone leapt from her hand. To her left, a car slowed as Morgan let out a squeal. She rushed to the other

side of the road where her phone lay in the gutter, spinning.

Fucking cyclists.

Josh was getting whisky, no argument.

Her heart thudded in her chest as she bent to pick up her phone. Sweat broke out on the back of her neck. Damn it all to hell. The screen was smashed. Frustration boiled in her as she stepped onto the pavement before another bike mowed her down. She held it up to her ear just in case her family were still on the other end.

“Hello?” Nothing. Now they were sure to think she’d expired on the mean streets of Glasgow. Her family didn’t understand her motives for living so far away. If she carked it here too, they’d never forgive Scotland.

She dropped her phone into her bag and stood in the queue for the cabs. On December 21st, with everybody laden with shopping bags, it wasn’t a short line. She should get the bus. But it was too cold, and this week had been too long. Plus, she’d just nearly died. She deserved a cab. Her friend Crystal would tell her to walk. Then again, Crystal was born and bred here, and still didn’t own a coat. It was the Scottish way. Morgan was always the soft southerner.

Fifteen minutes later, she was in the back of a cab, the driver asking which football team she supported. She didn’t think Plymouth Argyle was going to raise his interest. Morgan’s mind wound forward to tomorrow. To her plane ticket being digital, and so on her phone. Could smashing her screen have happened at a more inconvenient time?

She made a quick mental to-do list in preparation for her midday flight.

1. Get to the phone shop and get her screen repaired.
2. Email Ryan and tell him to have a stern word with Cinnamon and Antonio.
3. Borrow her neighbour Harry’s phone to call her family and tell them she wasn’t dead.

CHAPTER 2



Ali Bradford waved her arm to get served. The guy behind the bar looked through her every time, only serving the women with long hair. Blondes especially, she'd noted. The world wasn't a fair place, particularly for a thirsty short-haired lesbian surrounded by office Christmas parties. Ali hadn't gone to her own. This was her makeshift party with her friends before she headed home. At least, it would be if she ever got served.

Behind the bar, the pretty bar staff were still resolutely ignoring her like it was some sort of sport. She was just about to turn and tell her friend Sasha to try instead—she had long hair, after all—when the man beside her pointed the nearest bartender in her direction.

Ali blinked. “Thank you.” Apparently, chivalry was not dead yet. She ordered a Peroni for her, a Coors Lite for Sasha, and a Soave for Tobias (“criminally underrated” according to him). She flashed her card at the terminal, picked up the drinks, and walked back to their booth.

When she got there, Sasha frowned at Tobias. “It's got to be Christmas trees, right?”

Tobias shook his head, his dark fringe flopping in his eyes. “Nope.” He put his right cheek in the palm of his right hand and tilted his head to their friend. “Guess again.”

Sasha pursed her lips, then snapped her fingers. “Advent calendars.”

“Wrong!” Tobias loved guessing games, while Sasha hated them. He took his wine from Ali’s hand, “Thanks hon!”, then trained his gaze back on Sasha.

“What are you two talking about?” Ali slid into their booth. She pushed their pile of coats against the wall, giving herself more room on the red leather seat.

A cheer erupted from the booth behind.

She hadn’t drunk enough for this bar.

“What festive tradition we got from the Dutch,” Tobias told her. He drained his previous glass and gave Sasha a smug grin.

“And obviously, I’m hating every minute,” Sasha told her.

“Obviously,” Ali replied.

The music in the bar changed to Wham’s ‘Last Christmas’, and an accompanying cheer went up all around. She tried to ignore the table behind, but it wasn’t easy. Ali put a hand on her beer. Every time they slammed their table, her beer vibrated.

Both Tobias and Sasha temporarily paused their chat as their eyes widened at whatever was happening behind Ali. When she twisted to look, their booth neighbours stood on their seats, belting out the words to the Christmas classic as if they *were* George Michael. Ali didn’t want to be the bearer of bad tidings—you only brought good tidings at Christmas, right?—but they were more on the level of Andrew Ridgeley than George.

“Is the tradition we inherited getting pissed up at Christmas parties and murdering the classics?” Ali turned back to face her friends.

Tobias snorted. “No, but good try. I think we made that tradition up all by ourselves.”

Sasha shrugged, then sipped her beer. Last year, she wouldn’t have been seen dead drinking it, but the low-calorie version had made it acceptable now. “I give up. And I hate you. Tell us.”

“The tradition we got from the Dutch is leaving out milk and cookies for

Santa.” Tobias grinned like it was obvious all along.

“We’d never have guessed that!” Ali slid her fingers under the table to check her bags were still there. They were. All her last-minute Christmas shopping done today, before the long trek home started tomorrow. It was at this time of year she envied her Scottish friends. Their families lived in the same city. Her family lived almost as far away as you could get in the UK, without falling into the sea.

The song ended, and a cheer went up.

Ali turned to see one of their neighbours now in a heap on the floor. One too many festive sherries. She had it all to look forward to back at the family pub, too.

“Ready for your long trip home tomorrow? Final Christmas before your big move?” Tobias’s question snagged her attention back to the here and now.

“No.” She wasn’t even packed yet. “I still have to wrap my presents, so I can’t stay long.”

Sasha rolled her eyes, then tapped a finger on Ali’s wrist. Sasha’s fingernail was painted matte white. “Wrapping presents tipsy is part of Christmas. Stay for another drink, live a little. We won’t see you much next year after you head to New York, will we?”

Ali glanced out the window, where the promised light snow flurries had begun. She gritted her teeth and hoped the airport did the same to the runway.

“You’ll see me plenty. I don’t go until mid-January.”

But first, she had to get home. This Christmas was going to be strange, but she was determined to make it as near to normal as possible. Even if it was impossibly different already.

“What time’s your flight?” Tobias asked.

“Midday.”

He held up his beer. “A toast, then. To us all having a merry Christmas. But especially me, living it up in Ali’s flat. Me, Snowy, and *The Holiday* on

repeat.”

Tobias was cat-sitting for the next week while Ali was away. If he survived and didn't kill her cat or burn her flat down, he was moving in permanently next year.

She clinked his beer, but held him in place with her stare. “It's a very serious business looking after Snowy. She's a delicate creature, like her owner.” Ali paused. “And I hate to reiterate this, but I fear it needs saying. No having sex in my bed while I'm away.”

Tobias gave her a butter-wouldn't-melt look. “Only with myself, I promise.”



ALI WRINKLED her nose and filled Snowy's bowl full of Whiskas, ignoring the grim smell. Then she got Snowy's biscuits and rattled the metal tin. Sure enough, her cat appeared in the kitchen in seconds.

“You're always here for your biscuits, aren't you, girl?” Ali bent to stroke Snowy's pure white fur as her cat purred at her feet. Then she put her food on her mat, and Snowy's attention was fully consumed as she got stuck in. She wasn't to know this was the last day she'd get to have breakfast with her owner for a week.

Ali walked across her black-and-white chequered kitchen and stared out through her patio doors at the snow-covered grass beyond. It was perfectly festive. She'd love to spend a Christmas here one day. She had a cat, she had a home, but she'd like a girlfriend to share them with. Also, an excuse to stay here. Not that she didn't love going back to Devon. But she'd like just once to not have to rush around for the holidays. To stay where she was and enjoy the home she'd made. Maybe next year. Or perhaps then, she'd still be in New York City. Her future was wide open.

Snowy's warm body pressed against her left calf.

Ali crouched down and stroked her. It was an uncharacteristic display of love. Maybe she could sense she was about to be abandoned.

“You going to be a good girl for your Uncle Tobias while I’m away? But not too good. Wake him up with a dead mouse in the bed one morning. Get it over with when I’m not here.”

Ali picked Snowy up and kissed her neck.

Unimpressed, Snowy wriggled out of her arms and went back to her food.

Ali glanced up at her kitchen clock: 7:30am and she still hadn’t packed. She swept up her pile of clean clothes from the kitchen table and took them into her bedroom, where her suitcase was already open. She put the clothes into one side, then pulled open the underwear drawer of her solid teak 1950s dresser she’d picked up in a second-hand shop around the corner. Finneston, Glasgow’s hipster district, was full of such treasures. When she turned back with five pairs of knickers in one hand and socks in the other, Snowy sat in the other side of her case. Ali laughed. What was it with cats and suitcases?

“You’re not coming with me. We already had this conversation, remember?”

Her phone beeped, and she saw a message from Tobias.

It’s tomorrow you’re leaving, right?

Fucking idiot.

Today, and you know that.

That’s right. Today’s the day I get the key to my Christmas Shag Palace. I’ve already had a word with Snowy. She says so long as I bring her a parade of pretty ladies to rub herself against, she’s all for it.

Ali rolled her eyes.

Are you even out of bed yet?

Tobias lived two floors above with two other flatmates. Which made him living here easy, as he didn’t have to worry about forgetting anything.

I’ll be there in 20 mins. Put the kettle on.

Ali threw her phone on the bed, then picked up a distinctly unimpressed

Snowy. She'd had the vague hope her clothes wouldn't be covered in white fur when she went home, but that dream had already sailed. "It's a good job you're cute, isn't it?"

She walked around her bedroom, going through the list of things she needed. Jumpers. Jewellery. Perfume. Foundation to cover up the bags under her eyes. Her new reindeer-print shirt to impress her mum on Christmas Day.

Her phone rang, and she furrowed her brow.

She picked it up without looking at the screen. At this hour, it could only be Tobias again.

"I'm still leaving today. And no, you still can't have sex in my bed."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I'm not sure who that was directed at. Definitely not your mother."

Heat warmed Ali's cheeks. "Shit," she spluttered.

"Still not very eloquent, I hate to tell you."

"Sorry, I thought you were Tobias."

"Tell him your mum says he's not to have sex in your bed, either."

Ali laughed. "I will. Why are you calling? I'm going to see you in a few hours."

"I was just watching that lovely BBC weatherman—he's gay you know, I can tell—and he was talking about snow in Scotland. I just wanted to check your flight was still okay?"

Ali walked over to her window and moved a space between the blinds with her thumb and index finger. A light snow covering, but it was far from a winter wonderland. "It stopped snowing last night, so it should be fine. If anything changes, I'll let you know."

"Great," her mum replied. "Nicole's coming over later with Harrison. We're all excited to see you."

Ali's stomach plunged. It wasn't a dig, that wasn't her mum's style.

It didn't matter.

Guilt still nibbled every inch of her.

“Stuart will pick you up from the airport.”

Ali gulped. That was different. But this year was different, wasn't it? She'd stayed away for too long, she knew that. But it was Christmas. All the more reason to get back. “That's great. Listen, I better dash. Tobias is turning up any minute, and I've gotta get Snowy out of my case.”

“Okay. See you soon. Can't wait!”

Ali smiled as she hung up. She wasn't sure how she'd cope back home, but she was going.

It was long overdue.

CHAPTER 3



Morgan could hardly believe it. She'd asked the cab driver to drop her at a phone shop near the airport. He'd done just that, and she'd handed in her phone, pleading with the staff for a quick turnaround. Now, a woman with a sharp buzz cut and a smile the width of the Clyde walked towards her. She presented Morgan with her phone. Maybe the season *did* contain magic.

"You're in luck. Our repair guy was able to resurrect your screen. It's as good as new."

Morgan plucked the phone from the woman's hands and held it at arm's length, with a reverence usually reserved for a newborn. Which it sorta was. If it wasn't frowned upon, she'd have leapt across the counter and placed a kiss on the woman's lips. Thirty-five minutes ago, she'd arrived flustered and desperate. Now, with her link to the rest of the world back in her hands, she was leaving as a woman restored.

"Thank you. You don't know what this means." Morgan glanced at her watch. She really had to go. She had a plane to catch, family to hug. She paid her Christmas miracle worker, gave her an extra tenner along with a "Merry Christmas!", then ran out of the store, the wheels of her sleek suitcase rumbling on the cracked pavement beneath her. She hailed another passing black cab, and heaved her suitcase into the back, breathing a sigh of relief as

the driver sped off.

Ten minutes later, they skidded to a halt outside Departures at Glasgow Airport, the driver braking suddenly to avoid an incoming cab ploughing straight into them.

Morgan threw out her arm to stop herself from crashing to the floor. She succeeded, but also cracked her elbow on the side of the cab. She slammed back into her seat as silent swear words formed in cartoon bubbles above her head. She sucked in a long breath and held her elbow, waiting for the searing pain to stop.

Up front, her driver yanked open his door and strode towards the other cab, shouting something in Glaswegian that Morgan couldn't quite make out. From his frantic gestures, she guessed he wasn't wishing the other driver season's greetings.

Once she could move her elbow without wincing, Morgan opened the door and got out of the cab, grateful to be alive. Her solid black Samsonite case landed on the pavement with a thump. She pushed it closer to the main building, but then realised she still needed to pay.

A woman got out of the cab that had caused all the trouble in the first place, her feet encased in black boots that weren't tied all the way up. She wore a green duffel coat and a mustard scarf, and her hair—undercut, longer on top, perfectly styled—held huge queer energy. Morgan studied her for a hot moment, then raised an eyebrow as the woman hauled the same black Samsonite suitcase out of her cab and placed it beside Morgan's.

They stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Black Friday sale?”

Morgan scrunched her face.

The woman pointed at her case. “The Samsonite. I got mine on Amazon in the Black Friday sale.”

Morgan laughed. “Snap.” There was something about this woman that looked familiar. She was sure she hadn't slept with her—there hadn't been

enough for Morgan to forget one—but perhaps one of her friends had? But that wasn't about to be her opening gambit. Did Morgan detect a slight accent? Her mind hummed trying to work it out.

“See you for drinks on Friday then,” Morgan's cab driver shouted, then walked back to his open door.

Morgan blinked. That wasn't how she expected the altercation between the two drivers to end. “You want to pay by card?” he asked her, before he slid back into his seat and shut the door.

Morgan nodded, then got out her Mastercard.

The other passenger (who Morgan still couldn't place) held up her card, then walked over to her taxi, leaning in the window to pay.

Morgan's cab had a fixed pay station, which was in the back. She went to hop in, but unfortunately tripped on the step up and fell straight onto her elbow.

Pain shot up her arm as if something had just sliced through her. She rolled onto her side and clutched her elbow again. Goddammit, why was she such a walking disaster these past 24 hours? At least it wasn't snowing. She had to look on the bright side. In a few hours, she'd be home, eating one of her mum's delicious mince pies. All she had to do was get up and get on the plane.

The cabby turned his face near to the Perspex screen. “You picking a fight with yourself there, missy?”

Morgan chuckled. It looked very much like she was. She struggled to her feet, paid the man, then jumped out, slamming the cab door.

She hoped the mystery woman hadn't noticed any of that. If she had, Morgan would never know, as the pavement only held her case, and nothing else.

The other woman had paid and left.

Disappointment scratched in Morgan's chest.



MORGAN WAS one of the first on the plane, having bought speedy boarding with her ticket. She hated queueing, and anything that nixed it got her vote. The flight wasn't long, but she was all for making travelling as comfortable as possible. It came from a childhood spent camping in the rain in Devon and Cornwall. Travel and holidays to Morgan meant getting as far away from that image as she could. She edged her way along the narrow aisle, smiling at an older gentleman just taking off his flat cap two rows ahead. He was the type of man who'd play the granddad in an ITV Sunday night drama.

"Going home for Christmas?" he asked as he unwound his grey scarf.

"I am. You?" She bet this entire plane would say the same, so it was a pretty safe guess.

"Going to see my daughter and her family," the man replied in a broad Glaswegian accent. "They've moved to Devon. Couldn't get farther away from me if they tried. I'm trying not to take it personally."

Morgan smiled. Her mum and sister said the same when she told them she was staying put after university.

She settled into her seat, flicking through the inflight magazine and food options. She'd already had breakfast at home, but something about planes always made her want to order more. At least a coffee and something to go with it. A bacon roll with ketchup? Four-finger KitKat? They both sounded good.

"We meet again," a low voice said nearby.

Morgan looked up from her magazine, then blinked. The mystery woman was back, standing over her. Her face was like an art exhibit, all sharp angles and shadows, with devastating brown eyes. They crinkled as she smiled in Morgan's direction.

A frisson of intrigue ran through Morgan. Who was this woman? Her face rang so many bells.

Maybe she *had* slept with her.

“What are the chances of your taxi nearly crashing into mine, and then us getting on the same flight to Exeter?” If she was a betting woman, probably less than one per cent.

Which is why she wasn't a betting woman.

“Slim to none.” The woman gave her a warm smile, then slid into the seat across the aisle. She unwound her mustard scarf. It looked homemade. Had her gran knitted it for her? Her mum? Her girlfriend?

Morgan tried not to stare. She was just about to ask if they knew each other, when a family with toddlers walked through the aisle between them. When they'd gone, Morgan turned her attention back to the food menu. They didn't know each other. She was being stupid. The woman just had one of those faces.

“You don't recognise me, do you?”

Okay, so it wasn't just her. Morgan turned and put down her menu, then stared across the aisle. Salon-ready hair, questioning smile, smooth skin and vibe. The woman looked like a TV presenter. Maybe for E4 or women's football.

“You look very familiar, but I can't quite place you.” Morgan winced. “I'm afraid you're going to have to put me out of my misery, sorry.”

The woman smiled, then put a hand to her chest. “Ali Bradford. Nicole's sister. We went to school together at Hawthornes Academy?” She treated Morgan to her dazzling smile. “And I'm guessing you're going home for Christmas?”

Ali Bradford? The last time she'd seen Ali Bradford, she hadn't looked like this. Not even a teeny, tiny bit. She'd had longer hair, she'd been in braces, and she certainly hadn't exuded such queer energy. Now though, Ali's queer energy might turn the whole plane gay.

“I am. You are, too?” It was the best sentence Morgan could string together in the circumstances.

Ali Bradford. Her sister, Nicole, had been Morgan's best mate throughout their school years. Ali had been the little sister, always trailing in their wake. But now, Ali Bradford was all grown up.

"I am. Back to the homestead and all that entails." Ali gave her a forced smile.

Morgan had been home almost every year, but hadn't called in at Ali's family pub, The Rising Sun, nearly as often. She'd caught up with Nicole, but she hadn't seen Ali in maybe a decade. Morgan had always known Ali was gay, but she'd never looked like *this*. Like she could fill you in on the stats for the England women's football team, then take you out to the best sushi place and give you a night you'd never forget.

"How long's it been since we saw each other? Ten years? Maybe more? You look so different."

"Was I that bad before?"

Had Morgan offended her? *Shit*. She shook her head. "Course not, just..." She couldn't quite find the words.

"More hair?" Ali raised an eyebrow. "Less queer?"

Morgan laughed. Yes, the last time she'd seen Ali, she'd had chestnut locks halfway down her back. Not that you couldn't be queer with long hair, of course. But Morgan totally approved of this new look. "You looked fabulous before, but you look doubly fabulous now."

Ali gave her a broad smile. "Smooth. I'll take that from you, Morgan Scott."

Morgan beamed. She liked the way Ali said her name. Like she was someone famous. "I feel like I should have changed a little more now." She smoothed down her blonde hair. Still the same medium length as when Ali had seen her last.

"You're fine as you are." Ali held her gaze, then dropped it abruptly. She grabbed the food card from her seat pocket and studied it.

"Have you been home much lately?"

Ali shook her head, not looking at Morgan. “Not since summer.”

“I’ve only been back once this year. Work’s been crazy.”

They stopped talking for a few minutes as the plane got busier with passengers boarding. Morgan’s brain churned with all the information that had just been dumped in her lap. Her friendship with Nicole had a once-a-year catch-up vibe, and that suited them both. She’d mentioned Ali had gone to Edinburgh uni, but nothing more.

Morgan waited for the captain to tell her staff boarding was complete before she restarted the conversation.

“How come you’re in Glasgow?”

Ali put her menu back in the seat pocket. “I live here.”

She did? This was news. “Me, too. How did you end up here?”

“I went to university in Edinburgh, but fell in love with Glasgow. I mean, there could be more sun, but you can’t have it all, can you?”

“Especially not sun.” Morgan got up to let a person in her row into his seat. The man didn’t say thank you. “What do you do in Glasgow?”

“I work for a software company that makes apps for hospitality. I saw a gap in the market and wanted to make my parents’ lives easier. Then I got hired to create it.”

Morgan hadn’t expected that. “Anything I’d have heard of?”

Ali shook her head. “Industry things. Solving problems in business.”

“Sounds clever and worthwhile, like you’re making a difference.”

Ali gave her an embarrassed smile. “What about you? You and my sister used to be as thick as thieves when I was growing up. I always thought you’d become a DJ or a film star.”

Morgan snorted. “Really?” She had no idea why Ali thought that.

Ali nodded. “You used to host the school radio, didn’t you?” Her cheeks turned pink. “Plus, you were always hosting school assemblies. Nobody could shut you up, so I assumed you’d get a job that involved a lot of talking.”

“I did, in a roundabout way. I work with companies and people sorting out their relationships and business issues. A communications specialist.”

“I wasn’t far off.”

“I guess you weren’t.”

The plane taxied down the runway, and Morgan settled back in her seat, giving Ali a ‘we don’t have to talk the whole way if you don’t want to’ smile. She rummaged in her backpack for her headphones—there was a podcast she’d been meaning to listen to about relationships, and she’d downloaded it especially for the flight. Would it be rude to plug in now she and Ali had reconnected?

She couldn’t feel her headphones, so she lifted her bag into her lap and peered in. The flight was almost an hour and a half. Even though it was nice to see Ali, they might have used up their conversation starters already. They both lived and worked in Glasgow. She wasn’t sure where else to go.

Although, she really couldn’t find her headphones. At this rate, she’d be forced to engage in chat for the entire flight.

“Ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain speaking. We’ve got a slight technical hitch with the plane, so we’re going to be grounded here for a little while until it can be fixed. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Damn. She really needed her headphones now.

“I thought it would be snow that might ground us. I hadn’t predicted a technical hitch.” Ali gave her a tight smile.

“The captain said it wouldn’t take long to fix. Hopefully, she was telling the truth.”

Morgan pulled out her phone, her wallet, a packet of tissues and three pens, one without a lid. She felt around inside her bag with her fingertips, then studied them. No ink. At least the pen hadn’t leaked. She wasn’t putting it back, though. Instead, she slotted the pen in the netting in front of her. Morgan pictured her headphones on her bedside table. Probably where they still were. She sighed, put her backpack on the floor, then waved to a nearby

crew member.

“Excuse me.” She fluttered her eyelids. “I was just wondering if you had any spare headphones? I seem to have forgotten mine.”

The air steward flashed her straight white teeth at Morgan and shook her head. Her fringe looked like it was made of Lego. “I’m sorry, we don’t carry them for short flights.” She had a Spanish accent that made Morgan smile. She once had a fling with a Spanish woman. She only had fond memories.

Morgan nodded, then spotted the woman’s name badge. “No problem.” She got a box of Cadbury’s Heroes from her backpack and gave them to the steward. “These are for you, by the way. To share with your crew. Merry Christmas, Arianna.”

From being polite but reserved, Arianna visibly brightened. “That’s so kind, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Countless work trips had taught Morgan that a box of chocolates often made a flight that much more comfortable.

Sure enough, minutes later, Arianna returned with a packet of headphones. She leaned down, putting her mouth by Morgan’s ear. “I found these, but they’re the only pair, so keep it on the down-low.”

Morgan grinned up at her. “What a star. Thank you.”

Arianna left, and Morgan plugged the headphones into the phone.

“Wow, impressive. Does that always work?”

Morgan glanced over at Ali. “Not always, but who doesn’t love chocolates? If nothing else, I spread a little cheer. And sometimes, I get cheer back.” She raised her headphones.

“I can see why you’re a communications specialist.”

Morgan grinned. “Years of experience.”

CHAPTER 4



Morgan. Fucking. Scott.

Okay, Ali really needed to keep her cool here. Not show how much a young Ali used to worship the ground Morgan walked on. It had irritated her sister beyond belief that Ali followed them around everywhere. Her parents thought it was sibling worship. And yes, there was an element of that. But there'd been more of an element of Morgan Scott worship.

Back then, Ali never put a label on it. She just knew that when she grew up, she wanted to be as funny as Morgan Scott. Plus, she'd always wanted to have a name as cool as hers, too. Alison Bradford was pedestrian in the face of Morgan Scott. The former sounded like a primary school teacher. The latter sounded like a film star with a row of blockbusters to her name.

And now, here she was, on the same plane.

Ali was doing everything she could to be calm, but it wasn't easy.

Of course, she wasn't 12 anymore. And Morgan Scott was not a film star or a DJ.

But seeing her threw Ali right back to that girl who'd always been in awe of Morgan.

It was only in later years Ali realised the *real* reason she'd followed her around like a lost puppy. Morgan Scott had been Ali's first bona fide crush. Three years older, she'd lived in a world far more glamorous than Ali could

ever hope to inhabit. Morgan had cool friends (apart from Nicole), she ran the school radio, and people looked up to her. They listened when she spoke. Ali listened to everything she said, right up until Morgan left school, aged 18, and went to university. Fifteen-year-old Ali had known it was coming, but it still left her bereft.

But now, Morgan was chatting to Ali like it was an everyday occurrence. It wasn't. Ali might now be 35, but beside Morgan Scott, she'd forever be a stuttering, blushing 12-year-old.

Still, Morgan had plugged in her newly acquired headphones now, so the chat portion of their flight was over. That suited Ali fine. She needed time to regroup. Were her cheeks as red as she thought they were? She was glad she didn't have a mirror to check.

She looked up to the front of the plane, where the crew were in deep conversation. There was also a lot of head shaking. Was this technical fault going to delay them for longer than the captain had said?

She glanced at Morgan, who'd somehow got her brand-new headphones in a twist and was trying to untangle them.

Ali leaned over. "Can I help? You might be good at solving relationship issues, but I'm very good at solving stuff like that." She pointed at Morgan's headphones.

Morgan hesitated, unplugged them and handed them over. "That would be great, thank you. I'm not sure how I tangled them so soon. It's a special talent."

Ali said nothing as Morgan passed them over.

When their fingers touched, her breath caught.

Twelve-year-old Ali stood on a chair and punched the air. "I'm touching Morgan Scott!" she screamed.

Thirty-five-year-old Ali pursed her lips, ignored the wave of heat that rumbled through her, then carefully and quickly untangled Morgan's headphones and handed them back.

“Thank you.” Morgan’s gaze flicked up and down.

What did she see? Ali had no idea. She curled her toes in her shoes and prayed she wasn’t the colour purple. Fifty-fifty chance. She was so glad this plane ride was short. She couldn’t be in Morgan’s space too long without saying or doing something really stupid, she was pretty sure.

The tannoy crackled, then a voice filled the plane. The captain.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid I have bad news. The aircraft isn’t fit to fly, and I’d rather know that when we’re on the ground than when we’re in the air, as I’m sure you’d agree. The upshot is, we’re going to have to deplane you, and see what we can sort out in the meantime for getting you to your destination. I know this isn’t the news you wanted, but let’s look on the bright side. At least it’s December 22nd, still three days before the big day, so hopefully that means you can all make it back to where you’re going in time for turkey. Again, huge apologies, but this is out of our control. Please follow the crew instructions on what to do next. Thank you!”

Ali glanced at Morgan again, her forehead furrowed. “Not the best news.”

Morgan sighed, unplugged her headphones and put them back in their plastic pouch. “No, but like the captain says, we have time to get home.”

Ali nodded. “Plenty. How busy can Christmas travel be?”



THEY GOT off the plane and rode the bus back to the terminal. Ali texted her family, letting them know what was happening. Then she slotted her phone back into her green duffel coat. Tobias said it made her look like a plant-based Paddington Bear. She had no issue with that. She liked Paddington. She liked marmalade sandwiches, too.

When she glanced out of the window, the snow, which was forecast, was now coming down in full force. Terrific. Would the rest of the flights even get off the ground if it kept up? She didn’t want to think about that.

By the time they hurried through the airport doors for a second time that day, it seemed ten times busier, with flashing screens and harried customers. Beside the door, a bedraggled family of five wore frowns and crowns of fresh snow. Ali turned her head back to the scene outside, to the sudden blizzard that seemed to have come out of nowhere. She had a gnawing feeling this wasn't going to end well.

She joined the queue for the enquiries desk, but it wasn't moving. When she craned her neck to check what was happening, a man at the head of the queue gesticulated wildly, and the staff shook their heads slowly. She chewed on the inside of her cheek as the snow swirled against the floor-to-ceiling windows that lead to the airport tarmac. Should she try another route home?

Where was Morgan? Her charm might come in handy right now. However, when Ali stepped out to look to the front of the queue again, it was Morgan who was remonstrating with the staff at the desk. In seconds, she turned around and walked towards Ali, her face thunderous. Maybe blondes didn't always get their own way. She brushed past, not seeing her at all.

Ali put out a hand to stop her.

Morgan turned and shook her off. When she saw who it was, she blinked.

"Sorry, Ali." She rearranged her face from irritated to friendly. It almost worked. She sighed. "Getting home today was sort of important. My sister's pregnant, and due any day. I wanted to have some time with my family before that happened. We were going to make a gingerbread house tonight and decorate it."

Those were not the words Ali expected to drop from Morgan's mouth.

"It's a family tradition, so don't judge." Morgan pouted. "I've been looking forward to it all week."

Ali gave her a tiny smile. Morgan Scott wasn't a superstar, and she wasn't invincible. She might yet prove to be a normal person like everyone else.

"Your family bake gingerbread houses?" She should *never* offer to make

her a cake.

Morgan blushed. “They do. We’re good at it, too.” She shrugged. “We like to bake. It makes us happy.”

Okay, she was normalish. “*Eating* cake and biscuits make me happy, so we have something in common.” Ali paused. “I take it you didn’t have any luck with the woman at the desk? You should have saved your chocolates for her. Or baked her a cake.”

A glimmer of a smile. “I definitely should have.” She shook her head. “Especially with this blizzard. I asked about luggage, but she said they’re not sure where it is. And now...” She pointed up towards the departures board, which currently was awash with one word: delayed. “If all the flights are delayed or cancelled, who knows when we’ll get our luggage if they have to get the bags off *all* the planes. That’s what the woman at the desk just told me, and that’s when I might have lost it a little.” She sighed. “Even communications specialists have off days.” She put her palms together in front of her chest, then brought her eyes level with Ali. “But now I’m back on it. Back to problem-solving and getting people on my side. On *our* side.”

“Our side?” There was an ‘our’? Ali wasn’t sure she was ready for that.

“You’re going back to Devon, and so am I. Maybe we should travel together? I have a hatred of Christmas trains after being stuck on broken and overcrowded ones too many times. There are always too many people, too many presents.”

“Hence you were flying.”

“Indeed. But that might be up the spout now.” Morgan tilted her head to the ceiling just as the old man from the plane walked by. Her blonde hair sparkled under the airport strip lights.

“Any luck getting your luggage?” he asked.

“Not much luck with anything right now,” Morgan replied.

“Hope you get home eventually.”

“You, too!”

He gave her a smile and walked on.

Morgan turned back to Ali. "I might have to bite the bullet and get a train. Although, I remember checking and they were all nearly fully booked months ago."

"They are. I checked last week. And then just now while I was waiting in line."

"Right." Morgan looked over Ali's shoulder.

Ali turned and followed her line of vision to the signs pointing towards the various modes of transport. Train. Bus. Taxi. Car hire.

"The buses will probably be rammed, too." Ali paused. Car hire. She really didn't want to be trapped in a car with Morgan the entire way home. It would be far too much for her 12-year-old self to take. But she might have to get over that. Or else, spend Christmas back at her flat. Not such a bad thought, but her mum would kill her.

So would Tobias.

"We could try car hire."

Morgan's gaze drilled into her.

Twelve-year-old Ali's stomach flipped. She rolled her eyes at herself internally.

"I can't drive."

Ali blinked. "You can't?" She didn't know anyone who didn't drive.

Morgan shook her head. "No. I mean, I can, but I haven't for ages. I don't have my licence on me."

"But I do, and I can." She glanced back at the sign. "So shall we try?"

Relief swept across Morgan's face. "Yes please."

Ali nodded in the direction of the hire companies. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 5



No cars available. That was the sign on every single car hire desk when they ran through from the departures hall, dodging large swathes of confused passengers. They weren't the only ones in this predicament, which made it even more essential they made it out of the airport and the city before all routes out shut down. Yes, Morgan was thinking like she was in a disaster movie, but that was her jam today.

“Okay, let's think.” Ali sucked on her top lip. Panicked queer energy had replaced her former cool queer energy. But she was still cute, if a little freaked.

But no, Morgan couldn't think about that.

There were more pressing matters at hand.

Like finding their luggage and a route south.

She held up a hand. She was trained to problem-solve. She needed to put her skills into action.

“We need to split up. You see if you can get our luggage before we leave.” Because they were leaving, however it might happen. “I'll come up with a plan of action after I check buses and trains. Two-pronged approach for the win?”

Ali took in her plan, then gave a nod.

“Meet back by the cash machine in 30 minutes?”

“Should we exchange numbers in case we get stuck or lost?”

“Good plan.” Morgan recited her number.

Ali’s fingers shook as she entered Morgan’s number. She’d either had too much coffee today, or she needed food. Probably both.

Morgan walked over to a spare metal seat in the airport foyer, deciding that whoever invented metal seating was clearly a sadist. The seat was next to a sad-looking Christmas tree with a severe lack of baubles. Ho bloody ho. She stroked the new screen on her phone, then flicked to the National Rail app to see if they could get on a train. However, the trains had something in common with the planes: most were cancelled. Maybe they’d have to get a bus all the way to Devon. They might just about make it by Christmas Eve, if they were lucky.

What had she done to deserve this? She’d worked her arse off this quarter, and satisfied all her clients. All she wanted was a festive break with her family.

A sob from nearby pulled her from her thoughts.

Morgan turned to find Mrs Claus crying on the end of the metal seating. Had Santa had an affair? Was Rudolph bed-bound with shingles?

Morgan fished in her bag and brought out a tissue. Maybe her problems weren’t so bad.

She moved up the seating and sat next to the lady in red. “Excuse me,” she said. “Would this help?”

Mrs Claus—who couldn’t be over 25—brought her gaze up to meet Morgan’s. She spotted the tissue, took it, then burst into tears.

“Thank you,” she whispered, blowing her nose.

“It’s been a rough day all round.”

Mrs Claus nodded, then let out a hiccup. “You have no idea.”

“Try me.” Morgan had just about exhausted all transport avenues. She was very much up for some distraction. Mrs Claus was just that.

“My arsehole girlfriend stood me up, and then broke up with me by text.”

Ouch. That had to hurt. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We were meant to do a festive flash mob at the airport for a project we’re doing at university. Hence the costume. Me, her and ten others. Only, the rest of them couldn’t get here because of the snow, and then she messaged me saying she was having second thoughts and that we should break up. She’s already got on a bus to go back to Manchester. I just can’t believe it.” She leaned forward, then put her head in her hands.

Mrs Claus was a lesbian. Or at least, a woman who liked women. That put a smile on Morgan’s face. This was something she could help with. She was good at relationships. She was a queer communications professional.

“Mrs Claus,” Morgan started.

“Call me Imogen,” Mrs Claus mumbled into her hands. Then she unfurled herself and sat up with a sigh.

“Imogen Claus, I like it.”

A smile ghosted across Imogen’s face.

“Are you at university in Manchester?” It seemed an awfully long way to come if so.

“No. We go to Glasgow. I’m from here, but she was going home to Manchester for Christmas later today. She moved her bus time.”

“How come you’re here if all your friends couldn’t make it because of the snow?”

“I’ve got a car, and they haven’t. Plus, I’m more reliable. I turn up for shit, you know? That was one of my girlfriend’s gripes about me. She said I was too rigid. Not spontaneous. But I think being organised and reliable are good qualities.”

Morgan sat up. Damn it, this girl sounded like a young her. She wanted to help.

Plus, Imogen had a car.

“Being reliable is an exceptional quality, and one your ex will see in time is something to celebrate.” She waved a hand up and down Imogen’s outfit.

“I bet this didn’t happen last minute, did it?”

Imogen shook her head. “No!” she wailed.

Morgan rubbed her back. “It’s okay, better out than in.” A plan formed in her mind. “Listen, Imogen. How long have you and your girlfriend—what’s her name?”

“Sam,” she said.

“Sam. How long have you been together?”

“Six months.”

“Long enough,” Morgan said. “And do you want to fight for her?”

Imogen turned her head. She’d gone all out for Mrs Claus on the make-up front, too. With her exaggerated red lipstick, blush and eye shadow, she could be a contestant on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Morgan was certain they never got deliveries of Imogen’s OTT stick-on lashes at the North Pole, either.

“I think so?”

She needed some persuasion. Morgan was the person to give it. “I’m a trained relationship specialist, so if you want some advice, I’m here for you.” She leaned in. “I’m also a lesbian, so I understand where you’re coming from.”

Imogen’s face crumpled. “That women are the worst?”

“The absolute worst,” Morgan nodded. It had been a while, but they definitely were. “But if you think she’s worth it, why don’t you drive to Manchester and let her know? Do you know her address there?”

Imogen nodded. “I met her family a couple of months ago when we went for a weekend.”

“There you are. If you want her, maybe you should go after her.”

Imogen stared at Morgan, then twisted to look outside. “But the snow.”

“The motorway will be clear,” Morgan added. “Plus, I need to go that way, so how about I come with you? My plane’s cancelled. I could coach you on what to say on our journey. It’ll be like a road trip. *Thelma and Louise!*”

Imogen scrunched her brow. “That movie didn’t end well.”

She had a point. Poor example. But Morgan wasn't to be defeated. "But the whole gist of it was about female friendship and empowerment." Morgan paused, letting her words sink in. "If you go today, act on your gut. Maybe Sam just got cold feet over something. But if you confront her, you'll know. If you don't, you'll be stewing all Christmas until you're back at university. When is that?"

Imogen frowned, then took a moment before she replied. "Nearly a month."

"You don't want to wait that long. You need answers." She was really laying it on thick. But this was Morgan's ticket out.

Was Imogen going to bite?

"I promise, if we do this, we don't have to drive off a cliff at the end."

"There aren't many cliffs in Manchester."

"Exactly!"

The silence hung over them as Imogen processed. Then she jumped up and held out her hand to Morgan. "Okay, you're on. Road trip to Manchester. Sam will not believe I'd drive all the way there to confront her."

"You might end the day back on, and with all the answers you need. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Hope roared through Morgan. They could at least move south getting a lift with Imogen. Plus, she was Mrs Claus, so the best driver possible. She probably rode shotgun with Santa every year and took over the driving when he was tired or got stuck up a chimney.

Now she just had to locate Ali, and they could go.

Today was already turning into way more of an adventure than she'd planned.



THEY FOUND Ali filling in forms at the luggage desk, along with hundreds of

other passengers. It impressed Morgan she'd even got the forms.

When Morgan drew up beside her, Ali gave her a grin. "Just the woman. You need to fill in your email address. The whole luggage system has bugged up, and nobody is picking up the bags at the moment because of the snow. They're promising we can get our luggage eventually, but they can't say when. It could be today, but then again..."

"Holy shit."

"Holy shit is exactly what I said," Ali replied. "We're filling in these forms, and they'll text to let us know when the bags are ready. They might even fly them to Exeter so we can pick them up from there. I ticked that option."

At least they wouldn't have to come back to Glasgow for them. "Makes sense," Morgan replied.

"Now we just have to work out how to get there." As she spoke, Ali peered over Morgan's shoulder at Imogen.

Morgan straightened up. She needed to explain Mrs Claus to Ali. They were yet to be introduced.

"I might have come up with a plan for that." Morgan stepped back. "Ali, meet Imogen, aka Mrs Claus. Her girlfriend unceremoniously dumped her today, but Imogen's going to drive to Manchester to get her back in the manner of every rom-com movie you've ever seen, and we're going to hitch a ride that far with her. It's going to be an epic road trip and I've promised her we'll work out a solid plan of action to fix her love life in the car."

Ali's features didn't flicker.

"I've told her we're both seasoned lesbians, so we have ample experience."

Now Ali's eyebrow crept up her face. "Are you calling me a slut?"

Morgan's eyes widened. "No! I'm just saying, we have years on Imogen. We *know* women. We can be wise owls to her fledgling chicklet."

Ali didn't look convinced, but she shook Imogen's hand anyway. When

she did, the tiny bells strapped around Imogen's wrist tingled. Other passengers glanced their way.

"Good to meet you, Imogen."

Ali thrust the pen and form into Morgan's hand. "Fill this in, and we can get going."

Fifteen minutes later, they climbed into Imogen's white Range Rover. If Morgan could have chosen a car to battle the current conditions, it would have been this one. She just wasn't sure what a university student was doing driving one. Range Rovers were normally the province of yummy mummies or posh boys, not spurned fancy-dress lovers.

"Great car for the snow." Morgan clicked her seat belt into place.

In the rear-view mirror, she watched Ali do the same. Now she reminded her of a famous footballer who played in the Women's Super League. Same stylish hair, same cool brown eyes. Did she have the same muscular calves under her trousers, too? Morgan cleared her throat. Those thoughts weren't helpful in getting them back home. They definitely wouldn't be helpful if Morgan ran into Nicole, either.

However, Ali wasn't an annoying 12-year-old anymore, was she? She'd even proved a useful teammate by sorting out the luggage. Morgan gave her corporate clients this sort of dilemma all the time to foster team-building. Now here she was, taking part in a real-life example, with Mrs Claus in the driving seat. Nobody would ever believe this story if she made it up.

"It's my dad's car." Imogen took off her red-and-white felt hat, hit the indicator, then the horn.

Morgan jumped.

"Sorry, it's pretty new, and this is the first time I've driven it. I only got put on the insurance at the weekend. My dad took some persuading. I borrowed it this morning when I needed to get to the airport. He's going to kill me going all the way to Manchester in it." Imogen located the windscreen wipers and set them going to clear the snow.

Oh fuck. Was this the car they were going to die in? Morgan had always had a slight fear of flying, but never of car journeys. Maybe that was about to change.

“You okay if I put the heat on?” If they were going to die, at least they could do it comfortably.

“Of course,” Imogen replied.

Morgan turned the heat to full and cupped her hands around the air vent as if it were a fire.

Then Imogen reversed out of the space, narrowly missing an elderly woman pushing a trolley of suitcases taller than her. Imogen swerved at the final second, then let out a hiccup, followed by a giggle.

“Oops! My dad always tells me to watch out for people. But they’re smaller than cars, aren’t they? Trickier to see.”

Morgan swallowed down her heartbeat and closed her eyes.

It was all going to be okay.

Probably.

“Can you key in Manchester on the sat nav?” Imogen pointed at the dashboard navigation system.

Morgan nodded. “Do you know the address?”

“Just put in the big Primark. If we head for that, that gets me on the right road and I know where to turn off beforehand.”

Morgan glanced at Ali, her face ashen. She gave Morgan a tight grin and raised both eyebrows.

Five minutes later, they were out of the airport and on the road. They hadn’t crashed. Yet. Morgan allowed her muscles to relax by ten per cent.

Imogen fiddled with the radio dial, keeping one eye on the road. She settled on a station playing Mariah’s ‘All I Want For Christmas’ and tapped the steering wheel as she navigated onto the motorway.

“How long have you two been a couple?”

Morgan frowned at Imogen, then shook her head. “Oh no, we’re not—”

“—a couple,” Ali said decisively from the back.

Imogen glanced Morgan’s way. “I just thought... you said you’re both lesbians and you’re travelling at Christmas together.”

“I’m a lesbian.” Morgan pressed her index finger to her chest. “I can’t speak for Ali.”

“I’m queer,” Ali confirmed. “Sometimes I’m a lesbian. It depends on my mood.” She gave Morgan a wink as she turned to her.

Now they’d met again, Morgan wanted to know more. Had they seen each other at queer venues in Glasgow? Had they slept with the same woman? That thought made Morgan suck on her teeth. It was possible, because the lesbian community in Glasgow was hardly huge. But now wasn’t the time to ask that question.

In fact, she wasn’t sure there would *ever* be an appropriate time for that one.

“Okay,” Imogen replied. “How do you know each other?” Her knuckles turned a little whiter as she gripped the wheel. “You do know each other, right? I’m not being kidnapped, am I?”

Morgan shook her head so there was no room for confusion. “Relax. We know each other from school. No kidnapping is taking place.”

She could still picture baby Ali walking home behind her and Nicole. She was always told to keep a respectable distance. Far enough away for their school rep to remain untarnished, but not too far that it looked like they didn’t care. Morgan’s cheeks coloured at the memory. Being a younger sister must have been hard. “I really am a communications expert, and I can’t vouch for exactly what Ali does, but I know her parents and they’re lovely.” Morgan glanced in the mirror again and met Ali’s gaze.

As soon as she did, Ali dropped it.

“It’s true. She knows where my family lives.” Ali sat forward and put a hand on the side of each front seat. “In fact, we first met when Morgan came to my sister’s eighth birthday party. We might have met before that, but that’s

the time I remember. Morgan won pass-the-parcel that day and walked away with a toy trumpet. I really wanted that trumpet. I was so jealous.”

Morgan turned in her seat. “I remember that trumpet. I played it to death and drove my parents bananas.”

“You’ve known each other forever.” Imogen switched to the fast lane. She was no laid-back driver.

Ali held Morgan’s gaze. “For as long as I can remember, Morgan has been in my life. Well, my sister’s, which made it mine too. Because that’s how families work, isn’t it?”

What Ali said was true. She had been a part of her life forever. Just not when they were adults. Morgan turned to face front.

“It is,” Imogen replied. “I’ve got 14-year-old twin brothers and they annoy the crap out of me.”

“Give it time. You might like them when they’re older.”

“I doubt it.”

“But you never quite grow out of the roles you had when you were younger. No matter how old Ali or I get, she’ll always be my mate’s little sister. One that I better get home safe or Nicole will kill me.”

“I can get home myself just fine.”

Morgan caught Ali’s peevish tone, but she ignored it. “Anyway, enough about us. What about you? Tell us about you and Sam.”

Now it was Imogen’s turn to sigh. She flicked the wipers onto fast speed as the snow came at them in waves. The flashing lights on the overhead signs told her to lower her speed to 30mph. Imogen obliged.

“What do you want to know? We met eight months ago on our ecology course. Sam’s very chatty, kinda brilliant. We began studying together, and then one night we went for a chai latte at a cafe in the West End, and Sam invited me back to hers. I didn’t leave for six days.” A wide grin spread across Imogen’s features as she recounted the story.

“Look at your face! You can’t give that up.” Morgan remembered young

love. Sort of. “Six days is an impressive shagfest. Did you eat anything at all or just survive on lust alone?”

A snort arrived from the backseat.

Morgan turned again. “What?”

“*Did you eat anything?*” Ali said. “You sound about 60, not 38. Who cares if she ate anything? She didn’t need to. Lust is very filling, I hear.”

Morgan tensed. Where had that come from? “I was just making conversation.”

“We ate a lot of Battenberg cake. Good for energy. It still makes me smile when I see it.” Imogen sighed again. “Or at least, it did.”

Morgan reached over and patted her thigh. “It will again. You don’t stay in bed with someone for six days if there’s not a great connection. I’m sure it wasn’t just sex and cake. There was some conversation, too?”

Imogen tipped her head as the traffic ground to a halt. As quick as the blizzard had arrived, it had now slowed, but so had the traffic. Imogen wasn’t focused on that. She was too busy reliving the early days of her and Sam.

“So much of it. That’s what I love about Sam. She’s interesting and smart. Also, great tits.”

Ali let out a hoot of laughter in the backseat. “You can’t let her go, then. Tits are important.”

Imogen slapped the wheel, and the car filled with the sound of jingle bells. “I’m glad you’re a breast girl, too.” She grinned at Ali via the mirror.

“Was she your first love?”

Imogen nodded. “First one where I’ve been away from home. I mean, I had girlfriends at school, and I really thought my first one was going to be the one I stayed with, but it didn’t work out.” She shrugged. “But Sam’s different. Or at least, I thought she was different.”

Morgan tapped her fingers on the dashboard. “In that case, if she’s the one, you need to know why she’s ending it.”

“I wouldn’t drive to Manchester for just anyone,” Imogen replied.

“Although we’ve only driven 15 miles so far,” Ali added, phone in front of her face when Morgan glanced her way.

It seemed like they’d been on the road for hours. But at least they were heading in the right direction.

“What about you, Morgan? Who was your first crush?” Ali leaned forward. “And if you say my sister, full disclosure, I will tell her when I see her.”

Morgan laughed. “It was not your sister. It was actually a girl in the upper sixth. Her name was Sarah Kelly, and she wore her skirt just that bit shorter than anyone else, but in a ‘fuck you!’ kinda way.” Morgan still recalled stopping in the corridor whenever Sarah walked past. The way her breath had caught in her chest. “I wonder where she is now?”

“I don’t remember her.” Ali’s voice was quieter. “Did she move away?”

“Her family did, so she had no reason to come back. Probably for the best, because if she turned up in the pub, I might turn into my 15-year-old self and die on the spot.”

“She might be married with four kids by now,” Imogen told her.

Morgan shook her head. “It wouldn’t matter. You don’t forget your first and the effect they have on you, do you?”

At that, Imogen shook her head slowly from side to side. “No, you don’t.” She paused. “Are you both single now?”

Morgan glanced back as Ali nodded. “Yep. For the past three years. Happy to be so.”

Imogen eyed Morgan. “And you?”

Morgan nodded. “Yes. This year has been too crazy to accommodate a girlfriend.”

“Let me get this straight. You two are giving me relationship advice, when neither of you are in one, or have been for the past year?”

Morgan shifted in her seat.

She made a good point.

CHAPTER 6



Ali couldn't wait to get out of the car. This was possibly the worst road trip she'd ever had the misfortune to fall into. She'd done one with her ex when she was in her late 20s, and that had been a disaster as soon as they hit France and her ex began kissing boys on the sly. Or should that be, on the not-so-sly, because Ali kept seeing her do it. However, she still wasn't sure which was worse. Being cooped up with the woman she'd been in love with her entire teenage years. Or spending her days driving with her cheating, conniving ex.

Maybe she'd call it a draw.

"It's just intense, though, isn't it? First crushes and first loves?"

But apparently, it was all Imogen wanted to talk about.

Thankfully, Morgan had shut up in the front. Maybe she didn't want to think back on hers, for whatever reason.

Ali desperately wanted to look up Sarah Kelly, but she'd probably changed her name by now. Most women she knew had.

They passed a sign for a services where Burger King was the star attraction. Everyone knew an M&S Food outlet always trumped that, but they didn't get a choice. After half an hour, the snow had almost stopped, but the traffic was still slow.

"I need the loo, so I'm getting off here," Imogen said. "Maybe we can get

a coffee to warm us up for the rest of the trip, too?”

Morgan rubbed her hands together and blew on them. “Good plan. My treat for driving us. Might even get some gingerbread biscuits, too. Something festive and sweet.” She turned around. “Fancy a coffee and a gingerbread, Ali?”

Morgan was oblivious to the effect she had on her, wasn't she?

“Sounds good. I need the loo, too.”

Imogen flicked on her indicator, then pressed the accelerator to get past two cars on her inside. The obvious thing to do, rather than slowing down.

Ali clamped her eyes shut, so she didn't witness their certain death. However, when she reopened them, their car sped up the slip road and squealed around the bend too fast. She'd be glad to get out of this car alive. The bad news was she had to get back in.

Imogen parked up, and the three of them rugged up and walked cautiously across the car park to the main doors. A sign to the right of the entrance announced ‘Christmas Trees For Sale: Free Local Delivery!’, with an arrow pointing to a path beyond. As soon as they walked through the main door, Christmas music filled their ears again. This time, it was East 17 and their festive tune, ‘Stay Another Day’.

Next to her, Morgan threw up her hands. “This is not a Christmas song, by the way. It's just a song that got released at Christmas and they added jingly bells. Why don't people realise that?”

Ali gave her a weird look. “But it's always played at Christmas.”

“It's one of my mum's favourites.” Imogen jingled for added effect.

Morgan rolled her eyes. “It's a deception. Even their lead singer, Tony Mortimer, admitted it.”

“Okaaaay,” Ali replied. Morgan flipping out about a song was not optimal right now.

Morgan sighed. “We've got bigger things to worry about, I know. It just winds me up every year.”

Ali was getting that.

“Anyway, I’ll get the coffees,” Morgan said, taking charge.

She did that a lot.

“Maybe we can drink them inside while I use the Wi-Fi to see if I can book a hire car for tomorrow? My reception has been patchy so far.” She’d been trying ever since they began.

Morgan nodded. “Grab a table and I’ll find you.”

“I’m going to the loo before I do anything else.” Imogen jingled as she walked away.

Ali found a spare table and sat down. She unwound her thick mustard scarf, specially knitted by Tobias’s fair hands, then got out her phone and texted him. She had to talk to someone.

Plane grounded. Now hitching a lift to Manchester. With Morgan Scott. Don’t ask.

Although, obviously, if *she* got that text, that was the first thing she’d do.

Within seconds, Tobias responded. She knew he would. His phone was surgically attached.

OMG, I thought you’d be home by now! Are you okay? And who the fuck is Morgan Scott? Wait, was she in that Netflix thing you liked?

She sounded like a film star! It wasn’t just Ali.

Remember when we sat up drinking wine at mine recently and we discussed our first crushes? Morgan Scott was mine.

She waited for it to land, then his response.

First off, he sent a row of shocked-face emojis. Quickly followed by some aubergines.

Wait. You’re hitching a lift with your first love? More shocked emojis.

Looks like it. She’s going home too, and we met at the airport. Our parents still live in the same village.

Parent.

It was still new enough to shock her.

I better go. She's just paying for the coffee.

Where are you now?

A service station somewhere south of Glasgow.

No shagging in the loos.

Ali rolled her eyes. No shagging in my bed.

Tobias sent more aubergines, followed by a raised eyebrow.

She walked into that, didn't she?



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Ali sat up straight. Elbows on the table, head turned left. Her gingerbread was gone, her coffee half-drunk.

Opposite, Morgan mirrored her pose.

Outside, Imogen walked up and down, phone stuck to her ear. Every now and again, she stopped, frowned, then started walking again. She was still dressed as Mrs Claus, so onlookers were probably worried Christmas plans weren't going well in the North Pole.

“You think it's her dad wanting the car back?”

Ali turned, and their faces were so close, she could almost reach out and touch Morgan. That face that was so familiar, and yet, so much a stranger. She sat back, putting some distance between them. “I hope not, otherwise we're screwed.”

“I have a bad feeling,” Morgan replied. “Although if it is her dad demanding she comes home, at least we won't die with Imogen at the wheel.”

Ali snorted. “She is by far the worst driver with the nicest car I've ever had the misfortune to hitch a ride with.” She paused. “If it cheers you up, I just booked us a car in Manchester for the morning. If we can get there, we just need to find a hotel, and we can drive home tomorrow.”

Morgan's smile almost cracked her face. “Fucking hell, I could kiss you.”

Ali went rigid, and her heart danced in her chest. Goddammit, she just

wanted to get home and get away from Morgan. It was all too confusing. This was bringing back too much of her past, and Ali was all about existing in the future and beyond. She didn't want to be dragged backwards.

Imogen pulled the phone from her face, waved, then said something through the glass Ali couldn't understand.

Moments later, she sat next to Ali with a thump.

"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Good," said Morgan.

"Bad," replied Ali.

Imogen looked from one to the other. "Okay, I'll do it the way I want to. The good news is, that was Sam. She says she made a huge mistake. She read an article online last night about first loves and how I could be the one, and she freaked out." Imogen shrugged, then ran a hand through her blonde hair. "The details aren't important. The key point is, she got off her bus at the first service station, and now she's back in Glasgow and waiting at my flat. She let herself in. She has a key.

"The bad news is that I'm going back to Glasgow. This is where our journey ends. Unless you want to come back with me and try again from there? Or you could try to hitch a ride from here? There are normally people on the way out of services, aren't there? Plus, you're both hot, so you should have no end of takers."

Ali blinked. She hadn't expected that from Imogen's mouth. But where did it leave them? Bugged.

"This trip is all about you getting back together with Sam, and it looks like that's going to happen. I'm thrilled for you!" Morgan gave Imogen an encouraging smile.

"Thanks for understanding. Sorry to leave you stranded." She stood up, jingled, then grimaced. "Give me your numbers, then if you're still stuck this evening and nobody's picked you up, we'll come and get you. Sam and I. You'll love her. She's gorgeous. Also, great tits."

Ali laughed, but keyed her number in just in case. “Thanks for getting us this far. Now, go have your happy ending.” Ali got up and gave Imogen a hug.

“I’m so pleased I met you. Let’s keep in touch!”

“See ya, Thelma.” Morgan gave her a hug too, then checked she had her bag, wallet and phone.

Ali did the same.

“Go get your girl,” Morgan added.

Imogen gave them both a wave, then disappeared out the door of the services.

“Well, now we’re fucked,” Ali said.

“Royally.”



AFTER THEY GOT BORED with freaking out, they hatched a plan. They were going to hitch a ride home.

They stocked up on chocolate, then bought a large pad of paper and a black marker. Morgan wrote the word ‘Devon’ in large block capitals on one sheet, after an argument about exactly what they should write. Ali had wanted to focus on a particular town, and write ‘Exeter’ or ‘Torquay’, both agreeing Dartmouth was too small. However, Morgan won out, saying people would more likely have a vague idea of the direction of Devon. Ali guessed they’d wait and see. If they hit the jackpot and scored a lift, they’d cancel their hire car.

They’d stood at the side of the road for around 20 minutes when a battered red Golf pulled up. Ali banged her hands together and leaned in, only to be confronted by two mean-looking dogs in the backseat. When Ali reached out a hand, one dog snapped its jaw.

Ali jumped back. She was cold, but she didn’t want to be a dog’s dinner.

“You’re welcome as long as you don’t mind sharing with Rod and Emu,” the woman with a mass of frizz for hair told her.

Morgan gave Ali a definite shake of the head.

“Thanks, but my friend’s not a dog lover,” Ali replied.

“Shame, the forecast says snow again soon. Good luck, ladies!” With that, she drove off.

Ali breathed out, fogging the air in front of her. She adjusted her new furry, wrap-behind ear muffs. She didn’t like hats or normal ear muffs as they messed up her hair. “She has a point. I don’t fancy standing here in a blizzard.”

“If a blizzard whips up, we’ll go back to the services, okay? I’d prefer that to getting in the back with those two dogs.”

Ali hugged herself against the cold, but nodded. “Agreed.”

They waited 15 minutes longer, the wind slicing Ali’s face. She glanced at Morgan, who looked frozen. “You don’t have a hat and gloves?”

Morgan shook her head. “They’re in my case. I didn’t think I’d need them on the plane.”

It was a fair point.

And then it started to snow again. First, pretty snowflakes that swirled around them. If you squinted, it was almost like being in a snow globe. But then, the snowflakes multiplied, the wind whipped up, and soon they were both spitting out ice and shivering.

Ali made the move first, and Morgan followed. By the time they got to the services, Morgan had a layer of snow on top of her head, and her eyelids shivered.

Now she didn’t just look like Ali’s first love. She looked like her first love, but frosted.

“I’m not sure why snow is so romanticised. Ice doesn’t get the same appreciation, does it?”

“Unless you’re making a cocktail.”

“I can only dream of a Negroni right now.” Morgan stamped her feet as they walked into the cafe area. She clocked the stares from other people. “Do I look that bad?”

Ali laughed, leaning in to swipe the snow from Morgan’s hair. “You look like you’ve been in a snowstorm. And let’s face it, the heating is barely on in here. It won’t melt any time soon.” She stared into her eyes. Still deep and blue.

Morgan shivered.

“Thanks for making me look less like a snowman. It might have worked better if we still had the cabaret here, but Mrs Claus has long since departed.”

They walked over to the cafe, and this time, Ali got the coffees. She added two vegetable soups and hunks of bread and butter to the order, and brought the tray back.

Morgan looked like she might cry with gratitude. “You’re a lifesaver. I’ve only had breakfast today.”

“And a gingerbread.” Ali checked her watch. “Plus, it’s still only 3pm. We’ve been in survival mode, and we’ve made it this far. Well done us. But we’ll only keep it up with some food inside us.”

“Agreed.”

Ali ate the soup in silence, welcoming the warmth it provided. By the time they finished, Morgan had lost her frosting.

When she was done, she pushed away her bowl. “I’ve had an idea.” She peered out of the window. The snow still fell, but not as fast. She stood up. “Stay here. I’ll be back.”

“Hang on,” Ali began.

But Morgan was already out the door.

Where the hell had she disappeared to?

CHAPTER 7



Morgan blew some snow from her face and waved her hand as she walked up the side path where the Christmas trees sign pointed. She emerged into a small courtyard that seemed almost otherworldly. From here, shielded from the noise of the motorway by greenery and twinkling lights, it was a winter wonderland. She stamped her feet to make sure her blood continued to move and looked around for a staff member. Seconds later, a man in a lumberjack jacket appeared, replete with cream fleece collar. He also had a thick black hat on and thermal gloves. Envy fizzed through Morgan as she curled her own frozen fingers at her side.

“Hello, how can I help you?” The man walked over and smiled at Morgan. He wore a name badge that said ‘Dave’. A solid name. Morgan hoped she could appeal to Dave’s sense of community and Christmas spirit.

“Hi Dave,” Morgan began. Always throw in a name when you can. First rule of negotiation is the personal touch. “I was just wondering.” Morgan pointed at his nearby sign. “When you say you’ll deliver, how local is local?”

Dave tilted his head. Up close, his eyebrows were so thick, Morgan half expected a family of birds to be nesting there.

“Depends how polite you are. I’ve delivered to Edinburgh if I have enough trade. But normally it’s more local. Where do you need the tree to go?”

“Manchester?” Morgan winced. She knew it was ridiculous as soon as it came out of her mouth.

Dave threw back his head and howled. “I think they might have Christmas trees a little closer to Manchester that you could buy.”

Morgan took a step closer to him. She could see she had his interest. Either that, or he thought she was completely mad. Possibly both.

“The thing is, Dave, we’re in a bit of a quandary.”

“We?” Dave looked over her shoulder as if expecting someone to materialise any moment.

“Me and my friend. Well, not so much a friend. We know each other from school. Well, I know her sister more.” This was not going according to plan. *Focus, Morgan!* She shook her head. “I’m going off topic.”

“A little,” Dave agreed with a smile.

“Here’s the thing. My old acquaintance and I met today at the airport, where we were catching a flight to Devon for Christmas. But then, our plane had a fault and it snowed. We hitched a lift this far from Glasgow, but sadly for us, our driver had to turn back due to matters of the heart.” She paused. “And did I mention our baggage is still at the airport?”

“You’ve had quite the day, and it’s only,” he checked his watch, “three o’clock.”

It honestly felt like a year since this morning. “Exactly. We’ve tried hitching, but nobody’s stopping, so I wondered if you would give us a lift. Even to the nearest train station so we could get to Manchester eventually?”

“You don’t want to go back to Glasgow? You’ve not come far, and there are more trains than the local ones around here. Plus, your bags are there.”

Morgan shook her head. “The bags still haven’t been located.” She’d hadn’t received a text as yet. “And honestly, I think we’d rather go south than north. It feels a little more like we’re heading in the right direction, at least.”

He studied her face. “You might be in luck. I’m packing up here in around two hours, and then I’m heading home. And home is half an hour

south. If you stick around and help me stash the trees in the lot in around 90 minutes, you can get in with me and I'll drop you at Lockerbie, which is on the Manchester train route. How does that sound?"

Morgan went to hug him, then remembered she must not come over as a mad woman. She was in control. She was sorting things out. She was a problem-solver supreme.

"It sounds bloody perfect. Thank you, Dave. You don't know what this means. Let me tell my friend, and we'll come back." She shivered, then clapped her hands. "Don't drive off without us." Morgan pressed her frozen fingers together, as if in prayer.

"I promise." He gave her a grin as she left.

Minutes later, Morgan skidded back into the cafe to find Ali on her phone. When she heard her, she looked up.

"You think I should cancel this hire car we have for tomorrow? I don't want to buggery up someone else's Christmas travel if we won't use it."

Morgan shook her head. "No. Mainly because I've solved our travel issues."

Ali blinked. "This I can't wait to hear."

Morgan put her hands on her hips. "You don't believe me?"

"If you've promised me to a sultan in exchange for a car ride, I reserve the right to say no."

"No sultan, just Dave, who's selling the Christmas trees. In exchange for a hand putting them under wraps at the end of the day, he'll drive us to Lockerbie, which is the next train station on the line to Manchester."

Ali stared, then gave Morgan a big smile. "You really have saved Christmas with your sweet-talking ways. Did you buy some extra chocolate to bribe him?"

Okay, Morgan deserved that. "Mock all you like, but it means we don't have to spend the night here in Bothwell services."

"And for that, you have my thanks." Ali opened the train app on her

phone. “Let’s see if I can get some train tickets next, shall I?”

“Even if we can’t book a seat, I say let’s buy a ticket and squeeze ourselves on. We’re small, and we don’t have luggage. I want to at least get into England tonight. This morning, that wouldn’t have been my bare minimum aim, but now, it seems like an impossible dream.”

Ali scrolled, made some faces, then looked up. “It says we can book them. Maybe everyone from Glasgow is getting off at Lockerbie. Maybe they know something we don’t.”

Morgan wriggled her fingers. They were still numb. “I say book them.”

“Shall I book for both of us?”

“Yes please. How about you pay for the train, I’ll pay for tonight’s hotel when we get to Manchester, then we can sort the difference later? I’m good for it. And if you don’t think so, you know where my family live. You can track them down and hold them to ransom until I cough up.”

Ali laughed. A full belly laugh. Which made Morgan laugh, too. It felt so good to do so. Like she’d been tense and holding her breath ever since their travel disruption began. But there was still time to repair the damage and get home before Christmas. Sure, she wouldn’t make it to decorate the gingerbread house, but she hoped her family would save her a section of the roof. They always had before when she’d turned up late.

Plus, she wasn’t doing this alone. Much as she was self-sufficient, she was glad that was the case. Also, Ali wasn’t a stranger. She was a blast from the past. A welcome one.

An attractive one.

But Morgan’s fingers and brain were still too cold to process that thought. For now, she was happy she had a partner in crime.

Especially now, as Ali leaned back, held her phone in the air, and raised her gaze to meet Morgan’s.

Morgan’s heart boomed like a thunder crack.

She flinched, then took a deep breath in. “Did you book them?”

“We have train tickets,” Ali replied. “Whisper it, but I think our luck is about to change.”

Morgan clutched the hope to her chest.



“I’VE ALWAYS WANTED to ask, don’t you get cold? If I had to do this, I swear I wouldn’t last a day. My hands would fall off, as would my feet.”

Morgan and Ali hauled the last tree under the tarpaulin-covered metal cage.

Dave locked the padlock and rattled it to check.

“You get used to it,” he told them in a softer Scottish accent than Morgan was used to. Was Dave considered a soft southerner when he went to Glasgow, living an hour south of the city? “I was born and bred in Scotland, so it’s sunshine and warmth that makes us melt. The cold just toughens us up. Where are you from?”

“Devon,” they both replied.

Dave gave a sharp laugh that pierced the air. “I don’t think the Scottish Christmas tree trade is right for you. A nice office job would be best, am I right?”

Morgan bent her head, a little embarrassed. Dave had her number.

They climbed into his white van, all three in a row up front, high enough to view the traffic on the A74(M) with ease. This time, it was moving at least. Plus, the snow had stopped, although the sides of the motorway were still stacked high.

“I might see if we can get an actual tree when I get home.” Ali’s thoughts broke the silence.

“You don’t normally?” Dave twisted his head left as he spoke.

Ali shook her head. “My family runs the local pub. We have a few trees dotted around it, but they’re always fake. Too much mess with the pine

needles otherwise. We buy that pine-scented oil and pipe it into the pub instead. That, and a log fire with some mulled wine and mince pies, and people think all their festive dreams have come true.”

“I’m glad not everyone thinks like that, otherwise I’d be out of a job. Me and my brother run a Christmas tree farm nearby, so it’s a year-round occupation for me.”

Morgan leaned over. “What’s your business called?”

“Jolly Good Elf Christmas Trees. I came up with the name.” Dave looked pretty pleased with himself.

“Wow. You really are Mr Christmas.”

“I contemplated changing my name by deed poll, but my wife talked me out of it.” Dave raised one of his excessively bushy brows. “What about you, Morgan? Are you a real-tree fan, or have I got two heathens up front?”

“We always have a real tree,” she replied. “Actually, more than one. My parents go all out for Christmas. You know those houses that break the national grid with all their Christmas lights? That’s ours.”

Ali turned her way. “Baking gingerbread houses. Lighting up your side of town. I don’t remember this from my childhood. Is this where you tell me your surname is really Claus, and Imogen is your daughter?”

Morgan snorted. “If Imogen was my daughter, I’d be super proud. Then I’d make her take a driving course.” She paused. “As for my family, it’s always been that way, led in the most part by my dear, departed Nan.” She gave Ali a pointed look. “Don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it. Getting into the festive mood lifts your spirits. Having Christmas drinks. Hanging decorations and getting a tree. Buying presents. Which is why I really hope we get our luggage back in time for the big day, or all my carefully bought gifts will go to waste.” But she wasn’t going to think about that. “What about you, Dave? I take it a man running a Christmas tree farm has one in every room?”

He shook his head. “My wife is fed up with them by the time Christmas rolls around. We’ve got one in the lounge like everyone else. And about ten

thousand in the garden.”

Morgan could just imagine it. A vast swathe of green trees. She’d always loved visiting Christmas tree farms as a kid. “I bet your garden smells divine. Where’s the strangest place you’ve delivered a tree?”

“The local graveyard. I had a customer whose mum died the previous year, and she’d always loved Christmas. She buys a tree and puts it on her grave every year.”

“I love that,” Morgan replied. “Much better than flowers and more personal. If I die near Glasgow, can you deliver one to my grave, too?”

“We’re nearly at Lockerbie, so if we swap numbers before you go, yes.”

Morgan got her phone out. “I’m not really expecting you to deliver a tree to my grave. But I’d love your number so I can send you a thank you gift.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Dave swung the van off to the next exit, and followed the sign to Lockerbie.

“I know, but I want to. You’ve been so kind, and you got us out of Bothwell services. For that, we’ll be forever grateful.”

Dave gave Morgan his number, and she saved it to her phone under ‘Dave Mr Christmas’.

“We’ll be sure to tell everyone we know to get their tree at the services next year, won’t we, Ali?”

Ali nodded. “Absolutely. We promise to come and get both of ours from you, too.”

“You just said you don’t have a real tree,” Dave replied.

“But I always wanted one,” Ali said. “I’ve always thought you had to have a reason to have one. That you had to be hosting Christmas, or have kids. I never thought I could just get one anyway. But you’ve convinced me, both you and Morgan. From now on, I’m going to be more festive.”

He gave them both a warm smile. “Here’s to spreading a little Christmas cheer.”

CHAPTER 8



Against all the odds, when they boarded the train at Lockerbie station, there was a spare double seat by the door. The digital reservation display said it wasn't going to be occupied until Manchester. Maybe their luck was changing. Morgan took the window seat, and Ali took the aisle. It was just gone 6pm, and they'd sprinted over the bridge to make the train. It wasn't until it moved that Ali relaxed. Possibly for the first time that day. She took off her ear muffs and put them in her bag, then rubbed her lobes and yawned.

"I thought I'd be home by now. Having a drink in the bar. Being forced to serve customers when it got busy." She smiled at the thought. She'd been reluctant to go home this Christmas, but now it seemed like the only place she wanted to be.

"Inhaling the fake pine smells. Yet here you are, starring in your own festive adventure." Morgan fished in her bag and brought out the turkey and cranberry sandwich they'd bought in the services. There had only been one left, so they'd agreed to split it. Morgan unwrapped it, got out her half, then took a bite. She chewed, made a face, then handed the other half to Ali.

"I'm going to leave mine until it's a little less cold." Ali pulled down the plastic table on the back of the seat in front of her and put the sandwich on it.

"I'm not sure any amount of time is going to improve the taste." Morgan gave her a rueful grin, but took another bite anyway. "It's not Francesco's.

Let's put it that way."

Ali blinked. "I love Francesco's. The one on Pollen Street?"

"Yes." Morgan frowned. "You know it?"

Ali snorted. Francesco's wasn't just a sandwich shop. It was a religion. "Of course I bloody know it! They do the best sandwiches. Have you tried their chicken, pesto, and avocado?"

"It's my favourite." Morgan's face lit up.

"Mine too."

Morgan finished her disappointing sandwich. She made a face. "By contrast, that sad excuse for a sandwich would not pass a Francesco's taste test."

"We have the same favourite sandwich bar. How about that?" How about that indeed. This wasn't just a passing comment. This was *news*. "If you'd said you preferred Pret, we might have had to part ways now."

"Dirty talk." Morgan gave an exaggerated shiver.

"Do you live around there?"

"Not far, but my office is nearby. Do you?"

They'd probably waited in the queue together. "A five-minute walk. I've often dragged my sorry hungover self down there on a Saturday for a brunch wrap, too. They're a lifesaver, literally."

"I've done that a few times."

Outside, the coal-grey night whizzed by. They were on the move, and they shared a love of Francesco's. Don't ask her why, but somehow, that connection was important. Ali's bones eased.

"How's Nicole and her brood doing?" Morgan asked.

The announcer came over the tannoy listing the stations the train was due to stop at.

They both shut up until he was done.

"They're good," Ali eventually replied.

"I kept meaning to get in touch, but you know how it is. You move away,

then the longer you leave it, the more difficult it is to do.”

“I’m sure she’d still like to hear from you. Not just at Christmas.”

Morgan nodded. “I will make the effort. Does she visit you in Glasgow?”

“She’s visited once in seven years. I wouldn’t hold your breath.” Ali laughed. “Scotland might as well be the moon, according to my family. But I’ll put the squeeze on her to come when I’m home. She’s due a visit, and it means she gets time on her own, which I know she craves.”

They knew so much of each other’s pasts and their families, and yet they hardly knew anything about each other. But was it worth getting to know her when this might be a one-off thing? Morgan probably had a ton of friends and a rich life in Glasgow. Would she have room for Ali? Their paths hadn’t crossed in years, which said something.

Nevertheless, they were going to be travelling together for another day, and chat was preferable to awkward silences.

Morgan obviously thought so too, as she cleared her throat.

“You said you work in apps? What are you working on right now?”

“A craft beer app so that people can locate their nearest pub or bar that serves different beers, and also they can track what they’ve drunk. Plus, they can link up with friends to see what beers and bars they rate.”

“I bet your family love that. You own three local pubs, right? I remember your dad being a huge lover of craft beer.”

Ali gulped. “You remember right.” Her stomach lurched, but she wasn’t going to be derailed. Morgan didn’t know, so her chat was what normal people did. “It’s the reason I developed it. Most of my apps are to do with hospitality. I grew up in the business, so I understand what pubs and restaurants need. I also devised one that simplifies booking systems, and another to help with staffing and recruitment, which the company sold.”

Morgan sat back. “I’m impressed. Here’s me just being a Creative Solutions Specialist. But you’re the one changing the world, one app at a time.”

“You’ve got the fancier title, though.” But it still felt good to be lauded by Morgan Scott. To have her appreciate what she did. One smile from her was still enough to send Ali’s pulse racing. To make her feel like she was 12 again. If Ali wasn’t stuck in such close proximity to her, she’d roll her own eyes at herself.

Morgan laughed. “All smoke and mirrors. Although, when I can help my clients solve their issues and move forward in a positive way, I do feel a sense of achievement. Everyone needs help to communicate. It’s the world’s number one downfall. But I think everyone deserves the chance to be heard, which is why I do my job. I’ve got clients from all walks of life, so one day is never like the next.”

“I’m sure you’re great at it. Not everyone could have talked Dave into giving us a lift, but you did. You always had the gift of the gab, and now you’re paid for your talent.”

“You’re too kind. My sister would say I’m a blabbermouth, but I prefer your assessment.”

Morgan gave her a warm smile that made Ali’s toes curl. She went to change the subject to something where she’d be more surefooted, but Morgan seemed to want to stay just where they were.

“Ali Bradford. Who would have thought you’d grow up and not always be 12?” She waved a hand. “Gorgeous, intelligent, good taste in sandwiches.” Morgan’s cheeks blushed red. “Sorry, did that come out a bit creepy? I meant it as a compliment.”

Ali’s insides heated to boiling point. She hoped beyond hope she wasn’t glowing. “I’ll take it as one, then.”

“When was the last time you were home?” Morgan asked. “I haven’t managed it since July, which my mother thinks is the crime of the century.”

“The summer.” It had been hot as well. Too hot for any occasion, especially the one Ali had been home for. She shook the thought from her head. “I’m long overdue.”

“The prodigal daughters return,” Morgan grinned.

“Something like that.”

The train slowed to a stop, and they stayed that way for a few minutes. Ali looked out the window, but could see nothing. She got her phone from her pocket and went onto Google maps. It showed they were in between Carlisle and Penrith, and that two miles to the right was a place called Snowton, where there was a Christmas festival and parade today. This she had to share.

She nudged Morgan with her elbow. It felt like something you might do to a friend. She hoped they were on their way to that.

Her 12-year-old self gave her a high five.

“I’ve got two pieces of good news for you.”

Morgan turned her head and sat up. “Hit me.”

“One, we’ve left Scotland and are finally in England.”

Morgan held up a triumphant fist.

“Second, we’re just passing a village called Snowton that has a Christmas festival and parade today, and it’s billed as the most festive place in the north.”

“My friend told me about a town called Mistletoe in the southeast that loves Christmas. But I never knew there was somewhere in this neck of the woods, too.”

The train tannoy crackled to life. Ali’s body tightened. She hoped this wasn’t bad news.

“Good evening, ladies and gents. This is your driver speaking. I’ve got some bad news, I’m afraid. We’ve got a fallen tree on the line up ahead that’s brought down some power lines, making it dangerous to advance. There are two choices. First, wait on the train and we’ll try to make you as comfortable as possible with free tea and coffee, and blankets. Second, we’re pretty near a footpath to the nearest town, Snowton, which is about two miles away. If you’d prefer to get off and go there, go to carriage five. A member of staff

will be on hand to escort you off the train and to the footpath. I'd say your best bet is to stay on the train as the town isn't that big, but it's up to you. Any questions, I'll be passing through the carriages now."

Ali couldn't quite believe it. She shook her head and turned to Morgan. "You ever get the feeling this trip is doomed?"

"Never. It's just throwing up problems for me to solve." Morgan took a breath. "What do you think? Shall we get off? I don't fancy being stranded here, and I remember the last few times this happened. Trains didn't move for hours or passengers had to walk down the tracks in the dark. It happened to a friend of mine. She said it was terrifying."

Ali steepled her fingers in front of her chest. If they got off, at least they were taking matters into their own hands.

"Are you one of those people who hate waiting at bus stops, too?"

Morgan gave her a knowing smile. Ali struggled not to lean forward and touch her face.

"Hate it. I'd rather walk."

Composure.

"Even when the bus gets there before you do?"

"Even then. At least in my head I'm getting somewhere."

Ali twisted her mouth left and right. She didn't fancy being stuck on a train overnight, either.

She got up and hitched her backpack on her shoulder. If they were moving, it would distract her from wanting to kiss Morgan Scott, at least.

"Let's go to carriage five, shall we?"



ALI WAVED her phone around the ground at their feet, the torch lighting some of the way. The lights of the train still cast a glow from behind, but they'd lose that soon enough. Up ahead, it was pitch black, but in the distance, there

was a hazy light. The torch showed the path was wide enough for three people, flanked either side by a rough stone wall that stopped around knee height.

“It’s fucking dark, and I swear I’m about to tread in cow shit.”

Beside her, Morgan chuckled, as if she loved this type of adventure. Like life was better because of it. Maybe for her, it was.

“So long as this is a footpath and there are no cows on it, I’m good,” Morgan said.

“We might meet the only concrete-loving cow in the country.”

“Don’t say that.”

Maybe Morgan wasn’t loving this as much as she made out. Ali shivered and pulled her scarf as tight as it would go. She dropped her phone and the night went dark. “Shit!”

“Not literally, I hope.” Morgan rummaged in her bag, presumably to get her phone.

Ali crouched down, found hers, and gave them light again. “No shit attached to phone. Phone still working and acting as a torch. Be thankful for small mercies.” She stopped walking, noticing Morgan had stopped, too. “Everything okay?”

“I’m sure it’s in here somewhere, but I can’t find my phone.” She said it through gritted teeth.

“Did you have it out on the train?”

“No, I was trying to be in the moment, mindful, eating my sandwich in an aware way.”

Not very helpful. “Where did you last have it?”

Morgan made a humming noise. “In Dave’s van when I was taking his number down.”

They both let that sink in, with all it entailed.

“But I’m sure I put it back in my bag.” Morgan’s tone sounded anything but sure.

“Well, you won’t find it on a dark path in the freezing cold,” Ali told her. “Let’s walk to the town, get in the warm, then you can have a proper look.”

They started walking again.

“Look on the bright side. At least I got us a room at the local bed-and-breakfast, so phone or not, we’ll soon have somewhere to sleep tonight. That’s enough of a win for me today.” It was the first thing Ali had done while they waited for the staff to let them off the train. They were the only passengers who got off.

“Unless the bed-and-breakfast burns down before we get there.”

Ali nudged Morgan with her elbow again. “Hey, you’re the upbeat one of this partnership, remember? The problem-solver.” She waved her phone in the air. “At least I have mine.” She paused. “Although my charger’s in my case.”

Morgan huffed. “If it’s an iPhone, I have a charger you can use. But please, remind me never to think that winter and snow are romantic again. They’ve brought nothing but trouble today. Romance is far more suited to summer, sunshine and beaches.”

“It’s romantic when you’re inside in the warm with a roaring fire and glass of red.”

“Does that only happen in romance books and films, though? Give me a cocktail on a beach any day.” Morgan’s white teeth flashed in the dark.

Ali wasn’t sure if it was via a smile or a grimace.

“Have you ever had a roaring fire, a glass of red and a love interest at the same time?” Morgan asked.

The romantic periods of Ali’s life flashed before her eyes. There hadn’t been many, and none had involved what she’d just outlined.

“No, but I live in hope.”

“You told me there hadn’t been much romance in your life, but I’m hearing flecks of a hopeless romantic in you.”

Ali cleared her throat. “Don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to keep up.”

“Your secret’s safe with me. If we survive this path, that is.”

Then a noise made them both stop walking. It sounded like a cow crossed with a wolf. The darkness creaked around them.

Ali flinched and snapped off her phone light. Whatever it was, she didn’t want to startle it.

“What the fuck was that?” Morgan threaded an arm through Ali’s and pulled her close.

Ali was too freaked to register the full impact of being this near to Morgan Scott.

“I thought you said cows don’t come onto the path.” Morgan paused, then whispered, “Is now a good time to tell you I’m *terrified* of cows?”

“Not especially,” Ali whispered back.

They heard the noise again, this time a little closer than before.

Ali’s brain throbbed in her skull. Of all the ways to die, she never thought she’d get trampled by a cow. She strained her eyes to see anything.

Morgan held Ali’s arm with a vice-like grip.

Ali’s heartbeat thumped in her ears. Normally Morgan Scott hanging onto her would be the reason. But right now, staying alive was the primary culprit. She exhaled, but could barely see her breath.

Then something up ahead flashed in the dark.

Something about knee-height.

Was that a pair of eyes?

Ali swallowed hard, and every muscle in her body tensed.

“Don’t move,” she whispered to Morgan. She had no idea what she was going to do next, but she knew they were trespassing on territory that belonged to whatever animal it was. This wasn’t their patch.

“Is it a fucking cow?” Morgan asked, so softly it was barely audible.

“Not sure,” Ali whispered back. “It looks dense. Plus, aren’t cows’ eyes up high?”

“They have to bend down to eat grass.”

She had a point.

That tickled Ali.

This was an absurd situation. And cows had to bend their heads to eat grass.

Amusement rose up through her throat, and she let out a stifled snort.

Morgan twisted her head. “Are you laughing?” Her tone was incredulous. She was on the edge.

That caused Ali to stifle more laughs. This was a *really* inopportune time to get the giggles, but she couldn’t help it. She gulped back another laugh, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Sorry, it’s just, cows can move their heads...” Another wave of laughter sailed through her. She clamped it down, then took a deep breath.

Then Morgan shook too. “Keep it together,” she whispered.

The same noise filled the air again. This time, it was definitely something akin to a moo.

“Do bulls moo, too?” Ali asked, her breath coming thick and fast now. They had to act, otherwise they’d be here all night. Standing in the middle of a field, held in place by a cow.

“What am I, an expert on bulls?” Morgan hissed. She clutched Ali tighter. “I don’t know if I can walk past it.”

“You’re going to have to if you don’t want to freeze to death and wait for his mates to turn up.”

That comment made Morgan jolt. “Okay, but let’s do it quickly.”

The cow’s eyes were on the right, now raised in the air. If they walked left, they could pass without disturbing it. Ali took a deep breath, clutched Morgan’s hand in hers, then pulled her left. Together, they edged up the path, and it was only when they drew level with the cow that Ali realised it was on the other side of the wall. It was only the cow’s head that was straying into the path. It was a nosy cow, come to see what the noise was about.

Whatever, she wasn’t hanging around to have a chat.

She tightened her grip on Morgan's hand and pulled, breaking into a jog when they were far enough away. They didn't stop until some streetlights came into view a couple of minutes later. Then, Ali bent over, hands on her thighs, panting. Then she started laughing again. This time, she allowed herself to do so. Once she started, she couldn't stop.

Eventually, Morgan joined in.

In moments, they were both bellowing deep, round belly laughs into the night sky, rich with relief.

"Cows can bend their heads," Ali rasped. She sucked down ice-cold air and coughed some more.

"I know!" Morgan wheezed, clutching Ali's arm. "Fuck a duck, we're such wusses."

"We're city girls. Dave was right. What would our Devon families say? They're much better with animals."

Ali drained herself of laughs, then straightened up. She waited until she got her breath back before she spoke. "I'm not terrible with animals. I've got a cat, but she hates me. Spends her days covering me with fluff."

"That's what cats do, don't they?" Morgan paused, then shivered. "Who's looking after her while you're away?"

"My friend Tobias. He's threatening to bring a parade of men back to my flat, but I know he's more likely to spend the nights pandering to Snowy. He loves it when I go away, because he gets the flat all to himself."

"Sounds like Snowy wins whoever's there."

"Cats always do." Ali pulled her scarf tight as the wind whipped around them. "Tobias knitted me this scarf, actually."

Morgan blinked. "It's lovely. I thought maybe your nan knitted it, but it was Tobias. Clever man."

"He has his moments."

"Does he knit hats, too? I could do with one. And some gloves."

"It might be too late for this trip." Ali glanced up the path. "I can see

civilisation. Maybe a bottle of wine with our name on it. Ready to walk the final bit?”

“Yes. And then I can see if I have my phone, or if I’m turning into my grandmother by losing it or smashing it every other day.”

Ali stared at Morgan. This woman she’d put on a pedestal and held in such high esteem all of her life. But really, Morgan was just another woman. Just like her, trying to muddle through life. Plus, there was only three years between. Ali had dated women older and younger. But Morgan had always seemed light years older, wiser, hotter. That’s what happened when you got stuck in 12-year-old-self thinking patterns. From now on, Ali was going to treat Morgan as she would any other hot, intelligent and available woman.

On second thoughts, maybe she shouldn’t do that.

She might implode.

But more than that, her sister might kill her.

CHAPTER 9



The path led them into a cul-de-sac filled with identikit sandy-bricked houses. White picket fences surrounded their fake grass-lined front gardens.

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore,” Morgan told Ali.

In response, Ali widened her eyes. She got her phone out and checked Google Maps. “No reception.”

“Of course,” Morgan said. “I’m going to wait until I get inside to check for my phone. I’d rather have a breakdown in the warm than the cold.” Her stomach sank at the thought. She’d just got a new screen this morning. Had it really only been this morning? She checked her watch—7:30pm. “Shall we try right and see where it takes us?”

Ali nodded and they trudged in silence.

Up above, stars studded the inky sky, lighting their way.

They rounded the first corner and walked onto a road much like the last, with minimal streetlamps. Morgan pulled her coat sleeves down in a vain attempt to keep warm. She tried her best to keep her teeth from chattering. How she wished she’d had the foresight to put her hat and gloves into her backpack. When they got to the end of the road, she tilted her head. Whooping and cheering sailed in the air.

“Can you hear that?”

“I can feel it,” Ali said.

She was right. Something vibrated the ground under their feet. “I swear, if it’s a herd of cows, I’m running back to the fucking train.”

Ali guffawed. “You’ll have to get past Maud The Nosy first.”

“Maud?”

Ali grinned. “That cow looked like a Maud. My great-grandmother was a Maud. Apparently very nosy, too.”

“And a bit of a cow?”

“How dare you talk of my great-granny like that.” Ali backed up her words with a smile. “Shall we walk towards the noise and hope it’s not cows?”

Ten minutes later, drawn towards music and lights, they found themselves on the corner of what must be the town’s main street. On it, some sort of Christmas parade was taking place, with a marching band, Santa on a float and elves giving out candy canes.

Morgan blinked. She’d been to enough Christmas markets in the UK to know they were usually half-arsed. A dirty Santa’s grotto, lukewarm mulled wine, smashed fairy lights. This was nothing like that. Snowton really cared about Christmas and its festivities. The elves were smiling, the band played at full pelt, and all around her, families clutched hot chocolate and gazed at the festive merriment.

Beside her, Ali’s mouth hung open.

“Do you think somebody spiked our turkey sandwiches and we’re actually tripping?”

Ali shook her head. “I would say yes, but I didn’t actually eat the sandwich.”

“True,” Morgan replied. “This is like a Christmas parade from one of those cheesy Hallmark movies. That I love, by the way.”

“You better be careful. You know what happens in all of them. You might meet the man of your dreams and then you’ll have to move back here

and bake cookies all year round.” The smile Ali gave Morgan lit up her face.

It made Morgan melt. Whatever barking madness they’d walked into, at least she could finally relax.

No more broken-down trains.

No more nosy cows.

For now.

“I wouldn’t mind baking cookies all year round. I’m pretty good at it.”

“What about the marrying a man part?”

Morgan raised an eyebrow in her direction. “So long as it was platonic and I could shag his sister on the side, I’d be cool.”

Ali cackled, just as an elf approached and offered them a candy cane.

“Aren’t they for kids?”

The elf shook her head. “For everyone. It’s Christmas!”

Ali took one, as did Morgan, then they looked at each other.

“Shall we find this bed-and-breakfast before this dream ends?”



THE BED-AND-BREAKFAST WAS CALLED Snow Place Like Home, which Morgan had to give props to for its pun-wizardry. And, despite the odds, it was a decent find. The pillows were plump, the bathroom sparkled and there was a bowl of individually wrapped chocolate Hobnobs next to the kettle. From what she’d been expecting, it was a win. The only slightly awkward glitch in the plan—could she call any of what had happened today a plan?—was that they only had one bed. A king-sized bed, but still only one.

However, it was only for one night. They could muddle through.

Morgan didn’t enjoy sharing a bed with a stranger, but Ali wasn’t that. What was she to Morgan, exactly? Before this morning, a vague memory. But today, Ali had made sure she was very much at the forefront of Morgan’s mind. An attractive, funny part of her day. The woman who’d sorted more

problems than Morgan of late, and when did that ever happen? She'd got them past the cow and got them this place to stay.

When they arrived, Ali jumped straight into the shower, ignoring the one-bed issue.

Morgan sat on the bed and emptied her bag onto it. She'd been putting this off until she was on her own, but now she really hoped her phone was here. She scanned through her life on top of the duvet. Notepad, pens, tampons (small, medium, extra-large), wallet, tissues, shopping bag.

No fucking phone.

Her stomach churned. She'd been half-expecting it, but it was still a kick in the teeth.

Morgan moved the tissues to reveal her phone charger (the irony). She blew out. There were cards from three companies she'd worked with in the past month, a little dog-eared. But no phone. She must have left it in Dave's truck. A killer blow. She'd have to call him to ask. If it wasn't there, it was lost to the phone gods. Again. She could beat herself up, but it wouldn't change anything.

She got off the bed and walked over to the window. The main street was lit up with festive lights as the parade came to a close. At the far end, a gigantic fairy-topped Christmas tree stood tall. At least they'd landed in Christmas Central, where it was almost illegal to be glum. Despite losing her phone, she was going to put on a brave face. There was nothing she could do about it now.

The door opening made Morgan turn her head.

Ali walked out of the bathroom wrapped in only a white towel that she held in place at her side with her elbow. She glanced up at Morgan, then quickly looked away.

Morgan's senses switched to high alert. She gulped. She hadn't been expecting Ali in a towel. Her broad shoulders or her defined biceps. Did app developers work out? Apparently this one did. Morgan cleared her throat and

tried to focus her eyes on anything other than Ali's body. Any part of it.

It wasn't that easy.

She stared at the bathroom doorway as steam danced in front of her.

"Did you find your phone?" Ali made sure her towel was secure, then moved to get her bag on the velvet armchair. As she leaned, her towel slipped down.

Morgan's eyes widened, and she swallowed down hard.

Ali stood quickly and pulled the towel back up.

"I must have left it in Dave's truck." Morgan smoothed herself from the inside out.

"Bugger." Ali held up her phone.

Morgan let her gaze slide down Ali's shoulders, then just as quickly away.

"Feel free to call home on mine if you remember the number." She made sure her elbow was holding onto her towel. Then Ali unlocked her phone, threw it onto the bed, and flicked a thumb back to the bathroom. "I'm going back in here to get dressed in exactly the same clothes I was wearing before." She tiptoed back to the bathroom and shut the door.

Morgan exhaled, wondering when her thoughts about Ali had jumped from 'Nicole's younger sister' to 'smokin' travel companion'. She shook her head, wiped her thoughts clean, and called her parents' number. The landline hadn't changed since she was young.

Her mum answered after three rings.

"Look, I've told you, we're not interested."

"Mum?"

"Oh, hello sweetie! Sorry, I thought you were one of those call centres trying to sell something. What are you calling on the landline for?"

Morgan sighed. "I lost my phone. It's a long story. But don't worry, I'm okay and hopefully I'll be able to get it back."

"Where are you?"

“In a town called Snowton. In the Lakes.”

“And when will you be home?”

That was the million-dollar question. “Fingers crossed, tomorrow.” Tomorrow was December 23rd. She had to be home by then, as it was the local secondary school’s last performance of their Christmas play. Her dad had written and directed it.

“Will you make it back for the play? Your dad’s very excited you’re coming.”

Guilt lodged itself in her stomach. “That’s the plan. I’ll do everything I can to make it.”

Ali stepped out of the bathroom in jeans and her bra. When she saw Morgan look up, she stopped.

Morgan flinched as her breath lodged in her throat. Her skin tingled all over, and her lips were suddenly very dry. Every bit of moisture in her body travelled south at pace. She swallowed, and allowed her gaze to wander from Ali’s face, down to her breasts and impossibly flat stomach, and then back up to her gaze that was now drilling into Morgan’s soul.

Big mistake.

Morgan sat up quickly as Ali turned.

“I was just getting my brush,” Ali muttered, then ran back into the bathroom.

Morgan jumped off the bed and slammed her left hand into the pocket of her trousers. Then she paced in front of the window, not quite knowing what to do with the thoughts that crowded her head.

“You like her!” said one. “If she was in a bar, you’d notice her,” said another. “You’re sharing a bed with her tonight,” said the third.

“No,” Morgan said to nobody in particular.

“Sorry?”

Morgan stopped pacing. She’d almost forgotten she was on the phone to her mum.

“Sorry, Mum,” she said. “I was just talking to Ali.”

“Ali?”

Shit. Her mum didn’t know she was here with Ali. “You remember Ali. Nicole’s little sister?” *Used to be annoying, now not so much?* “She was trying to get home too, so we’re travelling together. At least, we’re trying to.”

Her mum paused. “Ali Bradford?”

“Yes, of course Ali Bradford.” Why did her mum always irritate her?

“Okay, I was just asking. Only, she’s a lesbian, too, isn’t she? You keep saying you’d like to meet someone, so…” Her mum left the sentence dangling.

“Just because I’m a lesbian and so is she doesn’t mean we’re going to end up together. I thought I told you that when you tried to set me up with Jane Goddard’s daughter?”

Her mum tutted. “She turned out to be an idiot in the end. Going out with a boy now. But Ali has always seemed nice.”

“She is, but we’re just travelling together.” Morgan searched her brain for a change of topic. “How’s the gingerbread house going?”

“Great! Josh and Annabel decorated one side, me and your dad did the other. We’ve left the roof for you, as instructed.” She shouted to someone in the house, making sure she leaned away from the phone. “Listen, I have to go. Can’t wait to see you tomorrow!”

Morgan threw the phone on the bed, then stared at the bathroom door. Ali was behind it. But something had shifted today. With everything they’d gone through together. It wasn’t just because she’d seen Ali semi-naked. Today had opened her eyes to Ali altogether. Made her see her in a whole new light.

Morgan wasn’t sure what she was going to do about it.

CHAPTER 10



They spent the evening wandering around the town, visiting its chocolate shop, its Christmas store and the last stop, the Snow Globe cafe-bar. There, they ordered hot buttered pretzels and homemade sausage rolls, and drank mulled cider. Ali contemplated buying Christmas gifts from the shops just in case their luggage didn't turn up in time or at all. However, she was worried they'd get stranded again and have to lug it with them wherever they went. Yes, they'd cancelled their first car, and secured another for the morning thanks to Shelley, the kind woman at the bed-and-breakfast, who'd even offered to drive them to their pick-up point. But Ali didn't want to tempt fate. She was already sharing a bed and a room with Morgan Scott. That was more than enough fate for one day.

Now, she lay in bed under a thick Scottish-flavoured tartan duvet, in just her knickers and a T-shirt, waiting for Morgan Scott to get in with her. It was all a bit too much for her brain to take. Also, had there been a moment earlier? Ali couldn't be sure, but when she'd locked eyes with Morgan, something had happened. A fizz. A swell. A stutter of her heart. At least on her part.

Morgan's face had changed, and she'd sat up abruptly. Had something changed for her, too? Ali would love to know.

Why had she come out of the bathroom in just jeans and a bra, though?

When she knew Morgan was going to be there? Psychologists would have a field day working out her motives, Ali was sure. Whatever the reason, now was the moment she'd been psyching herself up to all evening.

It would be slightly more palatable if she had shorts or pyjama bottoms to wear. However, the only clothes they had were the ones they stood in. That was the same for both of them. Hence, unless Ali wanted to sleep in her jeans—which would seem a little awkward—she had to go with knickers and T-shirt. Far too few clothes for her liking. What if she leaned over in the night and threw a casual arm around Morgan? Her cheeks flamed at the mere thought. How the hell had she put herself into this situation? One that she was quaking about, but also one that fulfilled a fantasy that had flitted in and out of her mind for the past 20 years?

That thought made her stall. Had it really been 20 years?

The answer was yes.

She grabbed her phone to take her mind off the situation, and tapped out a quick text to Tobias asking how he and Snowy were doing. She got one back right away, with a photo of Snowy draped across her friend's neck. She was such a tart for visitors.

Are you home yet?

No, still in the Lake District.

You could have been having cocktails and dinner in the Big Apple in the same time, Tobias responded with a laughing emoji.

I'm well aware.

And how's it going with Morgan? Your long-lost first love. Are you married yet?

Ali rolled her eyes. She knew she shouldn't have confided in him.

It's going fine. We're stuck in a town in the Lakes and we're sharing a hotel room.

Typing... typing... typing...

Tell me you're updating me because you just had sex in the shower and it

blew your mind.

That made Ali smile.

We're actually having sex right now as I type.

Ali's thermostat rose at record levels just typing that.

I always said women were better multitaskers than men.

Ali glanced up. Through the thin door, she heard the tap shut off as Morgan finished brushing her teeth.

She's coming back, I've got to go.

Okay. Don't cut yourself scissoring each other!

Bye Tobias.

She put her phone back on her bedside table, then took a deep breath and sank right under the duvet.

She was going to hide.

That was the adult thing to do.

The bathroom door opened. Ali poked her head out of the duvet. She'd never been good at playing hide and seek, even as a kid. "Do you think we need to ask for extra pillows to put down the centre of the bed?"

Morgan gave her a strange look. "I think we can control ourselves for one night."

Ali sucked on her cheek. Why had she said that? It just highlighted what she was thinking. Why couldn't she keep her big mouth shut? Why was she never the cool one anywhere in her life, apart from in work meetings? Then she was in control. Work was the only area in her life where Ali had ever felt comfortable, able to be herself fully. She'd moved away from her family. She couldn't hold down a relationship. But a job? She'd never had difficulty with those. She'd just like some of that to rub off elsewhere.

As Morgan stepped out of her jeans, Ali glanced up.

Her pulse sprinted. This was really happening, but not at all in the circumstances she'd always imagined. In those dreams, Morgan pounced on the bed, and then on Ali, straddling her and promising to do all manner of

things to her.

Really not helpful.

Fuck, why couldn't she just be normal and think normal thoughts?

Only, this wasn't a normal situation, was it?

Morgan's legs looked just as shapely and strong as Ali had always imagined. She looked away as Morgan pulled back the duvet and slid in beside her.

For a few moments, Ali held her breath and tried to stop her body from shaking. She stared up at the ceiling. This was excruciating.

What was Morgan thinking?

Probably that she couldn't wait to get home and get in her own bed.

Far away from Ali.

"This is weird and awkward, isn't it?"

Those weren't the words Ali had expected. She turned her head.

Morgan did the same.

Up close, she looked even more beautiful than usual. Yes, she might be years older than when Ali developed her first crush, but her skin had barely aged. What would it be like to touch it?

The goddess next to her was still 100 per cent Morgan Scott and all the magic that brought with it.

Okay, Ali had to shut down these thoughts, and fast.

"If we accidentally bump arms or legs in the night, no big deal," Morgan said.

Easy for her to say.

"But I should tell you, I'm not known for it. You always have one in every relationship that hogs the bed, steals the duvet and snores, right?"

Ali laughed. "Very true."

"It's never me. You can call all my exes and they'll confirm." Morgan paused. "Or at least, you could if I had my phone." She shook her head. "Let's not focus on that."

“We can get the number for Jolly Good Elf Christmas Tree Farm first thing tomorrow and call him. I don’t think it’s lost forever.”

“Fingers crossed.” Morgan smiled, then turned her head to the ceiling. She placed her arms above the duvet and linked them on top of her chest.

Ali did the same.

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

Ali glanced Morgan’s way. “Sure.” The word came out more confident than she felt.

Morgan’s face twitched. “When did you know you were gay?”

Ali raised both eyebrows, but didn’t look at Morgan. She couldn’t. It might give the game away. “I don’t know. From a young age, I knew I was different. That I wasn’t experiencing the world the same way everyone else did. But I had no label for it. But then, when I was in my teens, I started looking at women and the world made sense.”

“Were you out at school?”

Ali nodded. “In the sixth form, yes. It was impossible not to be. I had a girlfriend. It kinda just happened that way.”

“You were braver than me.”

“It just didn’t make sense to hide.” Crucially, she’d only got a girlfriend after Morgan had left to go to university in Glasgow. Ali recalled her coming back and being in their kitchen, telling them tales of Glasgow. It was where the seed of her wanting to go to Scotland was sewn. She’d gone to university in Edinburgh, and only moved to Glasgow in the past few years. But it had always been a note on her life agenda, mainly thanks to Morgan Scott.

Had everything in her life until now been connected to Morgan? That thought pulsed in her brain.

Morgan twisted, this time propping her chin in the palm of her left hand. She was almost in pouncing position.

A furnace flamed inside Ali. She wriggled her bum, then tensed her fingers.

“Who did you go out with? Anybody I’d know?”

“Tara Dooley. She was in my year. She was a terrible kisser, but she was the first girl to show interest, so I went with it. We were not the love affair of the century.”

Morgan laughed. “I kissed my first girl in a toilet in Glasgow, so I win on the lack of romance. I’m not sure what I was hiding from. Probably myself.”

“First kiss fantasies never quite live up to reality, do they?”

Ali’s gaze dropped to Morgan’s lips. They were so close. They were so kissable. But she couldn’t do that, because Morgan was not someone she kissed. Even though they were semi-naked and in bed together. Was this the definition of torture?

Just keep breathing.

“That’s the thing. I didn’t even have a fantasy of my first kiss. I just wanted to get it over with, having kissed a million boys at school. I needed to become me, and I was in a hurry to do it. I envy you knowing so young.”

“I have you to thank.”

Ali’s brain slid sideways. Oh fuck, what had she just said? Had she just admitted something? She emptied the contents of her brain onto the floor as if it were a box of Lego, then tried to piece her thoughts and her words back together. Her brain throbbed with the effort.

It clearly hurt Morgan’s, too. “Me? What did I do?”

Ali’s cheeks heated at nuclear speed. If she’d been hot before, she was even hotter now.

“You just... You...”

Say something! Anything! Utter some words.

“You existed.”

Not those words!

Understandably, Morgan’s frown deepened. “I existed? I’m not following.”

She was going to have to say it, wasn’t she? “It’s nothing, really. Forget I

said anything.” She pressed her eyes tight shut, hoping that would make the situation go away.

When she reopened them, Morgan still stared.

It hadn’t worked.

Shit.

“It’s kinda hard to forget when I don’t understand. What did you mean, I existed?” Morgan blinked, then moved back.

Ali tried to regulate her breathing. “What I mean is, I might have had a bit of a crush on you in school. Way back when.” She sat up, dragging the duvet and her dignity with her. Ali folded her arms across her chest, then brought her eyes level with Morgan. “Not now, of course! I mean, it’s 20 years later. I haven’t been carrying a flame for you all this time.”

Surprise flitted across Morgan’s face. Then her cheeks coloured pink.

Was she embarrassed?

Morgan should be inside Ali’s brain, she didn’t know the half of it.

She put a finger to her chest. “A crush on me? Wow.”

Ali covered her face with her hands. Why had she blurted that out? She wasn’t one for divulging her feelings to strangers. But that was it, wasn’t it? Morgan wasn’t a stranger. She knew her, and Morgan knew Ali. Plus, they’d shared something today. They’d made a connection. Maybe Ali thought by telling Morgan, she’d finally be able to frame her crush as what it was? Something from the past.

Very much not a part of today *at all*.

“And I don’t know why I just told you that,” Ali mumbled, still not daring to move her hands.

She felt Morgan sigh. “Ali, look at me.”

It was the last thing she wanted to do, but it was also the only thing she could do. Ali swallowed down hard, then peeled her fingers away.

Morgan’s kind, ridiculously gorgeous face stared back at her.

She mustn’t let her gaze drop to Morgan’s lips. They were already in bed

together and Ali had just admitted to liking her way back when. However, as she sat up, Ali couldn't bring herself to look at any part of Morgan: face, neck, arms. It was all out of bounds. Instead, she twisted and stared at the heavy curtains, lined and blocking out any glare from the lit-up street below.

"It's not a big deal," Morgan said, telling the whopper of the century.

Her kindness did nothing to quash Ali's crush.

"We all had crushes in our youth. If I tell you mine, will you promise never to tell anyone else?"

Ali stole a look. "Unless it's too juicy."

"I don't know. It depends if you also had a thing for Ms Cherry."

That broke the tension. "Our PE teacher?"

Morgan rolled her eyes. "I know. I couldn't be more of a cliché if I tried, could I?"

"Not really. Although she had a certain charm about her in those fetching colour-coordinated tracksuits she used to wear."

"She was matchy-matchy before it was cool to do."

Ali's bum cheeks were still clenched from what she'd said, but she'd be forever grateful to Morgan for doing what she'd done. Making her laugh. Deflecting the situation.

"She was definitely queer, though."

"No doubt."

Ali glanced at Morgan again and caught her gaze. Desire rocked inside her, desperate for an exit. She took a moment to quiet it before she continued. She kept her hands under the duvet. If she took them out, they'd likely shake.

"You, though, were more of an enigma." Ali risked a smile Morgan's way.

She rewarded her with one back. "I wasn't even out to myself."

"And you had that boyfriend. What was his name?"

"Grant." Morgan's face folded into a frown.

"Yes, Grant! I hated him." Shit. Had she said too much? The truth was

often a low blow.

But Morgan laughed. “If it’s any consolation, I wasn’t that enamoured with him either. I mean, not in the way I should have been. All the other girls had boyfriends, and they were having sex and chatting about it all the time. Whereas I never quite got it, but I wasn’t ready to have that talk with myself.”

“Even though Ms Cherry made you want to pop?”

Now the bed shook as Morgan let out a hoot of laughter. “Ms Cherry was far too loved up with our maths teacher, Ms Bardell, to notice me. Imagine being Ms Cherry’s first, though. You really could say you popped her cherry.”

Ali grinned. “I’d dine out on that for years.”

They were quiet for a few moments before Morgan spoke again.

“I hope I was a decent first crush. Not too horrible to you. I remember Nicole and I making you walk behind us all the way home.”

Ali shrugged. “I got to ogle your arse, so it wasn’t all bad.”

Morgan’s mouth dropped open. “I feel used.” She closed her mouth. “But also, glad I paved the way for you to have some real-life love.”

Ali shook her head. “I was much better at it when I was younger. It was after university that shit got serious.” She blew out a breath. “Anyway, enough chat. We should sleep because if tomorrow’s anything like today, we’re going to need all our strength to get through it.”

Morgan slid down until she was flat. “You’re so sensible.”

“Tell my mother, please. She still thinks I’m rebelling by living in Scotland. Not a thought to what I might want to do with my life.” Of course, after what happened in the summer, maybe her mum had a point. Life was finite. Maybe she needed to go home more often.

“Also, I need to go to sleep so I can die of shame for what I just told you. I can’t wait until I wake up in the morning and remember it all over again.” Ali let her eyelids flutter shut. She functioned better when she was asleep.

Less able to say stupid things.

“You’re going to be fine. If it helps at all, I’m glad I’m here with you. You might have been an annoying kid, but you’re a pretty cool adult. Plus, getting thrown this hopelessly off course on the way home wouldn’t have been half the fun alone. I’d still be stuck trying to inch past Maud the cow.”

Ali burst out laughing. Morgan always had been funny. Yes, she was cute, but her sense of humour and fun had drawn the young Ali, too.

When she recovered, Ali glanced sideways.

Their gazes locked again.

All the old feelings oozed down Ali like melted butter. Hot and impossible to ignore.

Ali felt it *everywhere*.

But she stuffed her feelings deep inside. Just like she always had with Morgan. This learned behaviour would take quite the gear shift to change. Because when the glare of a Morgan Scott smile snagged Ali, all she really wanted to do was lean in and soak it up. It had always been that way.

Morgan was Ali’s sunshine.

“And if you are embarrassed in the morning, I have two words for you.”

“Ms Cherry?”

“How did you guess?” Morgan replied.

CHAPTER 11



Morgan slept well, which amazed her after what happened before they closed their eyes. They'd managed the entire night in the same bed without touching each other, which was a feat. That Ali didn't snore or hog the duvet helped.

Still, Ali's revelation had caught her off-guard. But beyond Morgan's surprise, it also impressed her. Ali had always been comfortable in her identity, even from a young age. It had taken Morgan a while longer to get there. What's more, from what she'd seen so far, that played out in their lives, too. Morgan was the organised, methodical one. She had to think about things first before she acted. Whereas Ali was far more spontaneous and brave. She'd saved them from Maud last night. She'd booked this bed-and-breakfast from the train. Plus, she'd drawn back the curtain on her past. She wasn't afraid to be vulnerable. It was a quality Morgan admired, and one she taught through her work. Ali didn't need her help with that. She was in control far more than she gave herself credit for.

They'd eaten a full English breakfast to set them up for the day ahead, but Ali insisted they head back to the Snowton Gift Shop before they left.

"There's a little something I want to pick up."

So it was a short while later, Morgan found herself surrounded by more Christmas than she knew what to do with. This store might even overwhelm

her Christmas-obsessed mum. What to buy? A festive hat? An apron? A Christmas loo seat cover? The whole store smelt of pine trees, and some old-school Ronettes blared from the stereo. Between that and the snow still piled up on the pavement, she couldn't help but feel festive.

Also, quite cold. She really needed a hat.

“What about this?” Ali appeared by her side, holding up a Christmas bra, replete with fur holly lining and Christmas puddings over the nipples.

Morgan held up her hand. “I can't unsee that.”

Ali put it back on its hook, then held up a small bag. “I've got what I came for, so let's go. Also, just to let you know, I messaged Dave and asked about your phone, so we wait to hear.”

“Thank you.” Resourceful and thoughtful. Morgan was touched.

Shelley dropped them at the car rental place, which was a 15-minute drive away, and Morgan gave her a box of Ferrero Rocher as a thank you.

As Shelley drove away with a wave, Ali gave Morgan a clap.

“What's that for?”

“You and your magic sweets. Everywhere we go, you whip them out and charm the locals. I'm learning a lot this trip.”

Morgan raised an eyebrow. “That makes two of us.”

Ali's blush was damnably red. “I'm going to get the car.” She walked off, avoiding Morgan's gaze.



HALF AN HOUR LATER, they were on the road, Ali driving a grey Ford Focus on the same motorway they'd touched twice yesterday. Morgan had a severe case of *déjà vu*.

Morgan got the heating going, then put their destination into the sat nav. “It says it's only 6.5 hours away!” They could be home for dinner. That seemed like dreamland.

Until they slowed to a stop in increasingly thick traffic once more.

Ali glanced at the sat nav, then frowned. “What do all those thick red lines mean?”

“Re-routing,” said the sat nav.

Morgan winced. “Let’s see if the radio can fill us in.” She switched it on and tuned until she found a local station. They caught the tail end of Wham’s ‘Last Christmas’, and then the travel news followed.

“Bad news if you’re trying to drive south on the M6 right now. There’s a pile-up just before Penrith. It’s grid locked, so be prepared to sit in traffic. Keep it here for festive tunes to keep your spirits high!”

“That’s where we’re heading, isn’t it?”

Ali nodded. “Uh-huh. I don’t know about you, but after yesterday, I just want to keep moving. We’ve got a sat nav, so are you okay if I get off at the next junction and try to take the back roads?”

Morgan nodded. “Of course. Like the man said, we’ve got festive tunes, so long as they’re not East 17.”

“You really need to let that go,” Ali told her.

“It’s been said before,” Morgan replied. “If nothing else, we can sing to keep warm.”

Ali leaned down and grabbed the gift shop bag. “But before we move again, I have something else to get us in the mood.” She produced a pair of fluffy festive dice and hung them on the central mirror. Then she gave Morgan a grin. “You told me I needed to be a little more festive.” She motioned to the Christmas dice. “Does this count?”

She was funny. Morgan loved funny. She smiled warmly at Ali, and couldn’t stop her gaze from sliding to Ali’s lips.

“Yeah.” Morgan dragged her gaze upwards. “It counts.”



EVEN THOUGH THEY were on the smaller roads, the traffic was still a nightmare. They crawled through a small village, passing a sign that thanked them for only driving at 20mph. They didn't have a choice.

“Is there a reason you don't love Christmas?” It always intrigued Morgan, as it was so alien to her.

Ali shook her head. “I don't hate it, I just don't go all-out.” She tapped the dice. “Apart from this year, of course.” She gave Morgan a grin. “I suppose growing up, we had the pub, so it was always busy. I associated Christmas with hard work. My parents did what they needed to do. However, this year, we're shutting the pub on Christmas Day.” She paused, as if searching for her next words.

“Why's that?”

Ali gripped the wheel tighter and shook her head. “No particular reason. My mum's getting older, so it's time.”

Morgan would swear it was more than that. Ali's mum was younger than hers, and still very able. Had something happened to her or her husband, Tony? There was something Ali wasn't telling her, but they had many more hours for her to spill the beans.

“Also, I've lived through a couple of terrible Christmases with my ex, so all those people who go on about it being the most wonderful time of the year? Not always.” Ali shook her head. “And can I just say, I don't normally tell people this shit. I blame temporary insanity brought on by extreme circumstance.”

Morgan smiled. “For what it's worth, she didn't deserve you if she let you go.”

Ali glanced her way. “Thanks.” Her cheeks blushed pink.

Morgan turned down Wizzard singing about it being Christmas every day. “I don't want it to be Christmas every day. We'd be in traffic jams forever.” They slowed to a stop. Up ahead, bright yellow roadworks signs warned of delays. They were correct. “Was that your last relationship?”

Ali nodded. “We were together for seven years. Then she got ants in her pants and left. Just upped, and moved to Australia to be with someone she’d been having a secret online relationship with for a year. I understand they’re married now.”

Morgan let her lower jaw drop. “That’s got to hurt.”

“It did at first.” Ali shuffled in her seat. “But then I realised she wasn’t right, and we weren’t right, so she did me a favour. But it’s definitely dented my trust in other people.” Ali eased the car to the end of the road. She flicked on the indicator and turned right, almost driving straight into an oncoming tractor taking up the whole road. She swerved just at the last minute, then slammed on her horn. “Fucking idiot. That is not how I want to die, either. Trampled by a cow, or flattened by a tractor.”

“We’re dicing with death this trip.”

“What about you? No girlfriend back at the ranch? I know we told Imogen that yesterday, but you could have been lying for some weird reason.”

Morgan let out a strange noise. “I wish. No lies here. My work demands a lot of hours, and I don’t have the patience to swipe constantly on dating apps.” She shrugged. “I suppose I’m old-fashioned at heart. I either want to meet someone in person just randomly and have that initial spark you can’t get through a phone screen, or else I’d like to get together with someone I already know. Like my sister Annabel and her husband Josh. They met at school.” She blinked and wriggled her bum on her seat. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to marry my school boyfriend—”

“That would be awkward.”

“Very. But you know what I mean. Someone who understands you a bit, someone you don’t have to start from scratch with.”

Ali glanced across and rubbed her chin. “I always think starting from scratch is part of the thrill. Although Nicole says she’d never start again with someone else, so Stu’s stuck with her. She’s trained him now.”

“I can just imagine Nicole saying that,” Morgan replied. “The belief in romance clearly runs in the family.” Morgan sighed, then looked Ali’s way. “I suppose I want it both ways. I wanted to leave Devon, but it’d be nice to meet someone who understands it too.”

“I get that. Plus, your chances aren’t terrible. It’s a big county. The third largest in the UK.”

Morgan pointed a finger in Ali’s direction. “I love knowing that. What are the three largest counties in the UK is a great quiz question. Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Devon. Nobody ever gets number two.”

“Devon is underrated.” Ali slowed the car at the next junction. Ahead were fields of snow. To their right, a graveyard and a picture-perfect stone-built church with a spire. “I don’t go back enough. But I always feel less-than, and I know it’s probably in my head. But so many of my friends there are already married and have kids. I feel like I’m behind. I’ve never even bought a Christmas tree or a TV with someone else. Am I even a fully grown adult until that happens?”

“You’ve bought some festive dice now, so I’d say you’re on your way.” Morgan grinned. “But I know what you mean. I’m a part of my family, but I’m not a part that’s always there, so I’m separate. It’s hard to explain.”

Ali shook her head. “I get it. We’re not there for the day to day. We don’t understand where we’re from as much as they do anymore. We don’t know what’s been making the local news, or what’s going on at the PTA.”

“And they never stop reminding us,” Morgan added. “I think I left because I knew I was gay and I needed to find myself. But being gay makes me doubly an outsider when I go back.”

“I prefer to think it makes us cavalier and daring. My family thinks my life is so exciting and unusual. I don’t like to dispel that myth. I work in apps, I live far away, I go to gay clubs and party all the time. I mean, two of those are true.” When Ali smiled, her face lit up. Had it always done that? Or was that something Morgan had just noticed?

“The go-getters of the family. I like that. Does your family get what you do for work? I can see mine glaze over when I talk about communication. It’s never been their strong point, unless my mum wants to order something from a website she can’t use. Then she’s on the phone smartish.”

Ali let out a bark of laughter. “They’ve no idea. I mean, they use the apps I make, but how they’re devised? I might as well be selling magic beans.”

A warm glow settled in Morgan’s chest, and then moved to her stomach. She and Ali understood each other. Sure, they didn’t work in the same realm, but they had similar family dynamics. They were from the same place. They were both gay. Maybe they had more in common than Morgan had first thought.

But Ali was still Ali. She was still Nicole’s little sister. And once they were home, they’d probably never see each other again. Maybe the odd drink in Glasgow. Maybe next year, they’d rent a car together to get home, and laugh about this year. But for now, this was nice. Having Ali’s company. Someone who knew Glasgow, but also her home. Someone who understood her completely.

Morgan blinked.

Completely was a *big* statement.

But she hadn’t felt as comfortable in anyone else’s company in a very long time.

Ali Bradford was an unexpected Christmas bonus.

CHAPTER 12



They drove on for another half hour, singing along to Christmas music and not getting very far at all. Ali's smart plan to divert to the side roads had backfired somewhat, because a lot of other cars had done that, too. Plus, they'd had a few instances where they'd ended up going round in circles and coming back to the same set of roadworks. However, if Ali wanted to keep moving, this allowed her to do just that. Even if they'd barely moved ten miles so far.

"Okay, let's talk about Christmas. Do you have any traditions in your family? Just so I know in case we're spending the big day driving around in circles in the Lakes and I need to replicate them."

"Don't even joke." Morgan drummed her fingertips on her thighs.

Ali stared. Something fluttered just above her rib cage. It wasn't the first time Ali had noticed Morgan's legs.

Mainly because they were the kind she'd like wrapped around her head.

Whoa. Where the hell had that thought come from? One minute she was driving along, and the next, her mind was in the gutter. She had to sort that out if she wanted to survive the next however many hours in an enclosed space with Morgan. Luckily, Morgan was oblivious to Ali's thoughts. Which was a good thing.

"We always open one gift on Christmas Eve at midnight. Which used to

annoy my nan when she was alive, as she liked to be tucked up in bed by ten.”

“When did she die?” Even saying that was like someone had punched her in the gut. Ali still wasn’t ready to deal with her situation. It was the main reason she was enjoying this delay getting home. Getting stranded with Morgan had been a great distraction. Something to take her mind off her very real family situation that was bowling towards her.

Particularly when it involved sharing a bed, which she had miraculously survived, wholly intact.

“It was nearly ten years ago. I still miss her. She lived a good life, but she was only 77. Nan always used to say it was better to leave before the party ended. Never be the last one standing. I like to think she died as she lived.”

“A good way to look at it.” Ali couldn’t say the same about her dad, but she wasn’t going there. Her mouth got dry even thinking about it. She needed a distraction. “Any other traditions?”

“Apart from playing charades and me always losing? Nothing out of the ordinary. Christmas dinner. The queen’s speech. A cheeseboard that nobody wants. Monopoly, where my sister always steals from the bank. Me eating those Guyliau seashell chocolates and realising they are the devil’s chocolate. How about you?”

Ali shook her head. “None really. The pub was always open, so we always spent Christmas working. I never minded, though. I quite liked it, because everybody was in a good mood. Plus, as a child, I got to be in the pub all day, which was normally off-limits. But this year will be different.” More than Morgan could possibly know.

“Maybe you’ll make new traditions.” Morgan glanced Ali’s way as she spoke.

They were in stationary traffic, so Ali let her gaze linger on Morgan’s sapphire-blue eyes with flecks of gold. She’d been closer to them in the past 24 hours than she had been in years. Yet their shape and depth were still

imprinted on Ali's psyche from her teenage years. She recalled staring back then. How she wanted to kiss Morgan's eyelids. What would they taste like now?

A car horn broke her thoughts. Ali jumped, then eased her foot down on the accelerator. However, they only moved for a couple of seconds before they ground to a halt again.

"Whoever's behind is a bit trigger-happy with their horn."

Morgan turned in her seat and gave the car a glare.

Ali drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "My cousin lives around here somewhere. I came to visit last year, but I'm not exactly sure where. It all kinda looks the same."

"Usually green, currently snowy, occasional lake?"

"Exactly that. She moved up here to open a bed-and-breakfast. I forget the name. She's always full, though. Business is booming."

The sat nav made a noise Ali had never heard before. "What on earth was that?"

"Sounded like the sat nav just burped."

Ali stared as the screen reconfigured, and then an alternative route showed up. It was suggesting going down even smaller roads with less traffic. Ali glanced up at the line of cars ahead, then back to the screen.

"What do you think? Should we follow it?" She had flashbacks of a time in Germany when the sat nav had taken her on a tour of a local housing estate for half an hour for no apparent reason.

Morgan was silent for a moment before she spoke. "It's not as if we're getting anywhere fast at the moment. Can it be any worse?"

Ali sucked on her teeth, then flicked on her indicator. Nobody else seemed to be doing the same thing, and at least this way, they'd keep on moving. It was the motto Ali lived by.

They drove down the road, which quickly turned into a lane barely wide enough for one car.

“If a tractor comes, we’re toast.”

“I’m well aware,” Morgan replied.

Just then, the car made a loud whirring sound, the dashboard lights flashed on and off super-quick, and then it slowed.

Ali sat up straight and clutched the steering wheel, willing it to be okay. But deep down inside, she had a feeling it wasn’t going to be. It had been that kind of trip so far.

“What just happened?” Morgan almost whispered the words, as if she were afraid of the answer.

“I’m not sure, but the car doesn’t want to go very fast anymore, and that’s steam coming out of the bonnet.” Ali pulled into a nearby layby and cut the engine.

The silence and tranquillity when she did were overwhelming. For the first time in ages, they weren’t surrounded by people, cars or killer cows. All that was visible were snow-covered fields with the occasional farmhouse, a clutch of hills in the distance, and almost-camouflaged sheep. Lots and lots of sheep. Did sheep feel the cold, too? Yes, they had natural woolly jumpers on at all times, but did they get cold feet and noses like humans?

Ali sat back in her seat and closed her eyes. She missed peace and quiet. She missed uncomplicated journeys. But interestingly, she was still glad she was doing it with Morgan. She shook that thought from her brain and grabbed her phone. Maybe she could see where her cousin lived in relation to where they were now?

When she clicked, there was a text from Dave, the Christmas tree man. He had Morgan’s phone and if she sent him her address, he’d put it in the post today.

“Okay, so I have some good news amid every mode of transport we try breaking down.” She cocked her head. “Are we the curse?”

Morgan banged her hands together and blew into them. “Maybe. What’s the good news?”

“Dave has your phone and if we send him your address, he’ll post it today.”

Morgan’s eyes went wide. “Today? Isn’t he bonkers-busy selling trees? Tell him it can wait until after Christmas.”

Ali shrugged. “We clearly made an impression on him.”

“Well, god bless Dave.”

“And all who sail in him.” Ali took a deep breath. “Okay, I’m going to try this again.” She hit the start button on the car, but nothing happened. She checked the car was in drive, then tried again. Still nothing.

“Not happening?”

Ali shook her head. “Let’s give it a minute. My dad always said cars are like humans, sometimes they just need a little time.”

Ali could see him standing over his car on the side of the M40 pretending everything was okay. Her dad had always been a positive person, right until the end. She sent up a silent prayer just in case he was listening. She could really use his help right now.

Morgan nodded, then tapped her hand on her thigh. The rhythmic beat was all Ali heard until she tried the car again, channelling all her positive energy. It was running fine before they stopped, and nothing had changed in the interim.

She squeezed her eyes tight shut, and pressed.

Nothing.

They had enough fuel, so it wasn’t that. “I’m trying really hard not to feel like this is another setback, but I want you to know I’m struggling.”

Morgan leaned over and put a hand on Ali’s thigh. “You’re doing really well for someone who’s a glass-half-empty person.”

Ali’s leg hummed under Morgan’s touch. Morgan, again, seemed oblivious. She’d clearly swallowed down Ali’s lies about her crush being in the past. Ali’s heart had not. It began to sprint.

However, when Ali replayed Morgan’s words, she frowned.

“Who said I was glass half empty?”

Morgan’s cheeks flushed red, and she pulled back her shoulders. “I deal with many people in my day job, so let’s just say I know the signs.”

“Really?”

Morgan had pressed Ali’s buttons. Unlike the car, they definitely worked. How many times had she heard that in her life? That she just needed to come at life with a positive attitude? Never at work, but always from her exes. She wasn’t ready to put up with it from Morgan, too.

A cow might have flattened Morgan if it wasn’t for Ali.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Morgan said. “But it is learned behaviour. I could give you some tips to flip it around if you like. We could meet for a drink in Glasgow and I could share my secrets.”

This was how Morgan was going to ask her out on a date? By telling her she had faults that needed fixing? Ali may not be the catch of the season, but she was doing okay. Morgan Scott might be her first love, but that was no way for her to treat Ali.

“When did you last ask a woman out for a drink?” Ali’s brain simmered, then popped.

Morgan frowned. “I wasn’t asking you out—”

“Let me tell you, that’s not how you do it, whatever your intention. Women don’t generally respond to the line, ‘You’re miserable. Do you want to meet me and I can show you how to cheer up?’”

Morgan winced. “When you put it like that, it sounds terrible.”

She looked so genuinely contrite, Ali’s anger immediately leaked out. Maybe it was their ridiculous situation. Maybe it was thinking about her dad, or the snow that had just begun again. Perhaps she’d overreacted. Whatever, it was probably best left here.

“I used to think you were smooth when I was little. That you had all the lines.”

Morgan’s laugh was genuine. “I’d never say that. Yes, I know how to

communicate, but I still have my floundering moments.”

“I got that loud and clear.”

Ali tried the car again, but nothing. She wrapped her fingers around the steering wheel and sighed. “You’re the problem-solver of the partnership, so you keep telling me. Do you know anything about cars?”

Morgan’s face crinkled, and she shook her head. “I know they’ve got four wheels and a boot?”

“Remind me never to book you for a cross-country survival course.”

“Isn’t that what we’re on already?”

Ali unclicked her seat belt. “I know a little as my dad used to make us learn for just such an occasion. I’ll have a look and see if there’s anything obvious. But it could be electrical or mechanical.” She got out, blew some snow from her face, then grabbed her duffel coat from the backseat. “That is, if I’m not feeling too glass half empty to try.”

Morgan turned and gave Ali a forced smile. “Point taken!”

Ali slammed the back door, annoyance still buoyant inside. “Glass half empty, my arse,” she muttered as she walked to the front of the car and lifted the bonnet. She secured it with the metal rod, then leaned over and pulled out the dipstick to check the oil levels. When she turned her head, Morgan was right next to her.

Ali jumped and cracked her head on the rod. She stumbled backwards. “Fuck me! I wasn’t expecting you there.” Ali rubbed the heel of her hand on her cheek and steadied herself. She rolled her eyes at Morgan. She couldn’t stay mad at her for long. It wasn’t in her DNA. “You pick your times to get interested in cars.”

“Sorry about that.”

When Morgan looked her in the eye, Ali couldn’t look away. When she spoke, Ali watched the cold air dance in front of her face. Morgan moved closer as if huddling for warmth, then gave a shiver. Snow still fell in soft flakes all around.

Ali leaned over the open bonnet again.

Morgan followed.

“I’m just checking the oil, but it seems okay.” She held up the dipstick. “Now I’m going to put the dipstick back in place.” She put it back where she found it and screwed it tight. She then checked the engine coolant levels, although she was pretty sure that wouldn’t be an issue today. They were hardly in the middle of summer.

“It could be the battery. It could be the alternator. It could be several things.” Ali blew out a raspberry.

“Your dad was right,” Morgan said. “We should know how to do this, so I thought I’d learn. Even in this inclement weather.” She looked her dead in the eye. “I’ve only heard good things about this particular trainer.”

Ali leaned in so their shoulders touched. She raised a single eyebrow. “What have you learned so far? If you had to present a deck, what would your key slides be?” She licked her lips, which had suddenly gone very dry.

Morgan thought for a moment. “I now know where the engine is. Also, what a dipstick is. It’s one of those words you always hear, but I never really knew what it was.” She held up her index finger. “But my key takeaway would be to make sure you take a woman who knows about cars so you can fall back on her far superior knowledge. Because problem-solving is a team activity. That’s what I teach at all my workshops.”

Ali took a step backwards and straightened up, then closed the bonnet. Somehow, she’d got oil all over her right hand.

“Teamwork. What’s your part in this, apart from winding me up in the car?”

“It wasn’t what I was trying to do.” Morgan held up her palms on either side of her head. “I apologise. But I like to think my being here spurred you on to fix the issue far quicker than if you’d been solo.”

“The snow and being lost in the middle of nowhere were the major driving factors.” She walked around to the side and kicked a tyre. If all else

failed, that was always her dad's signature move.

Morgan's gaze flicked up and down Ali's face. Was it Ali's imagination, or did it land on her lips?

Ali's internal furnace turned up a notch. Was this Morgan's idea of flirting? It certainly felt like it. On every part of this trip, with every decision made and every sentence uttered, their relationship moulded and changed. Like the snow, it was swirling and unpredictable, and Ali couldn't tear her eyes from it. Every setback tested them, but so far, they'd come through.

Ali wanted to know what happened next.

There was only one way to find out.

"Would your slide also say that said lesbian was alluring while she was leaning over fixing the car?"

Morgan gave her a look. "That goes without saying. A lesbian who can fix things is always appealing. Extra points for a tool belt."

"I left mine at home."

"Maybe we can actually have that drink when we're back in Glasgow. I can show you my techniques. You can show me your tool belt."

Outside, Ali was calm. Inside, she was screaming.

Maybe flirting was the ultimate distraction for them both. She was more than happy to play her part.

CHAPTER 13



Morgan wasn't sure what had just happened under the bonnet, but she knew Ali had a massive oil stain on her one and only top. Once they were out of the snow and back in the car, Morgan pointed it out. Ali looked down.

"Great," she replied. "That must have happened when I was leaning over. Just what I need. To turn up at home looking like I spent all day rolling in oil." She stretched out her top. "I think this is beyond saving. Put that on your deck: trying to save the day can be messy."

"That's the nature of risk and vulnerability."

"Okay, Freud." Ali blew out her cheeks in cartoon fashion, then gripped the wheel like she was Lewis Hamilton. "Right, we need the power of positive thought. I would guess that's your bag, seeing as you're a people person, right?"

Morgan detected a note of sarcasm. "If you believe it, you're almost on the way to making it happen."

"Do you believe this car will start?"

Morgan sat up straight, then gave Ali a solemn nod. "With every ounce of my being." She was lying, but Ali didn't need to know that. She'd enjoyed the flex of Ali's forearm under the bonnet. The stretch of her neck and the smooth skin that covered it. She'd found herself enraptured. But had Ali

actually done anything to get the car moving? The jury was still out.

“Here goes!”

Ali hit the ignition and amazingly, the car sprang to life.

“You’re a magician!”

Ali flexed her fingers. “Magic hands.” She grimaced like she’d just eaten ten flies. “Please forget I just said that.” Her cheeks flared red. She flicked on the windscreen wipers, then eased the car back onto the road.

The smaller roads were far less busy, with only a few cars passing in either direction. However, the roads weren’t gritted, so they were far more treacherous. Neither of them wanted to test the car’s ability to skate as an addition to their day.

Morgan pulled down the sun visor and checked herself in the mirror. Thanks to the good night’s sleep she’d had in Snowton, she didn’t look too shabby. She reached into her bag and touched up her lip balm. Her thoughts wandered back to the look she and Ali had shared under the bonnet. To their not-quite-necessary touching. She gulped. She hadn’t imagined it. It had been both ways. She’d even suggested meeting up.

She still couldn’t get her head around the fact she was attracted to Ali Bradford. Also, that she’d been Ali’s first crush. While Morgan was sure Ali had moved on, there was always something that lingered. If Ms Cherry appeared at the next service station out of nowhere, Morgan wasn’t sure she’d be able to form a sentence.

The car swerved a sharp left, and Morgan’s heart dropped to her feet. When she glanced up, a digger bore down on them. Ali had almost driven into a hedge to avoid it, and was now swearing under her breath. The digger edged past them. Once it was clear they’d survived, Morgan let out her breath.

“I don’t miss that from home, do you?” Ali glanced her way. “Also, thank god it was me driving and not Imogen, otherwise we’d currently be impaled on a digger.”

Morgan let out a yelp of nervous laughter. “I feared for my life the entire way to those services yesterday.” She paused. “One good thing about driving in Glasgow, on the rare occasions I do, is its lack of killer farm machinery. Unlike in Devon and here.”

“I’m skilled at avoiding them. I spent my teenage years doing so. You can count on me to keep you safe.” Ali gave her a smile.

“I believe you,” Morgan replied. She wasn’t lying. Morgan trusted Ali completely. More than she had anyone in ages. That thought pickled in her mind. She put the lid on it and flicked her sun visor to the roof. “From here on in, I see clear roads, and us gliding through to Devon, right?” She reached forward and turned on the radio.

It was East 17’s ‘Stay Another Day’.

Morgan bristled.

“Oh shit,” Ali said.

“This one again? Honestly, it’s about his brother’s suicide and they added bells to it! I like the song, but I want my Christmas tunes to be upbeat, not sad.”

Ali laughed. “I think you need to accept that it’s played at Christmas and move on.”

“It’s annoying though, right?”

“I don’t know. I don’t mind a downbeat Christmas track. Breaks up the relentless happiness.”

“I thought you told me you weren’t glass half empty.”

“I might have been lying.”

Morgan wriggled in her seat, suddenly aware she needed the loo. She didn’t want to stop the car again, but nature called.

“Ali, sorry to do this, but I need the loo. Could you stop at the next available place?”

“Sure. I could probably use it, too. If only to see if I can sort out my jumper.”

Up ahead, Morgan glimpsed the top of a very tall building. Was it a castle of some sort? As they drove through the snowy narrow lanes, a massive sign came into view. “Christmas Court at Muirhead Castle.”

“A Christmas Court. That sounds fancy.”

“I’m sure they have a toilet there. Shall we pull in?”

Morgan nodded. “That would be great.”



MOMENTS LATER, Ali swung their Ford Focus down a sweeping dirt drive up towards a castle that looked like something out of a fairy tale. It had turrets on either side of the main door, and someone had been busy maintaining the exterior of the building. The stonework glinted in the demi-snow shine. The snow had stopped for the moment. To the left of the main building was an enormous Christmas tree. They passed a sign for a Christmas market and ice rink, which Morgan guessed was round the back and out of view. If they had more time, she’d love to stay, have a look around and go for a skate, but time was not on their side.

“Wow.” Ali cut the engine and peered out of the windscreen. She unclicked her seat belt. “There’s a gift shop, so come find me when you’ve been to the loo. I’m going to see if they have any tops I can buy that aren’t covered in oil.”

Five minutes later, Morgan walked into the gift shop, which was a sensory overload. Flashing lights, Santa hats, fluffy reindeer and, in the corner, Ali riffling through a rail of Christmas jumpers. When she saw Morgan, she grabbed two hangers and held the first one up to her chest.

“What do you think? Jaunty, jingling reindeer?” Ali shook the jumper, and the bells on Rudolph’s antlers jingled. “Or Santa himself?” She held up the second option, which was sadly bell-free.

Morgan gave her a shrug, like the choice was obvious. “The reindeer.

Duh! Take a leaf out of Imogen's book. Jingle all the way."

Ali put the Santa jumper back. "Jingle it is." She pointed towards the hats. "You could use one of those, too."

Morgan glanced at the hats on the rack, then selected one that resembled a Christmas pudding. She put it on and puckered her lips. "What do you think? Does it make me irresistible?"

Ali gave her a grin. "Its powers are magical. I feel weirdly drawn to you. But that could be because I'm hungry." She moved towards Morgan. "Wait until you see me in my jumper for real. We're going to be a festive force to be reckoned with." Her gaze dropped to Morgan's lips and lingered there before lifting her face.

An arrow of desire landed in Morgan's chest.

It had happened again, hadn't it? Just like it had last night when she saw Ali in her bra. She was no longer little Ali. She was now a real-life adult, and one that Morgan wanted to kiss. That knowledge flickered in her chest like a pilot light trying to ignite.

She glanced up at Ali, who was giving her an intense stare. What was she thinking and feeling? This entire trip was turning into something Morgan had never expected in so many ways.

"Shall we pay for these gorgeous bits of fashion?"

Morgan blinked. "I don't even like Christmas pudding."

"But it likes you," Ali replied.

They paid, then left the gift shop. Morgan picked up a couple of tuna sandwiches, salt and vinegar crisps, and a box of Celebrations just because, while Ali got them both a coffee. Then she walked back to the car while Ali went to the loo to change her top. Morgan replayed Ali stepping out of their bed & breakfast bathroom in nothing but a bra, her taut stomach and shapely breasts on show.

That might be the last time she saw Ali semi-naked.

She wished she'd paid more attention.

Moments later, Ali hurried across the car park, coat in hand. She flung it in the backseat, then slotted herself back into the driver's seat. Her every move jingled. She frowned.

“Is this jumper already annoying? Would the more sensible choice have been Santa?” She jingled one of her four tiny bells. “Also, it's only when I put it on I realised the top two bells are positioned right over my nipples.”

Morgan's laughter caught in her throat. “Santa would have been the glass-half-empty jumper choice.” She tilted her head. “But you went for the festive choice, and I'm proud of you. As for the nipple bells—isn't life *always* better with nipple bells?” That wasn't a sentence Morgan ever thought she'd utter in her life.

Ali glanced down, then shimmied like she was a Brazilian samba dancer. “I guess you're right,” she replied with a jingle. “The bells have it.”

Morgan tried her hardest not to focus on Ali's nipple bells. *Really hard.* She pointed at the drinks' holder. “Your coffee's there if you want it.”

“Thanks.” Ali took a sip, then gulped down some air. “It's still pretty hot.”

She jangled her bells one more time, then hit the ignition.

Nothing.

“Holy fucking Santa Claus. Seriously?” Ali tried again. Same result. She took a deep breath in, then released it. “Okay, I'm not getting another jumper dirty, and my mechanic skills only extend so far.” She grabbed her phone from the centre console.

Morgan tapped her fluffy Christmas dice. A little like those, they were both hanging on to their Christmas spirit by a single thread.

“Who are you ringing?”

Ali tipped her head back. “I'm not sure.” She shook her head and jingled again.

That broke the mood, and they exchanged rueful smiles.

“Can we make a pact? Yes, this trip is proving difficult, but let's look on

it as an adventure. Stay upbeat. You with me?"

Ali blew a raspberry. "I'm not going anywhere else, am I?"

CHAPTER 14



Ali squinted at the sticker on the windscreen, then dialled the number for the rental company. The woman on the other end of the line was very apologetic, but told her all their cars were booked, and their normal breakdown service was swamped with calls from cars stuck in the snow.

“I’ll log you, dear, but it might not be until later tonight or even tomorrow that we can get someone to you. Tell me exactly where you are and I’ll keep you posted.”

Ali took a breath. Hadn’t she just agreed to stay upbeat? Plus, she didn’t want to prove Morgan right with her glass-half-empty summation. Ali wasn’t a pessimist. She was just logical. A realist. Whereas Morgan was an upbeat problem-solver. Morgan was the kind of person Ali would normally avoid.

But that didn’t factor in the star power of Morgan Fucking Scott.

Who was currently busy trying on her Christmas pudding hat. She pouted into her sun visor mirror, then turned to Ali. “What do you think?”

Ali smiled. “Gorgeous.” She might not be presenting as the epitome of metropolitan cool, but she was still Morgan. Still Ali’s version of perfection.

“What did the rental company say?”

“They don’t know when they can come, but it might not be until tomorrow.”

Morgan stilled at the news. “Okaaaaay.” She took off her hat. Then

quickly put it back on. “This is not me losing my Christmas spirit.”

Ali pointed at the stiff grin glued to her own face. “Me neither,” she said through gritted teeth.

That made Morgan smile.

“But I’m going to look up where I think my cousin lives. It’s called Lower Greeton or something like that. Let me message my mum to get her address and number.”

“Didn’t you say she’s always full at this time of year?”

Ali nodded. “Yes, but she has a spare room in her actual house. We’re family, not paying clients. And then we just need to see if we can get a cab there.” She glanced around the half-empty car park. “Although I don’t think this is Uber territory.”

“I’m guessing not.” Morgan stroked her chin. “I like your plan, although I’m less enthused about not getting home again tonight.” She held up a hand. “But I’m staying upbeat, don’t worry. Ho, ho, bloody ho and all that.”

“We will get you home to decorate that gingerbread house if it’s the last thing we do. Maybe not tonight, but we will. Even if we have to hire a sleigh.”

“At least it wouldn’t break down like our plane, train and now car.”

“Knowing our luck, the reindeer would probably go lame as soon as we set off.” Ali clapped her hands. “Shall we see if we can book a cab or a sleigh, or whatever other form of transport we haven’t tried yet?”

Ali slammed the car door, then pulled her jacket tight. Something wet hit her nose.

“It’s snowing again,” Morgan said, holding out her hands.

“I can see.”

“Which is magical, apart from when you’re trying to get home, right?”

Ali quirked an eyebrow. “Upbeat!”

They walked over to the court’s large main entrance, two huge wooden doors festooned with Christmas wreaths. The smells of orange, cinnamon and

nutmeg caressed her senses, reminding Ali of her family pub. A wave of homesickness washed over her. Yes, she was worried about what might be waiting for her, but she was excited to see her family, too.

Ali nodded at the woman on the door, then walked up to the reception desk. A fat Santa statue grinned at her.

“Can I help you?” The receptionist wore a top the colour of processed cheese, along with a smile that could power the whole estate. Her long red hair appeared freshly ironed. Ali immediately warmed to her.

“I hope so. Our car’s broken down, and we need to get a cab to my cousin’s place. I can’t remember the address, but she lives in Lower Greeton, I think? Do you know how far away that is?”

When the woman nodded, relief washed through Ali. If they couldn’t get there, at least they could have a warm bed for the night.

“It’s about a 15-minute car ride.” Her accent was so thickly northern, you could spread it on toast.

“Fabulous!” Ali said. “Is it walkable?”

The woman shook her head. “I wouldn’t advise it on these roads. The locals speed down them. They’re not used to walkers.”

“Could you call us a cab?”

The woman winced. “We only have two cab companies in the area, and they’re all fully booked today because of the snow.” She pointed at Morgan. “Which I can see from your hat has started again.”

Ali’s heart sank to her size-six boots. “Could you try them at least?” It had to be worth a shot.

Morgan stepped forward and offered the woman a box of Celebrations.

Ali did a double-take. Was Morgan a chocolate sorcerer? She never seemed to run out.

Morgan caught her stare, but studiously ignored her. “We’d really appreciate any help you can give us. I didn’t catch your name?”

The woman smiled. “Liesl.”

“Like *The Sound of Music*?”

The woman nodded, then blushed. “My mum’s a huge fan. My brother’s named Kurt.”

“Better than Rolf,” Ali said.

Liesl laughed. “That’s what we always tell him.” She put the chocolates on her desk. “It’s very kind of you to give me these, but it doesn’t change the fact there aren’t any taxis.” She looked from Ali to Morgan. “Although I might have another alternative. But I’d have to check with my manager first.”

Ali’s ears perked up. “An alternative?”

Liesl nodded. “How are you with cycling?”

“You’ve got bikes?” Ali wasn’t mad-keen, but she’d done her cycling proficiency when she was 11, and she knew how to pedal. “Two bikes would work.”

“What about one bike?”

“But there’s two of us,” Ali replied.

“I know. But this bike has two saddles. It’s a tandem. We have them so people can ride around the grounds. They’re very popular for romantic weekend dates.”

Ali wasn’t sure it was exactly what was needed here, but now was not the time to be picky.

Liesl clicked some keys on her keyboard. “Let me just see.” A few moments later, she nodded. “It’s currently being rented, but it’s due back in three hours. If you can amuse yourself here—there’s plenty to do and the restaurant has space—I can hold the bike for you. It wouldn’t need to be back until the morning, but I assume you’re coming back for your car, anyway?”

Ali looked at her phone, then at Morgan. “I’m still waiting on a message from my mum with my cousin’s number. For now, I think it’s the best option. You up for a tandem bike ride?”

Morgan blinked. “Just when I think this trip can’t get any weirder.”



THEY WALKED AWAY from the desk, then sat on a pair of uncomfortable wooden chairs. Ali logged into the Wi-Fi, then typed Lower Greeton into Google Maps. The route appeared. She clicked on the bicycle option: it took 25 minutes. Would it be quicker on a bicycle made for two? She'd find out soon enough.

“What does Google say?” Morgan shivered as she spoke.

“Twenty-five minutes to the village, but then we have to find my cousin's place. Her B&B is called something clever that was in a movie, but I can't remember what. The good news is Lower Greeton isn't that big, and she lives just off the main square, so I'm hoping I remember that. If I don't, we'll knock on doors.” Ali clicked on the message to her mum. She still hadn't read it. She checked her watch. Midday. Her mum would be busy in the bar for a while yet and she wouldn't answer her phone. She copied the message to her sister too, to cover all bases. Then she tried to call her. No answer.

Ali got up. “Shall we keep moving to stay warm?”

The snow crunched underfoot as they walked, following the signs to the Christmas market. However, when they arrived, Ali wasn't prepared for what she saw.

“Oh my god,” she muttered, taking it all in. Five rows of Christmas stalls with wooden roofs stood in front of them, the nearest selling delicate Christmas ornaments, the next piping-hot mulled wine from a chrome barrel. The spicy, warming smell made Ali's nose tingle in the best possible way. As she raised her gaze, she spied an illuminated Ferris wheel turning in the background. When she glanced left, the promised ice rink winked at her in the midday gloom. Right ahead, there was also a sign for Santa's grotto. She'd loved going there as a kid. In fact, she'd loved Christmas as a kid. When had she got so 'bah humbug'?

“This is the most spectacular slice of Christmas in the middle of

nowhere.”

“I was just thinking the same,” Ali replied. “If you’re going to be stuck anywhere, this is not a terrible option. Shall we get a mulled wine and stroll the market? I can have a drink, now I’m not driving.”

“Can they do you for drunken tandem riding?” Morgan walked towards the mulled wine stand.

“Can you get drunk on mulled wine at all?”

Morgan laughed. “Good point.”

Ali ordered them both a mug of hot wine from a bearded man wrapped in so many scarves, Ali could only assume he had a neck and a chin. He handed them over, and Ali cupped her hands around the ceramic mug. She took a sip, and the alcohol warmed her through. It was better than she remembered.

“This is good,” she told Morgan as they walked down the first line of stalls.

Morgan nodded. “My first of the season. I’m already kicking myself for not having some earlier.”

“Me, too.” Ali smiled. “You’ll have to come to the pub for your next one when we get home.”

“I’ll drag the whole family, up your profits.”

“My family thanks you.”

Even so early, there was a fair smattering of people out to soak up festive cheer and do some Christmas shopping. Ali dodged around a family with a double buggy before they drew up alongside a stall selling pick’n’mix sweets.

“Talking of sweets, how did you suddenly produce a box of Celebrations at the desk earlier?” Ali jabbed Morgan’s backpack. “Is this a Tardis and you haven’t told me?”

“I bought another box in the gift shop for your cousin. I guess I’m going to have to restock. You can never have too much chocolate.”

Ali stared at her. “You’ve got hidden depths, Morgan Scott. It’s the main

thing I'm going to take back from this trip."

Morgan shifted her gaze left, embarrassed.

"I used to love this when I was a kid." Ali pointed at the pick'n'mix. "Can you hold this?" She held out her wine and Morgan took it. Then she grabbed some small pink tongs on the tabletop, and filled her pink-and-white striped bag with strawberry laces, cherry lips, fried eggs, bananas and milk bottles. "All the sweets from my childhood. I feel like we need a treat today. Anything you want to add?" Ali opened the top of the paper bag as wide as she could. Then she took back her wine and handed the tongs to Morgan.

Morgan added fizzy cola bottles, Black Jacks, milk bottles and toffees. "Are we just going to eat and drink our way through the next three hours?"

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

Morgan shook her head. "I should be home being festive with my family. Instead, I'm here being festive with you." She leaned in so their faces almost touched. "Whisper it, but I don't hate it."

Ali's insides warmed. "I'm glad."

They came to the end of the row of stalls, and face to face with the festive Ferris wheel. It was a classic, each carriage only big enough for two. They were lit with rainbow-coloured lights, and Christmas classics blared from the speakers. Ali glanced up, then at Morgan. "Remember the fair that used to come to Dartmouth every spring?" If Ali closed her eyes, she could still picture the layout, with the giant Ferris wheel in the middle.

"Do I? I had my first kiss on the Ferris wheel there. Unfortunately, it was with Chris Heaton. Completely the wrong gender, but I was slow on the uptake, like I told you." Morgan took a cola bottle from the bag, then took a swig of wine. "Whatever, Ferris wheels have always been romantic to me. I blame cheesy American movies where couples always kissed on them. You know we were talking about what romance is when I said I didn't get snow fitting into that category?"

Ali nodded.

“It’s summer and a Ferris wheel for me.”

“What about a Ferris wheel in the snow?”

Morgan smiled. “That could work. It’s still a Ferris wheel.”

Ali’s heart pulsed. “I’ve always thought Ferris wheels were kinda scary. It’s the height thing.”

“I’m not a carriage rocker.” Morgan held up her free palm. “Did you get rocked in a carriage as a child at the fair?”

“Who didn’t? I think Nicole was the worst culprit for that.”

Morgan laughed. “I agree. Your sister has a lot to answer for. I nearly fell out one year, she was so intense. The guy controlling the ride shouted at her.” Morgan laughed at the memory. “But it was still better than getting kissed on one by Chris Heaton.”

“Has nobody rectified that mistake since? No woman swooped in and kissed you off your seat?” If Ali had known, she’d have booked a Ferris wheel for just such an occasion. A vision of kissing Morgan as the wheel went round flashed into her mind, and her insides clenched. She took a deep breath.

She wasn’t the one Morgan wanted to kiss.

Ali needed to remember that.

“Do you want to go on this one?” Ali really did not. She hated heights, and she detested Ferris wheels. But somehow, she was prepared to go on one for Morgan. She wasn’t going to process what that meant too much. “I mean, it’s practically gay with its rainbow lights. I feel like we’d do the queer community a disservice if we didn’t.”

Morgan fixed her eyes on Ali, her cheeks pink with cold. “We don’t have to if you’re scared.”

Something fluttered in Ali’s chest. She still didn’t want to. But Morgan did, and that trumped what she wanted all ends up. “This trip is all about accidentally getting out of our comfort zones. I’ll do it if you promise no rocking and no falling.”

Morgan sipped her wine. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER 15



Morgan passed a stall selling thick woolly socks and another selling Christmas decorations.

Ali spent a few moments browsing, then bought her mum a tree ornament that was a stack of books.

“That means she’ll have to get a real tree next year. Plus, she loves reading. I think it saved her after this summer.”

“What happened this summer?”

“It was just...” Ali paused. “A lot.”

It was also something Ali clearly didn’t want to talk about. Morgan wasn’t going to pressure her. She’d tell her when she was ready.

Ali shook her head, as if shaking off whatever was irking her. “Anyway, you wanted to go on the gay Ferris wheel.” She looked up, then at Morgan. “Ready? You better say yes, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime offer.”

Morgan’s gaze dropped to Ali’s lips.

If Nicole could see her now, eyeing up her little sister. Would she hate it, or would she be chilled? She and Nicole had been like sisters once.

Before she could second-guess herself, Morgan held out her hand.

The startled look Ali gave her almost made her drop it, but she didn’t.

She didn’t want to.

Ali took her hand tentatively, then in seconds, she wrapped her fingers

around Morgan's in a surer embrace. Her gaze held a question, but she didn't air it.

Morgan stepped onto the metal platform as a carriage stopped in front of them. The man in charge had grease in his hair and all over his jeans. She stowed their backpacks with him, gave him a tenner, then got into the carriage, pressing her feet into the metal footwell. Ali slotted in beside her as the bloke secured the metal bar over their laps until it clicked into place.

"No rocking the carriage." The smell of stale cigarette smoke hit her as he spoke.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Morgan was acutely aware of Ali's presence and proximity. She was finally on a Ferris wheel with an attractive woman beside her.

Only, this was not the attractive woman she'd expected.

The wheel turned, and they rose slowly, in a backward motion. Ali clutched the bar so tight her knuckles went white.

Morgan leaned over and put her mouth to Ali's ear. "I promised I wouldn't rock it, and I was telling the truth," she whispered.

It was lucky there was a metal bar holding Ali in place as she flinched, then screamed.

Okay, she hadn't been joking when she said she hated Ferris wheels.

Morgan threw an arm across Ali to soothe her.

The carriage swayed as they made their way to the top of the wheel.

Ali blew out a long breath that lingered in the air in front of her. "Fuck, fuck, fuck! I forgot how much these scare me." She clutched Morgan's arm. "It's all Nicole's fault."

"Sorry for making it worse by whispering when you weren't expecting it."

Ali's eyes widened as they rode over the top of the wheel and began their descent. "Maybe you should do it again. Take my mind off what's currently happening!" she screamed. "Damn it, I hate these things!"

“Look at the gorgeous snow-covered forest!” Morgan motioned with her free hand. “Breathe in the pines.” They went on for days. “Looks like it might even be a Christmas tree farm.”

“I guess it’ll soften the blow when this carriage snaps off and we fall to a prickly death,” Ali replied.

They sailed round and past the wheel operator, who didn’t seem bothered by their first-spin rocking. He was more interested in his phone and his cigarette.

Ali took a few deep breaths.

Morgan squeezed Ali’s thigh. It flexed under her fingertips.

Ali turned her head just as Morgan did, and their gazes locked.

Ali’s inviting lips were mere inches from her own.

They were stuck like this.

There was no backing away, nowhere else to go.

Morgan cleared her throat just as the snow started again. She grinned at Ali, squeezed her thigh once more, then threw her head back, opened her mouth and let the snow fall into it. She heard a laugh, and when she looked sideways, Ali had copied her pose.

Morgan pressed her body back into the seat, Ali’s thigh warm under her freezing fingertips. She should have bought some gloves, too. Then again, that would have been another barrier between herself and Ali. Right now, she wanted to strip away as many as she could.

“Is tasting snow and looking anywhere but down the perfect distraction technique?”

“Fuck, yes,” Ali replied. “I might stay like this for the rest of the time. Also, I forgot my ear muffs, so my ears might be about to fall off. Another top distraction.”

Ali shook herself, then glanced at Morgan. Their gazes collided again. “Stop staring.” She put a hand over her eyes. “I know I’ve been a pathetic scaredy-cat ever since I jumped on this thing.”

But Morgan shook her head. “No you haven’t. You’ve been entertaining.” She smiled, then took it all in as they sailed upwards again. “And just look at the view! Snow-covered fields, Christmas trees, the twinkly lights, you.”

Morgan performed a slow blink. Shit, had that really just come out of her mouth? Ali was lovely, but she was still Nicole’s sister. There was protocol to follow. Or had that gone out of the window now? When she was 15, kissing a 12-year-old would have been wrong. But now she was 38? Kissing a 35-year-old was perfectly acceptable.

Ali stared, her mouth ajar.

At least Morgan had distracted her from the view as they rose to the top of the wheel again.

Morgan opened her mouth to do damage control, but the wheel jolting stopped any sound coming out.

Then it jerked again, before stopping completely as they reached the top.

“What the…” Morgan began. She peered over the side of the carriage. Not a good move. She moved quickly backwards, pushing Ali left.

Ali screamed. “Fuck, Morgan! What are you doing?”

It was a valid question. “I was just seeing what’s going on.”

“Did you find anything out by hanging over the side of the fucking carriage?”

Even Morgan could detect the sarcasm wedged between those words. “Only that we’re quite high up.”

“Really not helping.”

“Sorry.” Morgan winced. “Okay, this used to happen all the time when we rode these at the funfair. They’re probably just letting someone on.”

“Or it’s broken down. Every other mode of transport we’ve been on this trip has done the same.”

Morgan couldn’t refute that, but she’d made a promise to stay chipper. “I prefer my option. Seriously, this is what they do.” She paused. “And this would also always be when your sister—”

“Stop!” Ali gripped the metal bar harder. “No more talk of Nicole.”

Morgan nodded. The carriage swayed.

“And no more nodding. It shakes the carriage!” Ali added. “No wonder they got rid of these double carriages in favour of the round ones. Nobody’s going to rock those.”

“True. I haven’t seen one of these old ones in years.”

“They all ended up in the middle of nowhere.” She paused. “I hope they remembered all the screws.”

Morgan bit down a laugh. She didn’t want to freak Ali out any more than she already was.

“I’m sure they remembered all the screws. At least the ones they were given.” She couldn’t help herself. But then she instantly felt bad. “Sorry!” She squeezed Ali’s thigh, then left her hand there.

Ali flinched, but said nothing.

Morgan glanced left, studying Ali. Her strong chin. Her sculpted cheekbones. Her ears and cheeks, red with cold. The way her hair stuck up adorably, buffeted by the wind and snow. Ali had told Morgan she didn’t wear a hat, as she didn’t want to mess up her hair. She wasn’t sure that logic applied in a snowstorm on a Ferris wheel.

“Why isn’t it moving?”

“Don’t focus on that,” Morgan said. “What can I do to distract you?” She looked at the Christmas tree farm. “How many do you think they sell a year?”

Ali gave her a look that might have been sullen, but could equally have been scared witless. Morgan wasn’t sure of the difference. What she knew was that Ali was cold and working herself into a lather. Suddenly, the perfect form of distraction sprang to mind.

They should kiss.

Morgan flinched, as if someone had just punched her in the stomach. But in a warm, fuzzy way. Heat flushed through her body from her toes to her scalp. She gulped. How was she going to sell this? Would she have to? There

was only one way to find out.

“Ali,” she began.

“What?”

Sullen. Snarky. Okay, Ali wasn't in the best of moods.

“I have an idea. Remember I told you I always had a romantic notion of being kissed on a Ferris wheel?”

Ali gripped the bar tighter still. She didn't turn her head. “Uh-huh.”

“Well, we're on a Ferris wheel, and you need a distraction. Think of it as doing me a service. Fulfilling my teenage dreams. Like Katy Perry.” She paused. Should she push it further? She wasn't sure. She could hardly believe the words were tumbling from her lips, but apparently they were. “You said yourself you had a crush on me when you were 12, so maybe it's making both of our teenage dreams come true.”

Morgan didn't dare look at Ali.

Not after she'd just uttered the most stupid thing she'd ever uttered in her entire life. Plus, Ali still wasn't looking at her. Had she stopped breathing?

Morgan turned her head. “If you're worried, you only have Chris Heaton as competition. And to be honest, I only remember him as a sloppy kisser. All you have to do is beat that. Piece of cake.” The more Morgan talked, the more she convinced herself she was suggesting this as an altruistic act. Something to calm Ali down.

Not at all something *she* wouldn't mind. Something that had flickered on the periphery of Morgan's mind ever since last night.

Ali turned her head, eyes narrowed. Even in a snowstorm, she was still a mass of perfect angles and beauty.

“You are joking, right?” Her gaze scanned down from Morgan's face to her lips. When they got there, Ali looked away quickly, with a small shake of her head.

“I'm really not.” Morgan stroked Ali's thigh again. Her pulse-rate sped up. “It'll take your mind off being stuck. Plus, we're in a snowstorm on a

Ferris wheel. It's a story to tell, right?"

Ali stared straight ahead for a few moments, then turned to Morgan. "You don't have to do this. I know I'm scared, but you don't have to take pity on me. I told you, I'm over my crush." Her cheeks blared red as she spoke.

Morgan didn't believe her. But it wasn't why she was asking.

She licked her lips.

Ali's eyes followed the movement.

Morgan shifted closer. "This isn't a pity kiss. All I'm asking is that you humour me and make my teenage dreams come true." She moved her lips to within touching distance. Then Morgan flicked her gaze until it met Ali's. Up close, she had a spill of freckles over the bridge of her nose. Adorable. "What do you say?"

Ali blinked, then parted her lips a fraction.

She didn't say no. She moved her head closer to Morgan's.

Morgan did the same. Then, with a moment's hesitation, she pressed her lips to Ali's.

And just like that, Morgan's world reclined.

Ali tasted of Christmas, her mouth still warm from the mulled wine. Cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg. Snow hit Morgan's cheeks, but she hardly noticed. Ali's lips were taking up all her attention. The way they felt on hers. The shape of them, and how they jigsawed precisely. But most of all, the power they already had on her. Morgan couldn't move, and she didn't want to.

They kissed on, and Morgan melted into the moment. She closed her eyes and got whisked away to a fiery sunset beach, with sand between her toes. Her idea of romance. Although, this Ferris wheel was fast turning into her idea of romance, too. Yes, it was in the snow. But it was still a Ferris wheel.

The perfect location for a totally unexpected kiss. Morgan hadn't got on this fairground ride thinking she'd kiss Ali Bradford. That was, in fact, the very last thing she expected. However, now it was happening, it made perfect

sense. They'd wasted time not doing it earlier. This something-to-pass-the-time kiss had suddenly segued into a lip-lock far bigger than them both. Something Morgan wanted to explore further. Now she'd kissed her lips, she only wanted to kiss other parts of Ali Bradford.

Ali slid her hand around Morgan's neck and pulled her closer. Then she slid her tongue into Morgan's mouth.

Morgan's breath slid away.

She and Ali were French kissing on a Ferris wheel. If her teenage self could only see her now. Chris Heaton was a distant memory, just like 12-year-old Ali. Because grown-up Ali was currently kissing Morgan into oblivion, and Morgan was here for it. She'd happily stay on this Ferris wheel forever. Kick back, relax, and offer herself up to the moment. It seemed to be Ali's plan. This was no rushed kiss. This was a warm, slow drink of a kiss. One that made every sense Morgan owned come alive. She could taste it, smell it, touch it. It was flawless but fragile. It came with a sticker that read 'handle with care'. Morgan was determined to do just that.

There was a jolt as the wheel cranked into gear again and moved forward. Morgan's eyelids sprang open about the same time as Ali's.

They pulled apart.

Morgan's heart thumped in her chest like it was sending out a warning signal. Her scalp pulsed under her hat. She already missed Ali's lips. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip and tried to conjure up some words that suited the moment. She found none. Instead, she stared into Ali's warm brown eyes, which somehow spoke a language Morgan immediately understood.

Then, before she knew it, Ali leaned back in and found Morgan's lips once more.

It wasn't words that were called for. Rather, it was action, and Ali was taking charge.

The wheel moved round, and Morgan's stomach dropped for all the right reasons.

Ali didn't miss a beat. She moved over Morgan, her lips hot and wet.

Electricity sparked in Morgan's brain as she slid her fingers into Ali's frosty hair, then her tongue into her mouth. Morgan groaned. She couldn't help it. Somewhere in the distance, she heard a wolf whistle, but she ignored it. She wasn't going to let anything disturb this moment.

This was the best kiss Morgan had ever had on a Ferris wheel, hands down.

Scrap that.

This was one of the best kisses she'd *ever* had in her whole damn entire life.

Full stop.

CHAPTER 16



*H*oly. Fucking. Hell.

That was the only thought rolling through Ali's mind, lit up in neon and flashing nonstop. She was kissing Morgan Scott. Scrap that. She was *snogging* Morgan Scott. Morgan currently had her tongue deep in Ali's mouth, and every nerve ending in her body was on high alert. She hardly dared to blink in case she woke up, and this was all a dream. But she knew it wasn't. She also knew that if they hadn't been in public and shackled by a metal bar, Ali would have straddled Morgan by now, and performed all manner of things not fit for public consumption.

She'd waited over two decades for this. Whatever the initial reason, this kiss was no normal kiss. It was a kiss for the ages. A kiss to tell the grandkids. A kiss that would keep her warm forever.

But that was only in Ali's mind.

For Morgan, it was purely to fulfil a teenage dream.

Ali had to remember that.

But right now, with Morgan's lips on hers, desire flamed through Ali. Dammit, she wished they weren't in public. If this was how Morgan Scott kissed for fun, what might it feel like if she actually meant it? Ali's brain shook at the thought. A few minutes ago, she'd thought her ears might drop off with cold. Now, Morgan's kisses were her own central heating system.

Ali's cheeks warmed, her belly too. Even her calves heated by a couple of degrees.

Eventually, Morgan pulled away, but kept her lips within touching distance. Over her shoulder, Christmas trees winked in the distance. Then the Christmas market flashed by.

Ali stared, her breath causing small plumes of smoke in front of them. She breathed Morgan in. She smelled of bergamot and Ali's dreams.

A smile flickered on Morgan's face. "Hot damn."

Ali sucked in the biggest breath of her life. "I agree." She snagged Morgan's gaze. The wheel kept on turning. As did life, the universe. But something had forever changed in her world. Something she couldn't row back on. She now knew what it felt like to kiss Morgan Scott.

Now, all she wanted was to do it again.

"It worked, by the way." She leaned forward and pressed her lips to Morgan's once more. This time, she left them there for one, two, three seconds. Long enough for sparks to fly around every inch of her body. Long enough to make her toes flex. Long enough to know pulling them apart would be tinged with regret. But she did it anyway.

"The kiss," Ali continued. "It took my mind off the height and the wheel collapsing and us meeting an untimely demise skewered on top of a Christmas tree." She stared at Morgan. "For that, thank you."

Morgan's cheeks burned red beneath her Christmas pudding hat, and she let out a throaty laugh. "A Christmas skewer. It's no way to die."

Ali shifted in her seat. She unwrapped her arm from Morgan's neck. "But also, that kiss was... unexpected." Understatement of the century.

Was Morgan going to laugh this off? No.

She looked away, then shook her head slightly. Eventually, she turned back.

"It was very unexpected. A bit like this whole trip."

Their gazes met again.

Ali couldn't move, couldn't think. But she was 99 per cent sure there was desire in Morgan's eyes, too. Just as there had been desire in her kiss from the moment their lips had connected. It still pulsed through Ali. The wheel kept turning. The lights flashed. Ali's mind was a wasteland of previously coherent thought, now reduced to rubble. The waft of possibility hung in the air, the scorch of Morgan's lips on hers. Ali gripped the metal bar as the wheel soared over the precipice again.

But this time, she wasn't afraid of the height or the wheel. It didn't matter if the world around her collapsed now. Her own world had just shifted, and her focus was completely on that. On Morgan Scott. On when she could kiss her again.

"Did I win the prize of best kiss on a Ferris wheel? Better than whatshisname?" It was a daring question. Flirtatious, even. If you'd asked her this morning if she'd utter those words, she'd have told you not to be so ridiculous. But that was then. Now, after a kiss like that, everything had changed. Now, there were even more questions floating around Ali's brain.

Morgan's laugh came from her stomach, loud and throaty. "I would say you obliterated it. Like whatshisname never happened." Morgan's eyes focused fully on Ali's. "You are the Ferris wheel kissing champ."

Those words exploded in her like a firework, the after effects raining down and tickling her skin.

Now she was sure of it. This wasn't just one way.

Morgan Scott liked her.

When her gaze dropped to Ali's lips, she knew Morgan wanted to kiss her again, too.

The wheel spun around to the operator one more time. "Last go around if you want to get a last kiss in, ladies!" He followed that up with a knowing grin.

Instinctively, Ali pulled her mustard scarf up over her face to disappear from view.

Beside her, Morgan shook with laughter.

Ali peered right, catching her gaze.

“It seems when we’re on a Ferris wheel, we revert to being teenagers,” Morgan said. “I kinda like it. Being an adult is way overrated.” She licked her lips, then straightened up. “What else can we do that would take us back to being 15?”

Ali flipped her head back to the sky. “Smoke a fag? Order a takeaway with my mum’s credit card?”

Morgan laughed. “We could definitely buy some cigarettes. I’m not facing the wrath of your mum for anyone.”

The wheel slowed to a stop when they were halfway down the front. Ali shivered and breathed in the scene. It was still snowing, and somehow, being up high now took on a magical quality. She no longer feared she was going to die. Plus, she had an extra thing to live for now. Morgan Scott’s kisses and the promise of an illicit fag.

Moments later, the operator let them off with a bow. Morgan got out first, then turned and offered a hand to Ali.

It wasn’t the first time Morgan had done that, but it held extra meaning now. This time, when Ali put her fingers in Morgan’s, the jolt that went up her arm was brand new. It was big, bold, alive. Just like this moment.

Ali put one foot out of the carriage and was just about to follow up with the other when her trailing leg caught on the edge. Ali stumbled. But who was there to catch her? Morgan. Her hands were tight on Ali’s body as she righted her. Then their faces were inches apart.

This was so confusing. It was everything her 12-year-old self would want, and nothing her 35-year-old self could comprehend. Plus, was this even anything?

Ali shut her thoughts down. She wasn’t going to figure out whatever the hell this was standing on the platform of this Ferris wheel. That was borne out when the operator cleared his throat.

“Thanks ladies, if you could step away from the carriage now. I need to let the other customers off.”

Morgan blinked, then shook herself. She let Ali go and jumped down with a shy smile.

Ali followed.

They wandered into the market, neither of them saying anything.

Ali’s phone vibrated in her pocket. She got it out, glad of the distraction. She wiped a snowflake from her phone screen.

Please let it be a reply from my mum.

It wasn’t. It was from Imogen.

She clicked, and a photo of Imogen and another woman filled her screen, arms around each other. The message read: ‘Back together for Christmas! Thanks for making me remember that love is worth not giving up on!’

Ali spluttered. Well, this was awkward. She’d given up on a chance of anything with Morgan long ago, but now... No, she wasn’t going to go there. This was about Imogen and Sam, a couple with history who they’d unwittingly stumbled into and helped to get back together. It thrilled her they’d got their happy ending. Somebody should have one.

She turned the screen to Morgan, who blew some snowflakes from her face before steadying the phone in Ali’s hand. Her fingers wrapping around Ali’s once more was pure bliss.

When Morgan saw the photo and the message, a wide smile took up residence on her face.

“Did we do that?”

“If Imogen says so, then we did.”

“In that case, we’ll take all the plaudits. Both of us. Team Glass Half Full saved the day.”

CHAPTER 17



The man at the bike hire place was not at all happy about them keeping the tandem overnight, despite the assurances from Liesl at reception. Morgan was fresh out of chocolate, so it took a strong charm offensive to persuade him they'd return it in time for their first hire tomorrow. That, and a credit card as collateral. They waited until they were a safe distance away before they said a word to each other. Then Morgan let out a breath.

“And they say people in the country are friendly and trusting.”

“At least he didn't press us when we said we didn't want to wear helmets. Plus, I guess we don't sound like locals. He's probably been burned by tourists promising the world before.”

“I guess so.” Morgan went to put a hand on Ali's arm, but thought better of it. She was still processing that kiss, but ignoring it, too. If she gave herself time to process and analyse her actions, she knew where that would lead her. Down a long road named What The Fuck Were You Thinking? Kissing any woman in the snow on a Ferris wheel was something she never thought she'd do. But kissing Nicole's little sister had broken some rule or other in the friend world, she was sure. This was the little girl she'd robbed of a toy trumpet, after all. A little girl who'd been in the background of Morgan's life for years, and then, nothing. But she would always be Nicole's little sister. That would never change.

However, after that kiss, Morgan wasn't sure of anything anymore, never mind some arbitrary rules that might have been in the friendship code 20 years ago. Did friendship rules have a use-by date, after which lines blurred?

She pushed that issue to the back of her mind. Right now, she had a tandem to master. The perfect distraction. So long as it didn't break down. Could a bike break down? Morgan squatted by the chain and poked it with her finger just to make sure.

"What are you doing?" Ali dangled her ear muffs on her fingers, retrieved from the car for this part of the journey.

"Making sure the chain is fully attached. With our luck with transport of late, I want to check it won't fall off five minutes down the road." Morgan looked up at Ali, and something scrunched in her chest. It almost knocked her off her feet, but she stayed upright. She gulped. She had to keep a lid on this, or it might explode.

"Oh god, it can't go wrong again, can it?"

Morgan snorted, then stood up, coming face to face with Ali. More specifically, Ali's lips. Her insides pulsed. This was going to happen every time now, wasn't it? She gulped, then ploughed on.

"Famous last words." She patted the back saddle. "Are you going up top, or bringing up the rear?" Oh fuck. She hadn't meant for it to sound so flirtatious.

Ali's eyes glinted. "I was going to ask you the same question." She raised an eyebrow. "But seeing as I need to steer because I'm the one who sort-of-but-not-really knows where we're going, I should go up front, right?"

Morgan hadn't thought of that. "I suppose that's true."

"You know what your job is?"

"Looking pretty at the back?"

"And singing that song 'Daisy Daisy'. It mentions being on a bicycle made for two."

Morgan wrinkled her forehead. "Never heard of it."

Ali rolled her eyes. “In that case, can you manage looking pretty and not falling off?”

How the tables had turned. When they’d first met, Ali had seemed a little prickly about seeing Morgan again. Then bashful when she’d revealed her childhood crush. But now? Ali was the one calling the shots, the one with the cousin and the local knowledge. Also, it appeared to Morgan, she was quite enjoying it.

Strangely, Morgan didn’t mind. She was happy to let Ali take the lead. The little girl who’d once been an annoyance had turned into a capable, strong woman Morgan had faith in. Also, one Morgan was attracted to more by the second. But she wasn’t about to divulge that. At 3pm, it was still snowing, the light was dimming, and they had a cousin to find.

Ali checked her phone and swore. She tried calling someone, then blew out a sigh when nobody picked up. “Why are none of my family answering their phones? I’ve messaged mum, Nicole and Stuart.”

“What about your dad?”

Ali flinched, then focused on her phone. “He won’t answer either,” she mumbled. Then she checked her bag was secure in the back basket, kicked the bike stand and got on the front saddle.

Had Morgan said the wrong thing again?

She adjusted her backpack, got on the back saddle, then realised she’d done nothing like this before. Morgan was a team player, but if there was an opportunity to do something solo, she’d always choose that. Today, she didn’t have that option.

Up front, Ali twisted, then let out a yelp of pain.

“What was that?”

Ali winced. “Just some muscle in my neck waking up and punching me in the face.” She twisted back. “I’m going to look up the village on my map. I’ll send a couple more urgent messages to my family, and then we’ll set off. If I see my cousin’s house, fingers crossed, I’ll recognise it.”

Morgan rang the bell on her handlebars. "Ready when you are." She paused. "Before we go, I just need to know. Are you a super-expert biker? Because if you're about to speed off like Laura Kenny, we might have an issue. I haven't ridden a bike since I left Devon."

Ali tipped her head back, then blew out a raspberry as snow battered her face. "I am not Laura Kenny, so don't worry," she shouted. "You really haven't ridden since you lived in Devon?"

Morgan shook her head, even though Ali couldn't see her. "Nope."

Ali sat up and fixed her ear muffs in place. "Try to forget that. On three. Right pedal first. One, two, three!"

The bike wobbled as they set off, but they kept it upright. After a few moments, though, they were in a rhythm. Ali steered them out of the car park and down the long drive, flanked by snow-covered trees. If everything hadn't gone so wrong for them on this trip, they might have appreciated the winter wonderland they'd been dropped in. But staying upright and not face-planting on the concrete was now the first thought in Morgan's head. So far, so good. However, this long driveway was clear of snow, with no other traffic. It was the smaller roads she worried about.

Up ahead, Ali signalled with her arm, then pulled out onto the road. Two cars flashed past them in the opposite direction.

"Just keep pedalling at the same pace, and holler if you want to slow down. Stopping is not an option!" Ali shouted.

The snow had momentarily stopped, so Morgan could speak without ingesting a mouthful. "Not even for the loo?" She shivered as a gust of wind whistled by her face. Not for the first time this trip, she was glad she'd brought a thick jacket.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wet yourself!"

That brought a laugh from Morgan. "We better not run into any cows either!"

"Especially cows that can move their heads," Ali bellowed.

Morgan grinned. “The very worst kind!”

Over the next ten minutes, her fears about narrow roads turned out to be very real. On December 23rd, everyone had somewhere to get to fast, and a slow bike in their way wasn’t popular with anybody. It didn’t help either when the snow started up again, and began driving right at them.

After a couple of minutes, Ali flagged with her hand and they pulled into a layby. The cars behind them revved their motors and sped past, sending arcs of grey sludge their way.

Ali got off and kicked the bike stand. Her face was the colour of a pillar box, her lips blue, her hair frosted.

Morgan wanted to hug her, but that wouldn’t get them anywhere fast.

“I bet you’re glad you bought that hat now, just as I’m glad I got my ear muffs.” Ali squinted, then rubbed her palms up and down her face. “I just hope my cousin’s home, otherwise I might cry.”

Morgan reached out and touched her arm. “I think she’ll be at home, making a gorgeous dinner with just enough for two extra people.” Every fibre of her being hoped that was true. “I’m also picturing hot chocolate, wine and spin the bottle.”

Okay, now she was just plain flirting again. With a woman whose face was nearly falling off she was so cold. Bad Morgan.

Luckily, Ali saw the funny side. Even when the snow appeared to fall thicker. “I’ve never hoped for anything more in my entire life.” She grinned, then pulled her scarf tighter.

“You’re doing a great job.”

“I need to do it for another 15 minutes according to Google Maps.” Ali patted her saddle, then got back on. “You ready to annoy some more drivers in this picturesque biking nightmare?”

CHAPTER 18



Ali had never been more grateful to see a sign in her entire life. ‘Welcome to Lower Greeton! Please drive carefully.’ Now, all they had to do was find Helen’s cottage in a snow storm. After the past 15 minutes, her opinion of snow storms had changed. They were great when you were inside. But when you were in them, they were brutal. Small lumps of ice that pummelled her face until she wanted to cry. But Ali wasn’t going to cry in front of Morgan Scott. Plus, there was enough water already in the air. She didn’t need to add more.

“Lower Greeton!” she heard Morgan cry from behind.

Ali put a thumb in the air. “Nearly there!”

Morgan’s reply was drowned out by the roar of a car engine. The bike wobbled. Ali threw out her left arm, and they pulled up by the kerb. A red Audi blazed past, horn blaring.

“Happy Christmas to you, too!” Ali shouted, then twisted to Morgan. “I’m riding until we hit the village green, then I know where she is. Ready for the final push?” she shouted.

“Lead the way.”

They wobbled back onto the road. They rode past the village post office and The Black Bear, the larger of the two village pubs, and then down a slope in the road. Thankfully, there was a lull in the traffic. Ali didn’t even want to

look at her jeans and how muddy they were. Along with her snow-frosted hair, she was sure she looked a sight. Thank goodness she'd at least seen Helen in the past year and wasn't showing up as a complete stranger. The first thing she was going to do was fling herself in the shower.

They swung down the hill, Ali applying the brakes in a pumping motion. When they turned the corner, the village green came into view. Ali's Christmas spirit soared: she could see Helen and Jamie's house beyond the Christmas tree on the green, all lit up even at mid-afternoon. The oak trees on the green were lit with white fairy lights, too. Ali guided the tandem onto the semi-circular road that lined the green, and pulled up outside her cousin's house.

"Kellermans' B&B," Ali said, reading the sign. "I really should have remembered that, right?"

"From *Dirty Dancing*?" Ali felt Morgan get off the bike. When she turned, Morgan was beside her.

"Of course! We watched that film about 200 times when we were kids. It's the one that our mums and us all loved." Ali's phone vibrated in her pocket. She took it out. A message from her sister with Helen's number and the name of the B&B, along with a Patrick Swayze gif. Ali rolled her eyes. A little late in the day.

With Morgan's help, she pulled the bike off the road and they wheeled it onto her cousin's driveway.

"You never told me your cousin lived in a picture-perfect village in a picture-perfect house."

Ali looked at the place with fresh eyes. The house was made of old local stone, but they'd done it up so it shone, both inside and out. The doors looked freshly painted, the black-framed windows gleamed, and the front gardens were worthy of gracing any gardening show.

It was pretty cool. When she'd rocked up here last November, she'd been fresh out of a fling she'd hesitated to even name as such. Ali and Cath had

met, had a lot of sex, and then when Cath had come out with a group of Ali's friends in Glasgow one night, she'd dumped her the following day, telling her their lives were on different paths. Ali had been stunned, and when she'd got a message from Helen to come visit the following weekend, she'd grabbed it with both hands. However, being newly dumped, she'd been too wrapped up in herself and hadn't truly appreciated how well Helen had done for herself. Now she saw it through Morgan's eyes, she did.

Ali was just about to reply when the front door of the main house opened, and her cousin stepped out of it, carrying a black bin bag. She glanced up and stopped when she saw them approaching. Helen's fair hair was tied up in a tight ponytail, and she wore a pair of faded jeans ripped at the knee, along with a T-shirt the colour of hot sauce. It must be warm in the house, because it wasn't out here. Plus, Ali remembered from their childhood that Helen didn't feel the cold.

Ali whipped off her ear muffs and waved.

"Hey Helen, it's me!" The most unhelpful comment of the year by far.

Helen did a double-take. "Ali?"

Ali nodded.

Helen dropped the bin bag where she stood and walked over to her. Then she took Ali in her arms. "What the hell are you doing on my drive?" She eased Ali back to arm's length. "Not that it's not great to see you. But you're about the last person I expected to turn up two days before Christmas looking like an icicle." She glanced at the tandem behind them. "Tell me you didn't just pedal all the way here from Glasgow?" Helen's face was rightly confused as she glanced from Ali, to Morgan, then back.

Ali laughed, then a heady mix of relief and warmth rushed through her. They were going to be okay. They wouldn't freeze in a bus shelter, be found as blocks of ice on Christmas morning and be the talk of the local news. After all the setbacks of the past two days, arriving here to somebody familiar was the best feeling she'd had in the past 48 hours.

Okay, second best.

“We didn’t, although it kinda feels that way. We set off from Glasgow yesterday morning, and this is as far as we’ve got. So far, we’ve broken a train and a plane, and our hire car is currently conked out in the car park of the Christmas Court at Muirhead Castle. I was half expecting the bike chain to fall off, but no, we made it here. A Christmas miracle!”

Helen rubbed her hands together. “You’ll have to tell me all about it over a coffee. Jamie might help. He’s good with cars, but he’s not due back until this evening, so it might have to wait until the morning.”

“I thought I was good with cars, but apparently not.” She pointed to where Morgan had propped the bike onto its stand. “Hence, we have a bike, loaned from the Christmas Court. We have to get it back to them by midday tomorrow. If we don’t, the man has my credit card. From the look on his face, he might book himself and his whole family a trip to Lapland if we’re a minute late.”

“I think he’s counting on it,” Morgan added with a grin.

Ali gave Morgan a smile, then turned to Helen. “This is Morgan. We’re trying and failing to travel together.”

Helen stepped forward and extended a hand. “Helen, pleased to meet you.” Then she gave a little shiver. “But enough chat in a bloody snow storm!” She looked skywards. “Come in and get out of the cold. Jamie can put the bike in the back of his van when he gets in.”

“You’ve no idea how happy those words make me,” Ali told her.

Helen led them into their part of the house, which was far less festooned with Christmas than the outside. However, the kitchen was still a welcome hug. Ali fell into it, letting out a contented sigh. With its midnight-blue cupboards and copper handles, teamed with orange tiles on the wall and two giant skylights, it was a modern ode to stylish cuisine.

“Sorry for not calling ahead, but I got a new phone since we last spoke and I didn’t have your number. I’ve been messaging mum and Nicole all day,

but they only just got back to me.”

Helen waved a hand. “Don’t be silly, we’re family.” She sucked on her top lip. “Although you look a little like the rat in *Muppet Christmas Carol* after he falls into that ice barrel.” She walked forward and swept a strand of Ali’s hair from her face. “Do you want a coffee first, or a shower?”

It was a good question. Ali glanced at Morgan, her coat already off, but she couldn’t ask her to make this decision. She wanted both at once. Preferably with Morgan. But that would be a little rude. Today had been eternal, and it wasn’t even 4pm, according to the clock on Helen’s bright orange kitchen wall. This morning, they’d woken up in Snowton. But now, at least, they were somewhere familiar.

“A coffee first, but then a shower would be very welcome.” She glanced at Morgan. “Do you want to go for a shower first?”

Morgan blinked, then nodded. “I would love to.” She looked at Helen. “This might be cheeky, but do you have a washer/dryer? We’ve been in these clothes for a couple of days now, and I feel like getting them clean would cheer me up, too.”

Helen nodded. “We have both. I’ll pop a wash on when you both give me your clothes.”

“That would be brilliant.” Ali stared at the bottom of her jeans, covered in mud and grime. “Cycling on country roads is unforgiving.”

“I’m impressed you made it in one piece.” Helen walked to the other door in the kitchen. “Follow me, Morgan, and I’ll show you the guest room. I just made it up for Christmas last night—Jamie’s parents are coming to stay—so the sheets are fresh. You’re in luck.”

Ali’s stomach floored. Oh shit. One bed again. One bed last night had been torturous. But one bed tonight might be impossible. Being that close to Morgan and not kissing her again was totally out of the question. Once the kissing started, she knew where that would lead. She blew out a breath as her mind filled in the blanks in a blur of skin and heat. She closed her eyes to get

rid of the image. Really not helpful.

For now, she had to stay in this moment. Not worry about the future. Isn't that what this trip had taught her? You could plan all you liked, but in the end, life would have the final say.



ONCE HELEN and Morgan left the kitchen, Ali walked through to the lounge and pressed Home on her phone. It needed another charge soon, but she had just about enough juice left to call Tobias.

“Hello, Glasgow City Cat Adoption Centre. I’m afraid I just shipped the last cat out because it peed in my shoe, so we’re all out.”

“Very funny.” Ali collapsed on Helen’s super-squishy cream sofa. Thoroughly impractical colour choice, but cushions that meant she might fall asleep at any moment. That would be one way to deal with tonight.

“How’s Snowy doing, apart from fulfilling my brief to pee in your shoe?” Ali paused. “She didn’t really do that, did she? Now is not the time to be teaching her new tricks.”

“I swear she started to, but then I distracted her by vogueing. We all know how mesmerising I can be when I do that.”

“She does love a dance.” Ali could just imagine Snowy’s transfixed face. That her cat loved dance was a well-worn joke between the two friends. Once *Strictly* was on, there was no way anybody was distracting Snowy. “Everything good in the hood?”

“Gorgeous, darling. I bought a nut roast yesterday, along with some of those meat-free pigs in blankets. I daren’t look at the ingredients to see what they really are. I also bought a bottle of champers, and a bottle of red for a tenner. Splashing out this Christmas. Me and Snowy are going to have a great time. I even bought her a new toy. Santa is going to come to this part of Glasgow, even if he never does in the movies.” He paused. “How are things

in Devon?”

Ali closed her eyes. She'd checked in last night to see how Snowy was, but not given him any other details. Of course he thought she was in Devon.

“We're still not there.”

“Whaaaaaaaat?” Tobias was a fan of drama. It's why he was addicted to the *Real Housewives* franchise.

“Remember I told you the plane was delayed? Then it became cancelled, then our train broke down—”

“Yes, and you were travelling with your first love and it was like the most romantic thing in the world!” He was screeching now.

“Lower your voice. You'll scare Snowy.”

“I'll just vogue a little more. She'll be putty in my hands.” He paused. “Where are you now?”

“Were we in the services when we last spoke?”

“You were.”

“We hitched a lift, our train broke down, as did our hire car, and now we're staying the night with my cousin before trying to get to Devon tomorrow.” When she said it out loud, it sounded even more ridiculous than it had been living through it. However, she knew that when she looked back on the past few days, she'd remember the ups and the downs. Getting to know Morgan again. Dave, the Christmas tree man. Hanging out in Snowton.

The Ferris wheel.

That kiss.

“Where exactly are you right now?”

“Sitting on one of the most comfortable sofas in the world at my cousin's place in the Lakes.”

“You've only made it as far as the Lakes? You can drive that in three hours.”

“If you've got a car that works. Which we hopefully will have by tomorrow. Otherwise, we're spending Christmas with my cousin.” Which

wasn't the absolute worst plan in the world. But then again, it really was. It was the whole point she'd said yes to going home this year, because it was the first Christmas without Dad. The first one her mum had actually closed the pub for the day. The first one where it was just going to be the family, and nobody else. Ali sat up. She had to get home tomorrow, there was no two ways about it. She knew Morgan was just as keen.

“And you're still with the dreamboat that is Morgan Scott?”

Ali grinned like a cat of the Cheshire variety.

“You're bloody grinning, aren't you? I can hear it!” He let out another squeal of excitement. “Is she still gorgeous?”

Ali conjured Morgan in her mind. Then she thought about her right now, naked in the shower. Every hair on her body stood to attention.

“She still has a certain allure.”

“Hang on.” Tobias paused. “Has something happened? As I recall, she's on the lady-loving bus. You haven't climbed aboard, have you?”

That single question took Ali right back to the kiss.

She paused long enough for Tobias to know the answer.

“You fucking hussy! I love it! Something's happened, hasn't it? Have you stumbled upon a one-way ticket to love-town rather than just going home for Christmas like normal people?” He could barely contain himself. “Just so you know, I'm covering Snowy's ears, because this is strictly on a need-to-know basis.” He paused. “Of course, I need to know, so you have to tell me.”

Now that Tobias was interested, Ali found she was desperate to tell someone. She'd been pondering who, but her family was out. She couldn't tell Nicole. Not yet. Not that she thought her sister would mind, but it would just be... awkward at first. But that was supposing there was anything to back up that blistering kiss.

Fuck, she hoped there was.

“Hello, are you still alive?”

Ali sat up. “Yes. Sorry, I'm a bit thrown by it all.” Especially now it was

in sharp focus. She'd spent the past two days trying to contain herself, but she wasn't capable after that kiss. "Nothing happened, but then, everything did. We kissed on a Ferris wheel in a snowstorm, then we rode a tandem bike to my cousin's, and now we have to share a bed for the second night running. The first one was bad enough. I don't know what the fuck I'm meant to do when my first crush—my first fucking love, let's not beat around the bush—"

"Although you'd like to—"

Ali let out an enormous laugh. "I would. Especially when she's currently in the shower. Naked." Her entire system revved at the thought.

"Why aren't you in there with her?"

"Because it would be a bit much to turn up at my cousin's, then disappear to fuck my travel companion."

Now it was Tobias's turn to roar. "*Travel companion?* Could you sound more Radio 4 if you tried? I've heard it called a lot of things."

"You know what I mean. But now I'm thinking about it, I'm panicking. I've been wearing the same clothes for two days, my hair's a mess, and yet I'm contemplating sleeping with someone for the first time in forever."

"Over a year, but who's counting?" he replied.

"You, apparently." Ali leaned her head back on the couch. "Fuck, I'm out of practice. I can't be out of practice for Morgan Scott! I have to be ready. Hit the ground running. What if I've forgotten how to do it? What if I'm a really terrible lover and all my past conquests have been lying through their teeth?"

Tobias didn't snigger. "Don't be so ridiculous. You're a love goddess, I'm sure of it. Plus, I reckon the sight of her naked might sort you out."

"Don't say that! I've been pushing it all down, and now I'm thinking about it, I'm freaking out." Fear pulsed through her body, pursued by a frenzy of excitement. All her fantasies might be about to come true, and she really wasn't ready.

What was it they said? Never meet your heroes? Perhaps never fuck your first crush was on the same ticket.

“Ali, you’re overthinking it. Go back to not doing that. You’ve let this sizzle, which is good. She’s someone you’re still attracted to. She’s clearly attracted to you if you already kissed. I’m assuming you didn’t trip up, fall onto a Ferris wheel and accidentally land on her lips?”

The kiss lit up in her mind. “There might have been swooning, but definitely no falling.”

“Okay then. My advice is to go with the flow. See where tonight takes you. But if you’re sharing a bed, you’re bound to kiss again. Then it depends if you’re feeling like Maria von Trapp before that dance with the captain, or after.”

Ali laughed. “Does everything come down to *The Sound Of Music*?” It was Tobias’s favourite film.

“I just watched it, and I still say it was that dance that clinched it. When he holds her and they look into one another’s eyes, Maria wants to jump him. Before that, she’s happy to dream. You’ve had your lightning bolt moment. I assume the kiss was good?”

This time, Ali didn’t have to work hard to summon the image or the feeling. It had never left.

“It was fucking incredible.”

Tobias whistled down the phone. “You don’t use words like that very often. You’re normally the master of understatement. I’m going to give you some sage advice now, and you will listen. You ready?”

Ali waited. “I’m ready.”

“Do not push this off. This is your chance to go after what you want. Your first love. Even if it is terrible fucking timing with you leaving the country next month. But don’t think about that. You deserve this. You’re fabulous. Have some fun. Live a little.”

Fuck. In all the mayhem, she hadn’t expected anything to happen. For any feelings to be involved. But she was moving to New York next month. That was an irrefutable fact.

“But what if she doesn’t want to have sex?”

“Then she’ll tell you.”

“And what if we do? What happens afterwards? Should I tell her I’m leaving?”

Even worse, what happened if it was good—*great, even*—but that’s where Morgan wanted to leave it? Ali knew it couldn’t go anywhere because of her job, but she wanted it to be on her terms. Putting herself out there made her vulnerable. Morgan Scott might stamp on her heart. She wasn’t sure she could take that.

“For once in your life, Ali, take a chance. Just do it, sod the consequences. Go with your heart. Sort everything else out afterwards. What would your teenage self say?”

Ali conjured an image of her younger self in her mind. “Her mind would be blown.”

“There’s a joke in there, but I’m not sure it works for lesbians,” he replied.

She had to smile.

“Just fuck her, Ali.”

She heard Snowy meow in the background.

“Snowy agrees with me. If nothing else, do it to make yourself smile. Do it for the moment. If it all goes tits up, at least you’ll have a night to remember.”

CHAPTER 19



Morgan sat back and rubbed her stomach. “That was delicious. Thank you so much, you’re both life-savers.” She picked a crumb of garlic bread from her jeans—strictly speaking, Helen’s jeans—and slipped it into her mouth. “I can’t believe you made that pasta from scratch, too.”

“I enjoy doing it.” Helen’s husband Jamie—a 6-foot rugby type who’d made the divine carbonara they’d just devoured—took a sip of his wine. “Helen bought me a pasta-making course for Christmas last year, and now I see the method behind her cunning plan.”

“I bought it because you love cooking, dear husband.” She gave him a wink.

Next to Morgan, Ali’s cheeks had a tell-tale Rioja glow, her chestnut hair back to normal, frost-free and styled thanks to products provided by their hosts. Ali had showered right after Morgan, and then, as if they were staying in some five-star hotel with a laundry service, Helen had collected their clothes and chucked them in the wash. She’d also given them some old jeans and a couple of sweatshirts to wear while their clothes dried. Helen claimed everything they were wearing was destined for the charity shop. Morgan wondered if there was a way she could smuggle the lot back to Devon. Yes, the jeans were a little tight, but Helen had impeccable taste.

“What are your plans for Christmas?” Ali asked Jamie.

“The last guests check out tomorrow, my parents arrive tomorrow night, and then we’re having Christmas dinner down the road at The Black Bear. When you’ve catered for guests the whole year round, a holiday is someone else cooking and washing up for you.”

“We’re definitely on washing up duty tonight,” Ali added.

Jamie shook his head. “Nonsense. Take your drinks through to the lounge and I’ll clear up while you catch up. I’ll bring dessert through when I’m done.”

Helen was up in a flash. “Let’s go before he changes his mind.” She gave him a wink, and Jamie rolled his eyes. She followed it up with a kiss and led the way through to the lounge.

Morgan loved how easy Helen and Jamie were. The relaxed banter, the loving looks, the way they worked seamlessly together as a couple. It was what she wanted for herself. What her parents and her sister had in their relationships. None of them could quite understand why Morgan didn’t have it, either. It was a puzzle that Morgan herself had yet to work out. However, being in this cosy, warm environment made her want it even more. Perhaps there was more to life than work. This couple worked hard, but they did it together, and saw each other all the time. It had been the main gripe of all Morgan’s previous relationships that she always put her work first. The trouble was, she hadn’t met anyone in the past couple of years that made her want to change that.

In the lounge, Helen squatted and opened the small door on the log burner. She grabbed some logs from the wooden box to her right and stacked them neatly.

“Please, sit,” she said, indicating the large squishy sofa on the left.

Ali made an ‘after you’ gesture with her arm, squeezing Morgan’s own as she walked past.

Warmth rolled through Morgan at Ali’s touch. Yes, it had been a while since she had a connection with a woman, but in less than 48 hours, Ali had

staked her claim. But Morgan wasn't about to go there. She didn't have the brain space, especially not after pasta and wine. Right now, she wanted to sit and relax for the first time in the past two days. Jamie was driving them to their car in the morning. The hire company was sending a replacement. Whisper it, but it looked like they might finally get home for Christmas.

“You've no idea how amazing it is to have a good meal and to sit on a couch, so thank you again.” Morgan paused. “You said you didn't live in Devon when you were younger. Did you and Ali see a lot of each other growing up?”

Helen put some kindling between the logs, added a few twigs and small pieces of wood, then lit a long match.

They all watched the fire catch, and Helen blew on it before closing the door. “We'll add a couple more logs when it gets going.” For now, it was down to the flames and heat to work their magic.

“My family live in Surrey, but we always made the effort to meet up over summers and Christmas. We went on holiday a lot when we were kids to Bournemouth, didn't we?” Helen said.

Ali nodded. “I have really fond memories of those times. Even though you and Nicole used to bury me in the sand every year. I had a recurring dream I was buried alive throughout my childhood.”

Helen laughed as she sat down on the sofa opposite. “Poor Ali. You were always smallest, so always the one to get picked on. But the adults thought you were the cutest.”

“I'm still younger than both you and Nicole, so who had the last laugh?” Ali gave her cousin a grin.

“You, clearly. Although Nicole will always be a year older than me, and I cling to that.” Helen swilled her wine around her glass. Through the door, glasses clinked as Jamie cleared up. “He's a keeper, that one,” Helen added.

Morgan nodded. “Any spouse who likes to cook is one to be cherished.”

Helen glanced at Ali, as if weighing up her next sentence.

Morgan caught the hesitation.

Next to her, Ali clutched her glass that bit tighter.

“A little like your dad,” Helen said eventually.

Ali visibly flinched.

“I remember his amazing lasagne, which he always cooked every summer, even when it was boiling outside. ‘It’s always lasagne weather’, Uncle Tony would say.” Helen smiled. “And he always joined in with the sand-burying antics.” She paused. “How are things with everyone now?”

Ali cleared her throat. “They’re okay. I haven’t been back since... since everything.”

“Understandable,” Helen replied. “I was so sorry when I heard, and even sorrier we couldn’t make the funeral. It happened so quickly and we were still on holiday.”

Funeral? Morgan twisted to look at Ali, but she didn’t meet her gaze.

“It’s fine, really. He had many people there to see him off. It was a lovely service and a great turnout. And yes, he was buried within ten days, which is unheard of. There was obviously a dearth of deaths this summer. My dad led the trend into autumn.”

Morgan flicked her eyes from Helen to Ali, then back. She didn’t want to say anything right now. This was a family moment, and she should shut up. But Tony Bradford was dead? This was news. She remembered him with great fondness.

Why hadn’t Ali said anything? They’d talked about going home, about the pub, about their families, and Ali hadn’t mentioned it once.

“Getting home this year is a big deal, then. Being with your family for Christmas?”

Ali gave the most noncommittal shrug. “I guess.” She gathered herself, then looked directly at Helen. “I mean, yes. It is. I know they’re probably thinking I engineered this travel chaos to limit my time at home, but I really didn’t.”

“Do you need to call them?”

Ali shook her head. “I’ve been messaging Nicole, she knows we’re here and we’re leaving tomorrow.” She flicked her gaze to Morgan. “She probably wants more details on me travelling with Morgan, to be honest.”

Morgan reached out and put a hand on Ali’s knee. The electricity was palpable. “I’m really sorry.” She hoped her face conveyed her sincerity.

“Thanks,” Ali whispered.

For just a moment, it was the two of them again, inside their cocoon. Morgan caught Ali’s wounded stare. She wanted to reach out and make it all better. Wrap her arms around Ali and take the pain away. Even if just for a few moments. But now wasn’t the time.

Helen’s voice broke the spell. “But Uncle Tony wouldn’t want us to wallow. Plus, I know he’d be thrilled about you two. How long have you been together?”

Morgan blinked, stared at Ali, then turned to Helen. “We’re not together.”

Ali shook her head. “No.”

Helen raised both eyebrows in an unspoken question, then fixed her gaze on Ali’s thigh, where Morgan’s hand still rested. “You’re not? I just assumed...”

Morgan snatched her hand back, then shook her head. “No, we’re just old friends, as we said at dinner. I mean, we sometimes see each other when we both go home, but we’ve never hooked up.” Why was she over explaining? “When I say hooked up, I don’t mean *hooked up*.”

Oh god, make it stop. Somebody put a plug in my mouth.

But no, Morgan wasn’t done. “More, we’ve had a drink, said hi. Whenever I see Ali, she’s behind the bar or in the pub. We’ve never really had a conversation on our own, have we?”

As soon as Morgan said it, she realised how stupid that was. All these wasted years, when actually, they got on. They coped together in a crisis. Plus, Ali was kind, resourceful, hot. Why had she never seen that before?

Because she'd never looked. That was the stupidest thing of all. But she was looking now, and Morgan liked what she saw.

Ali shook her head, a sad look in her eye. "You were always Nicole's friend. I was the kid sister. We had our roles."

A silence descended on the room as everyone digested that.

"But now?"

Helen's question was cut off as Jamie walked in with a tray of Bailey's and a round of homemade tiramisu in individual glass dishes. "I was up at the crack of dawn making these, so I hope you enjoy, ladies." He put the tray on the coffee table with the precision of a gymnast. "Now, what or who were we talking about?"

"We were just discussing how Ali and Morgan are definitely not a couple." Helen could barely contain her smirk.

Jamie sat beside his wife and cast his gaze on the two of them. "Aren't you?" he asked.

CHAPTER 20



One Bailey's had turned into two, and then into cheese and port, and before she knew it, they were playing a card game with no boundaries, and sharing another bottle of red. By the time they tripped up the stairs to bed, it was gone midnight, and they had to be up at eight to get going.

However, it had all been worth it. Ali loved Helen and Jamie, and it had been fabulous to finally relax after two days of what-the-fuck. She'd probably have said no to that last glass of wine if she was at home or in a normal situation. But she wasn't. Accepting that last glass of wine meant she had another half hour delay to the inevitable moment of going to bed with Morgan. It also meant she had another layer of liquid confidence to take with her. In the morning, she'd think that was a mistake.

But tonight, it was everything.

Ali rolled over in the bed. Her phone was on the side table. She picked it up. There was a message from Tobias that simply said, 'Don't overthink it.' Easy for him to say.

She also had one from Nicole. 'Is there something going on that you need to tell me?' Ali's heart flipped. The family inquisition was going to be worse than anything the Spanish had ever faced. For now, though, she tuned that out and focused on what Tobias had said.

In the guest bathroom, she heard the light go off, then the bedroom door

open.

Then there was Morgan.

Every delicious ounce of her.

Ali gulped, suddenly overcome with nerves. This wasn't a sure thing, but then again, she felt like it was the surest thing ever.

They hadn't had a date. They'd just had a single dreamy kiss in the snow, on a Ferris wheel. Where the stars had aligned and the world had seemed brighter. Time had stood still. Possibilities seemed endless. But she had no idea where they were with each other. This was the first time they'd had alone since that kiss. And now, they were about to sleep in the same bed again.

Maybe Morgan would get in and they'd go right to sleep. She'd be absolutely fine with that. They had a big day tomorrow, and getting home in time for Christmas was the most important thing. Plus, there was New York.

And yet somehow, in the past 48 hours, Morgan had crept onto her list of most important things, too.

What had Tobias told her? 'Don't overthink it. Live in the moment.'

Easy for him to say, sat at home vogueing with her cat.

Morgan clearing her throat made Ali look up.

"We meet again." Could she have come up with a dumber line? She didn't think so. Even though Ali had known Morgan's emergence was imminent, she wasn't ready.

She had to remind herself to breathe.

Morgan gave her a shy smile, then put the clothes she was holding on the chair by the dressing table, neatly folded. Morgan was a neat person. After 48 hours together, Ali knew this already. She glanced at her clothes, thrown on the floor. Morgan would have to take her as she was. There was no masking the truth on this trip.

Ali tracked Morgan's path to the bed, her legs long and lean, her stomach flat. She wore black knickers and a black T-shirt (courtesy of Helen). A

tickertape ran through Ali's mind: 'What's underneath???'

When Morgan slipped under the covers, Ali took a sharp intake of breath.

Subtle. Really subtle.

They lay in silence for a few moments, the only sound the low rumble of Helen and Jamie's voices from along the hallway. It was Morgan who broke first.

"I'm really sorry about your dad. I always liked him."

The muscles in Ali's jaw clenched. "Thanks. Everyone said the same."

"Because it's true." Morgan paused. "How is your family doing with it?"

Ali steadied her breathing as much as she could. What was the answer? She didn't know. She'd steadfastly avoided going back since his funeral. She didn't want to deal with the fact he was dead, so she'd swept it under the carpet. She'd left Nicole, Stuart, and her mum to pick up the pieces and carry on. She'd gone back to her life and pretended like nothing had happened. That charade would have to end soon.

"Honestly? I have no fucking idea. I call them, they call me, we message. We even have the occasional Zoom. But we don't really talk about it. I'm sure they do without me. They must do. And sometimes Nicole calls me and tries to talk, but I always have some place to go, something to do. I always have an excuse. Because I don't want to deal with it." She shook her head. "I know that's wrong of me. I know it's not what my family needs, but it's how I cope."

Morgan reached under the covers and took Ali's hand in hers.

It was warm, comforting.

Ali let her.

"Everyone copes with grief differently. I know that was the case when my granddad died. Same with my nan. Mum fell to pieces, we all picked up the slack. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Ali tipped her head to the ceiling. She admired the cornicing on the central light before she replied.

“True, but I had a choice. I could leave. They couldn’t. They had to stay and deal with everyone knowing. Be in the place where he’d lived his life every single day. I couldn’t stand that. Even being there for the week after his death leading up to the funeral was stifling. I could leave, so I did. I’m sure that makes me a terrible person.”

Morgan squeezed her hand. “I think that makes you a normal person.” Her thumb stroked the palm of Ali’s hand.

Ali felt it everywhere. Suddenly, the room became louder, just like her heartbeat inside her. She turned to face Morgan, and she could see it all in Morgan’s eyes. The sympathy for her dad’s death, the understanding of how she’d reacted.

Ali didn’t want any of it.

She’d run away from her family, run away from what had happened. She didn’t deserve understanding.

Right now, she certainly didn’t want Morgan’s sad puppy eyes on her. She wanted Morgan’s lips.

Ali’s brain and body agreed.

“You know, I’m always here if you need a sympathetic ear. If you want to talk. I knew your dad, but I’m not directly involved, so maybe that makes me the perfect person?”

Ali had heard enough.

“Morgan.” She twisted her body to face her. She had no idea where to start. No idea where this was going. But all she knew was she wanted to get off the topic of her dad. If the only way she could do that was to cover Morgan’s lips with her own, then so be it. Ali moved forward until their lips were within inches of each other. “I just want to pretend we’re back on the Ferris wheel, back in that magical moment. I don’t want to talk about my dad. Not when I’m in bed with you. I want to kiss you again. You think we could do that instead?”

There was a moment of hesitation on Morgan’s face before her features

relaxed. She nodded. "I think that can be arranged."

Morgan's smooth fingers glided across Ali's cheek; her scorched gaze lasered Ali's soul.

Ali took a steadying breath. They hadn't even kissed yet, but this was already a level up from the Ferris wheel. That had been surprise, shock. This was not. But it was years of Ali's dreams on the line.

Morgan's nose slid next to Ali's, her mouth tantalisingly close. She looked into Ali's eyes, silently asking the question.

Ali's gaze didn't waver, giving Morgan her answer.

But even though Ali knew the kiss was coming, she still wasn't prepared. When Morgan's lips met hers, a cannon of gold confetti exploded inside her, and her mind and body soared. Everything else in the room fell away, apart from Morgan's lips. She'd had her eyes on the prize for two decades. Finally grasping it in her hands was almost dreamlike.

Morgan moaned into Ali's mouth, then her tongue parted Ali's lips and slid inside.

Ali sucked her in. She wanted every part of Morgan Scott. She'd wanted it when she caught her gaze earlier in the card game. She'd wanted it when their fingers had accidentally collided when they reached for the pepper grinder. She'd definitely wanted it this morning when she woke up with Morgan lying next to her, but strictly out of bounds.

This morning, she'd had to grin and bear it. Soldier on.

What a difference a day made.

Now, Morgan's sure hands were on her hips, pulling her close, and her lips were brush strokes to Ali's soul.

"You sure about this?" If Morgan's voice was faint, her fingers were anything but.

Ali couldn't find the words, but she'd never been surer of anything in her entire life. In reply, she simply kissed Morgan even more furiously than before.

Morgan's hands were a blur as they stole over Ali's skin like moonlight.

They both pulled back in unison to throw off their T-shirts and shed their underwear. Tonight wasn't the night for tiptoeing. Maybe that night would come. This wasn't about luxury or five-star service. Tonight was about vital pleasure, and Ali was determined to be in the driving seat. So much so, when she pushed Morgan onto her back and climbed on top of her—exactly the way she'd dreamed Morgan might do to her—Morgan's face spelt surprise.

"I wasn't expecting that." A satisfied smile crossed her features.

Ali leaned down and ran her tongue slowly along Morgan's top lip. "I'm full of surprises." Ali didn't know whose voice was coming out of her mouth, but it was husky and knew what it wanted. She nibbled on Morgan's lip, and felt her shake beneath her.

Ali sat up.

Morgan stroked both hands up and down Ali's sides, her focus fixed.

Ali wanted to drink in the look on Morgan's face forever. It was as if Ali was a work of art, and Morgan simply couldn't stop staring.

The feeling was mutual.

Ali ran her hands over Morgan's full breasts, just as she'd dreamed of doing when she was a teenager. If you held on long enough, dreams could come true. When she leaned down and took Morgan's right nipple into her mouth, Morgan gasped.

Ali sank into the lush sound. Into Morgan's bergamot scent. She made sure she gave Morgan everything she had. She'd never forgive herself otherwise.

"I can't believe this is really happening," she rasped, before she could even think about what she was saying. She should have been embarrassed. But there was no time.

Before Ali could process another thought, Morgan slid her hand between Ali's legs and slipped a finger into her.

Electric wonder shot through Ali, then her eyes went wide. She'd nearly

sprained her fingers a few times trying the same trick, but Morgan was a natural. Ali rolled her hips, then gently ground down on Morgan.

Taking the encouragement, Morgan slid another finger inside.

Ali let out a sound she'd never be able to name. One she'd never uttered before. It was the one she'd been saving for 20 years. The one reserved for when Morgan Scott finally fucked her. Ali's insides roared as she melted into her.

She fell forward, crushed her mouth to Morgan's once more, and let the moment wash over her. If she was riding Morgan Scott, she was going to do it in style. Low and slow. Every part of her pulsed as Morgan's fingers eased around inside her. Ali could feel how wet she was.

When she'd imagined this in her younger years, it had never been like this. Then, Morgan had taken her against a wall, crushed her to a bed. She'd dominated Ali. But that was a fantasy from her youth. Now she was up close, a private audience with Morgan Scott was more than living up to its billing. The later-life version of Morgan was more rough around the edges, but that only added to her charm. A charm that had sparkled for Ali ever since they met.

Now, Morgan had Ali in the palm of her hand.

Literally.

They stayed like that for a few more exquisite moments, Morgan locking Ali in with her intense sapphire gaze. Her blonde hair was mussed, her cheeks red. She looked absolutely, intensely, momentarily gorgeous. As Morgan's stare drilled into her, a crush of lust looped between them, holding Ali in place with its force. She swirled her hips, desire drenching her from the inside out. She'd never felt so filled, so satiated in her life. She stilled, never wanting to leave this bubble. Euphoria bubbled inside. Ali had to hold it together.

Which she did. Right up until Morgan shifted under her. She gently nudged Ali off her and got to her knees, mirroring Ali's stance, twisting her

hand with crazy skill. Morgan stared into Ali's eyes, her own irises dark pools of want, before kissing Ali's lips with the lightest of touches.

It made Ali's head spin. Then she was on her back as Morgan straddled her, her breasts tantalising, her lips wet. Morgan's hands were all over her, sliding, fucking, driving Ali on. She didn't need much encouragement.

"You feel so good." Morgan's thick, honeyed voice nearly tipped Ali over the edge.

She was so close. Ali opened her eyes, and they locked gazes again.

Morgan thrust into her and held it. Then she leaned down again, her fingers steady.

Her hot breath tickled Ali's ear.

"Come for me, Ali," Morgan whispered.

Ali didn't need a second invitation. As Morgan pressed home her advantage, sparks flared inside. Seconds later, years of pent-up desire rattled through her, and Ali came undone under Morgan's sure, smooth touch. She spread her legs and threw back her head, revelling in the moment. Then she hooked her arm around Morgan's neck and pulled her in for a kiss that shook her very bones.

Morgan kept her fingers just where Ali needed them, and in seconds, with Morgan urging her on, she came again.

Ali clung to Morgan, heart pounding, everything she possessed hot and raw.

This was a night Ali would never forget, even if this was the extent of it. Of them. The last glass of wine had been worth it. The heart palpitations had been worth it. Every moment of the past two decades that she'd lived through had led to this. She didn't want to go to sleep, but she knew it wasn't far off. She certainly didn't want to wake up tomorrow, just in case the spell was broken.

Whatever happened next—and she hoped that involved fucking Morgan Scott into the night—they'd always have tonight.

For now, that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 21



Morgan cracked an eye open and took a moment to work out where she was. Still very far from home. With the world's most genial hosts.

Naked in bed with Ali Bradford.

She couldn't help but smile at that last part.

She glanced right and revelled in the warmth of having Ali beside her. Another living, breathing human. It'd been a while since it'd happened.

Morgan flicked through the sex cards in her head. When had the last time been? Edna Shelly. Morgan remembered that name, because who their age was called Edna? It was the name of your great aunt, not the name of someone you ended up in bed with. But Edna Shelly had been hot. Also very married to a man, a tourist for the night. Which, judging by how much she knew her way around a woman's body, was not the first time she'd played away. She'd asked Morgan if they could carry on as fuck buddies. Romantic as the suggestion had been, Morgan had told her no. That was the last time anyone had touched her until last night.

Even though Edna had been good, she had nothing on Ali.

For a first time, last night had been incredible. There had been such an ease between them, even though it had sprung out of Ali avoiding talking about her dad. But the sex had been... more than just sex. They'd connected. When Ali had fucked her, Morgan had responded in a way she never had

before. As if Ali could see right through her. As if her fingers had unlocked something inside.

They had. An almighty orgasm, which Morgan's whole body responded to when she replayed it in her mind. The smile that followed was so broad it made her jaw click. But it was more than just physical. There was something else there. Maybe it was because she knew Ali.

Morgan shook her head. Just because she knew where Ali went to school, why would that make the sex great? Whatever it was, the connection they had stunned her. When Ali was inside her, Morgan never wanted her to leave. Had Ali felt it too?

She wasn't about to ask. Last night was one night. She wasn't about to build a future on it.

A movement beside her made Morgan look down.

Ali's tousled walnut hair stuck to her peachy cheek. Morgan wanted to reach down and kiss it, but that wasn't first-morning behaviour.

"Morning, sunshine." Morgan turned and propped herself up on her elbow. "How you feeling?"

Ali made a noise, then covered her face with her hands. "Embarrassed. Did I make a fool of myself last night?"

Morgan blinked. "From my memory, no. You did a lot of things, but making a fool of yourself wasn't one of them."

"Right."

"You remember last night, yes? I'm not alone in remembering the hot sex?"

Thankfully, Ali smiled. "No, I remember that. I was talking about before. When we were playing games. I think I was asking too many questions of Helen and Jamie."

Morgan shook her head. "They're old enough to cope. Plus, we'd all had wine."

"It seemed a good idea last night."

“It was a good idea.” Morgan gulped, then snagged Ali’s gaze. “I don’t regret what happened one bit.”

Ali’s cheeks flushed. She shook her head. “I don’t, either.”

And then Morgan didn’t care how she came across. She needed a kiss from Ali, and only her lips would do. She leaned down and acted on impulse. Just like that, she was transported back to last night. To how right it felt, to the bliss of getting to know Ali up close and personal. This morning’s kissing mirrored last night. It was too perfect. Also, far too fragile. She wanted to tiptoe around it, but also to show them off to the world.

Moments later, they came up for air, but stayed within striking distance. The only sound their shallow breathing, plus the thud of Morgan’s heartbeat in her chest. If she leaned forward, she bet she’d hear Ali’s heartbeat, too. Was she wondering where this went next?

There was, of course, an easy way to find out. Morgan could just ask. But it wasn’t that easy. ‘Hey, was this just a one-off thing for you, or could you see us repeating?’ Morgan had no idea what this was herself, so it was unfair to ask Ali. Even if she desperately wanted to.

Do not be needy.

Instead, she focused on Ali’s lips. It was so much easier to kiss them, and leave the talking to another time.

Ali had thought so last night, too, when Morgan had asked about her dad.

Sex was always easier than talking.

Morgan ran her fingertips over Ali’s slim waist.

Ali shivered.

Outside, a door slammed.

Ali cleared her throat, but held Morgan’s gaze. Morgan could almost see the thoughts racing through Ali’s mind, because they were racing through hers, too. Even if they both wanted to talk, get answers to their questions, they didn’t have time.

Morgan blinked, then stretched her arms above her head. “I guess we

should get up. It's Christmas Eve, and we need to drive home, hope our luggage arrives, and turn up at our childhood homes before Santa does."

"Do you think we're on the naughty list?" Ali raised a suggestive eyebrow.

"After last night, I certainly hope so."



THE HIRE CAR company called soon after to let them know they'd meet them at Christmas Court at midday. All of which meant they had some time to kill before they had to leave to drop off the bike and pick up the car. Jamie shooed them all out, telling Helen to drive Ali and Morgan to the nearest village to do a spot of last-minute Christmas shopping.

"Are you sure? We've got guests to check out and the rooms to clean."

"It's four rooms. I've done it before. Plus, when do you ever get to spend time with your cousin otherwise?" Jamie flapped his hands at them all. "Go, before I change my mind and have you all cleaning the loos."

That brought a smile to Helen's face. "You heard the man."

They parked the car at the top of the main street, and Ali pulled her mustard scarf tight. She was in clean clothes for the first time in a few days, which felt amazing. She wasn't sure how the chat was going to roll once she was alone in their car with Morgan, but she'd worry about that when she got there. For now, she was going to revel in what was in front of her. And that was a picture-perfect Christmas village.

The main street swept down before them, a blaze of independent local shops selling gifts, plants, clothes and walking gear, along with a variety of pubs, cafes, restaurants and bakeries. The streetlamps were hung with festive lights, the snow cleared and the pavements grittied. However, even with the morning sun low in the milky blue sky, the cold still lingered in the brittle air.

"I want to show you these gorgeous gingerbread houses they do at the

bakery. I always thought gingerbread was for American Christmas movies, but it turns out, rural Cumbria is mad for them too!” Helen walked them over to the bakery, its windows covered in glittery Christmas signage. But what truly drew the eye were the gingerbread houses on display in the window. Not just houses, but also shops, hotels, and even a gingerbread pub.

The pub was named The Rising Sun. Just like hers back home. Ali’s eyes filled up when she saw it. She could still picture her dad behind the bar, even though she knew he wasn’t there anymore.

Morgan pressed her nose to the shop’s glass. “Does that pub sign say what I think it does?”

Ali went to nod, but only smacked her forehead against the glass as she peered too close. She let out a yelp and held her head.

“Are you okay?” Helen asked.

“You should ask the glass that.” Ali gave a wry grin as she took her hand away. Her forehead still smarted. “But it says The Rising Sun, doesn’t it?”

Morgan nodded. “You think it’s a sign?”

“That there are a lot of pubs called The Rising Sun?”

Morgan’s Christmas pudding hat tilted. “That I should buy it for you?”

“What? No, don’t be silly. How would we carry it home?”

“We’re in a car. Did your dad like gingerbread?”

“Hated it.” She was being awkward, but she couldn’t stop herself.

Morgan paused. “What about the rest of your family?”

Ali relented. “They like it.”

“Then I think this is a must-buy. You said it yourself, this Christmas will be a different one for you all. Wouldn’t it be nice to turn up with this?”

Ali rubbed her forehead, then eyed Morgan. She’d been avoiding thinking about going home, but this brought it all back. Where she came from. What had changed. What she was going to have to face. She took a deep breath. Her mum would love it, as would Nicole. Plus, it was brilliantly intricate.

“You were the one who wanted to make a gingerbread house. Now you’re

buying me one?”

“Christmas is all about sharing and giving.” Morgan winked, then disappeared into the bakery. She pointed at the gingerbread pub, and the woman behind the counter gently removed it from the window, then put it in a box.

Beside Ali, Helen tapped the window. “You’re lucky. I was speaking to Laura who runs the bakery yesterday, and they’ve already sold most of these. The pub was the only one still available. Maybe Morgan’s right and it *is* a sign. I forgot that was the name of your pub, too.”

Helen stared at Morgan as she paid, then turned back to Ali. “Are you sure there’s nothing going on between you two? Because I’m definitely picking up a vibe. Plus, you don’t rush into a bakery and buy someone a gingerbread pub if you don’t care for them. Especially when the recipient isn’t the most amenable.”

Ali tried as hard as she could to keep her poker face. “We’re just friends.”

The look Helen gave her told Ali she didn’t believe a word of it. However, for now, Ali wasn’t ready for whatever they were to be public knowledge. Because if she said it aloud to someone else, that made what had happened true. Then, when it inevitably went nowhere, she’d be doubly sad. If she just kept it inside for now, she could manage it. Especially as she had enough to contend with when she got home.

Only now, Morgan stood in front of her, holding out a white cake box with a transparent lid, the gingerbread pub inside.

Ali blinked back tears. What on earth was going on? It was just a stack of biscuits with icing. But Morgan had bought it for her. Morgan knew what the original Rising Sun meant to Ali. Home. Family. Even though that was forever changed, this gingerbread pub was still standing, still making people smile. Just like the real thing.

A lump formed in Ali’s throat. She wasn’t going to get emotional. Not in front of Helen, or in front of Morgan.

Instead, she gave Morgan a tight smile. “Thank you. Mum’s going to love it.”

“And she’ll try to eat it at the first opportunity if I know my aunt,” Helen added.

Ali bit her lip. *Keep it together.*

“Can I have the car keys so I can put this in it? I don’t want to risk it getting broken.”

Helen nodded and handed Morgan the keys. “We’ll either be in the Paddings Gift Shop, or else Jen’s Boutique.”

Morgan took the keys and turned towards the car.

Ali watched her go. Buying her that was a super-sweet gesture. The more time she spent with Morgan Scott, the sweeter she became. Sweet and hot, the very best combination.

She followed Helen’s lead, walking along the pavement as the cold air needled her face. She spied the gift shop up ahead, and they dodged a slew of last-minute shoppers before they went in.

“There’s some great local gin in here I want to buy for Jamie. He loves it,” Helen told her.

The shop sold a mix of clothes, things to eat and drink, and high-end gifts. It was just the sort of place Ali loved. She stopped near the candles and picked up some rosemary and lavender pillars for her sister. If their luggage didn’t make it in time with Ali’s original gifts, Nicole would love these. She grabbed a rich orange cashmere scarf for her mum, and a bottle of expensive olive oil for Nicole’s husband Stuart, who loved to cook. As Morgan said, they had a car that hopefully worked. They should make the most of it.

She headed to the cash desk, but stopped when she saw some gorgeous dark green leather gloves. Morgan. She needed a gift for her, too, and these were just the thing.

A loop of Morgan’s hands running across Ali’s back last night made her zone out. She sank into the moment. Morgan was great with her hands, but

she was severely lacking in accessories for them. Next time she got stranded, Ali was determined Morgan would be fully equipped. She grabbed a basket, put her purchases in, then picked up the gloves: they were as soft as Morgan's backside.

Baby soft.

Ali couldn't help but beam again. She had presents for everyone who was important in her life. Mum, Nicole, Stuart, Morgan. Morgan had made the headline list. She wasn't going to dwell on what that might mean.

"Are you buying the entire shop?" Helen's face appeared by her shoulder.

"Looks like it," Ali replied. "Just in case our luggage doesn't show up. I can't turn up empty-handed, can I? Luckily, Mum already bought my gift for Harrison. Not sure he'd be impressed with a candle and a tea towel of the Lakes."

"I doubt he would." Helen stilled. "Any of those for Morgan?"

Heat rushed to Ali's cheeks. "Just one. I had to buy her something after what she just bought, didn't I?"

Helen gave her a knowing smile. "I'm not sure why you're trying to deny there's something between you. Did something happen before? Like, in the past?"

Ali shook her head. "No. But maybe it could." Damn it, she was terrible at keeping secrets. "She's Nicole's friend, so it's tangled." Even more so after last night, but Helen didn't need to know that.

"Sometimes things get tangled for a reason. Maybe tangled is good. It means she knows what she's getting into, and vice versa. One thing I know from spending time with you both? The feelings are mutual. I could light a match with the chemistry between you."

Ali chewed on that for a second. Had they really been that obvious even before anything happened? What was it Morgan had said in the car? That she wanted to meet someone who she already knew. That she didn't want to meet someone on a dating site, she wanted to do it the old-fashioned way. Ali

wasn't sure a disastrous Christmas trip home counted as old-fashioned, but the two of them did. They'd known each other forever, but never actually stopped and considered what had always been there.

Now, maybe they should?

Ali might, if it wasn't for New York.

"Any of that for me?" Morgan's voice startled both Helen and Ali.

Ali clutched her hand to her chest and shielded the basket. "No, but it would probably be better if you didn't see. Just in case you tell my mum I've bought her a chrome rabbit and spoil the surprise." Ali nodded at Helen. "Why don't you put that bottle on the counter and I'll pay for it as a thank you for everything."

Helen shook her head.

Ali held up a palm. "I don't want any arguments. How about you take Morgan across the road while I pay? See you in the boutique?"

Helen nodded. "If you're sure." Then she put an arm around Morgan and steered her out of the shop.

CHAPTER 22



Morgan gave Helen and Jamie an enormous hug.

“You’ve no idea what your hospitality meant after the 48 hours we had before. I feel like whatever happens on this leg of the journey, we can deal with it now. Particularly since the Nurofen Plus have finally kicked my hangover and I’m ready to roll.”

That got a laugh from everyone.

Ali followed it up with a bear hug for her cousin and Jamie, glancing over Helen’s shoulder at the impressive Christmas Court. Behind the stone castle was the Ferris wheel where her and Morgan’s story had begun, less than 24 hours earlier. Of course, the full story started way before that. You could call them a slow burn. She still couldn’t quite believe they’d only kissed for the first time yesterday. Now, they were back in the car park with their new grey Ford Focus—a carbon copy of the old one, albeit with a working engine.

“I echo everything that Morgan said,” Ali told her cousin. “Staying with you has been a real bright spot on our ill-fated journey.”

“You’re welcome anytime. Both of you.” Helen sent a pointed stare in Ali’s direction. “We’re not that far if your transport works.”

They waved until their hosts were out of sight, then got into their new hire car. This afternoon, the sky was overcast, with the sun breaking through intermittently. It was a vast improvement on the last few days. Critically,

there was no snow forecast.

“They have to be one of the most welcoming couples I’ve ever met. If I could meet a partner like Jamie, but female, that would be perfect. Someone who’s funny, charming and cooks like a dream.” Morgan glanced Ali’s way. “What are you like in the kitchen?”

Ali wanted to melt into her seat.

“I make a mean tortilla.” Her stomach lurched. The words ‘New York’ flashed in her mind.

“Tortilla is a good start.”

Ali’s phone buzzed in its holder before Morgan could say anymore. She’d never been more relieved.

She leaned in, pressed a few buttons, then clenched her fist in triumph. “Our luggage is due to land at Exeter airport this afternoon and will be ready to pick up between 4-7pm.”

Morgan leaned forward and keyed in the details to their sat nav. “It’s 12:15, and sat nav reckons it’ll take five and a half hours to get to the airport. What are the chances?”

“We’re going to make it. I need my case.” Ali adjusted her seat, then her mirrors. “Only essential loo breaks, otherwise we’ll just drive. Then another hour to get home after that.”

“So long as we don’t break down again.”

“Don’t jinx it!”

“You think this trip isn’t already jinxed?”

“Fair point.” Ali smiled, then settled her hands on the steering wheel. She nodded to the imposing main building on their right. “This is where it all began. The Ferris wheel. The snow. That kiss.” Ali paused. “I know it’s been a clusterfuck of bad luck, but there’s been some good, too, wouldn’t you say? Plus, I might not be Christmas-crazy like your family, but I’ve always loved Christmas Eve. A time when anything is possible. I think this Christmas Eve is living up to that billing, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” Morgan licked her lips.

Ali reached out and put a hand on Morgan’s thigh.

Morgan trembled under her touch.

As amazing as that felt, she knew they had to talk. That she had to tell her. Morgan had bought her a gingerbread pub and nearly made her cry, after all.

“But while I love your nostalgia, I’m hoping one of those possibilities is that we can get home today. You think we can give it a go?” She brought Ali’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “I’ve no idea if that’s allowed, but I just did it. Shall we see if we can find some festive songs on the radio and style out the awkwardness?” She gave Ali a shy smile.

In response, and even though her mind screamed at her to stop, Ali leaned over and planted a smacker on Morgan’s lips. So quick and so sure, it was almost like it didn’t happen.

But Ali’s body knew. She sucked in an unsteady breath before she dared to look Morgan’s way.

“There are many things I find awkward, but kissing you isn’t one of them.”

Way to go muddying the playing field, Ali.

She tapped the furry festive dice, rescued from the old car, and started the engine. “Let’s go home, shall we?”



ALI CUT the engine and unclicked her seat belt. Her tongue felt furry and her eyes tired. They’d made it to the airport in five and a half hours, just like the sat nav promised. Incredibly, traffic had been light, and they’d amused themselves with the radio and a little light chat. But nothing heavy. No mention of last night, of her dad, of their future. The weight of the unspoken hovered in the air, but they both skilfully avoided it. Morgan had even slept

through some of their journey, while Ali had run through every ending they might have. None of them came out with the word 'happy' stamped on the front. 'Wrong place, wrong time' was the verdict in all of her disappointing day dreams.

But for now, with transport on their trip finally working, she was going to put a brave face on it. They just had to collect their luggage and get home. Then she'd deal with whatever came her way. One hour at a time.

"Everything okay?" Morgan's gentle, concerned voice broke into her thoughts.

Ali blinked, then nodded. "All fine." She stared at Morgan, gulped, then got out of the car.

A gust of icy wind whipped through her. She shivered and got her duffel coat and scarf from the backseat. She waited for Morgan to get her coat before they both scuttled to the terminal. Once inside, they stamped their feet as if shaking off the cold. It wasn't snowing like it had been up north, but it was still the kind of cold that burrowed into your bones. Ali glanced around and located the luggage desk in seconds.

The bloke behind the counter was dressed in what looked like his school uniform. He scowled when they approached. It was 6pm on Christmas Eve. He probably wasn't best pleased to be at work. "Can I help?" His accent was pure Devon, and immediately made Ali relax. She knew this place. Despite not living here anymore, it was still home.

"We're picking up our cases from the delayed Glasgow flight. Loganair LM4015?" She tried to put as much pep in her speech as possible to show the man she appreciated him still being here at six o'clock on Christmas Eve.

"You're lucky. I was just about to close up and go home." He eyed them over his glasses. "Do you want to come and identify your luggage?"

They followed him through and immediately saw their cases. Relief swept through Ali. Maybe things on this trip had turned a corner.

"You've both got the same case?"

Ali nodded. "We do."

"Two-for-one deal?" He gave Ali a knowing smile.

Did he think they were a couple too, just like Helen and Jamie? It seemed like everyone did bar them.

Morgan's cheeks were red as they wheeled their suitcases back onto the main concourse.

Ali headed back the way they came, towards the main door. An elderly man walked by with his trolley, and she stopped to let him through. When he looked up, his face broke into a broad smile.

"It's you! My Devon travellers. You weren't on the plane. How did you get here?" It was the man from the plane. His broad Glaswegian accent coated the air like honey.

That made Ali smile as well. Devon might be home, but so was Glasgow. He still looked like the sort of man who might star in a Werther's commercial, and then sit on the porch with a glass of sherry. Very unlike her granddad, who was far more at home sipping pint after pint of wine.

Morgan stepped forward, a smile on her face. "Good to see you again. Did you say you were on the plane? Were you in Glasgow all that time?"

"I was," he continued. "They offered to put me up in a hotel, but I went home instead. Two-day delay, but I got here eventually. Although my daughter's car isn't working, and there are no taxis would you believe, so I've hired a car with a sat nav. My daughter says it's easy to work, but she would, wouldn't she?" He gave them a broad smile, then pulled his grey scarf tighter around his neck. "Just bracing myself for the cold."

They could have just stayed in Glasgow. Ali had to laugh. Although, if they'd stayed in Glasgow, they'd have missed out on so much. Getting reacquainted with each other. Having an adventure. Riding a bicycle made for two in a snowstorm. Ali glanced at Morgan, and she could see a smile at the edges of her mouth, too. She was glad they'd done it the hard way. Because it had led to them, and the past 24 hours. Whatever happened next,

that had been worth it.

“Where are you headed?” Ali asked.

“She lives in a place called Dartmouth.”

Morgan put a hand to her face. “That’s where we’re going. We could have given you a lift. You’ve already hired your car?”

The man nodded. “Bought and paid for. I don’t mind, it’ll give me a bit of independence when I’m there. My daughter seems to think now I’m 70 I need to be treated with kid gloves.” He leaned forward. “Spoiler alert: I don’t.” He grinned at them. “Anyway, I better go. I want to get there before it snows again. It was lovely to see you both.” He put a hand to his chest. “I’m Walt, by the way.”

“If you’re in Dartmouth, pop by The Rising Sun for a drink. It’s my family’s pub.” Ali gave him a grin.

“I might just do that. Especially now I can drive wherever I want.” He gripped his trolley. “You both have a lovely Christmas.” He tilted his head. “You make a great couple, if you don’t mind me saying. My daughter’s partner is a woman, and they’ve got a couple of smashing kids too. I was together with my wife for 45 years and I loved every minute. I carry on living well on her behalf, but I’d give it all up to have more time with her. You’ve both got time, so make the most of it.” He leaned over and patted Ali on the arm. “But now it’s my time to do battle with a sat nav.”

Ali watched him go in silence. It wasn’t until Walt was out of sight that she turned to Morgan.

Her face was pensive.

“How come everyone we meet thinks we’re a couple? Do we scream ‘couple’?”

Morgan ran a hand through her blonde hair. “Apparently, we do.” She paused. “Do we need to have a chat about that?”

Ali nodded.

It was time.

CHAPTER 23



Morgan lifted both suitcases into the boot, shrugged off her coat, then threw herself into the front seat. She rubbed her hands together and blew on them. Still cold. She glanced over at Ali.

The frost wasn't just in the air. It was in this car, too. Morgan had a foreboding feeling about whatever it was Ali was about to tell her.

Ali started the engine, then cut it. She unclicked her seat belt and turned to Morgan.

Morgan took a breath, then mirrored her movement.

“Why do I get the feeling you don't feel the same as everyone else about how we should move forward with whatever this is?” She moved her hand between them as she finished her sentence.

Ali licked her lips, then sighed. “It's not for the reasons you think.”

Morgan waited for her to say more. Outside, it started to snow again. It had been the soundtrack to their journey from the start.

“There's something I haven't told you about me.”

Morgan's stomach sank. She gripped the sides of the seat and braced. “You've got a girlfriend? A wife? Three children?” She tried to say it as lightly as she could, but it wasn't how she was feeling. Darts of pain sank into her brain as a carousel of scenarios played out in her head. Not one of them good.

Luckily, her words brought a smile to Ali's face, and she shook her head.
"No, I am one hundred per cent single. Available."

"Phew."

"But."

"I was waiting for the but."

"I'm leaving the country in three weeks."

A punch in the gut. She hadn't been expecting that.

"I got a work placement in New York. Six months to start, but then it might go longer. It depends on the job, but also on me. I wanted to shake things up. I arranged it before my dad died. After he did, I tried to bail, but Mum didn't want me to stop doing what I wanted just because of that. She didn't realise what a shit daughter I was going to be in the interim, never going home, but that's another story." Ali exhaled. "Which is why, when it comes to us being a couple—and I've no idea if that's what you want—I don't know how it might work. And I'm really sorry about that, just for the record."

Disappointment anchored itself in Morgan's stomach. "But you're coming back eventually?"

"Yes, but I don't know when that will be." Ali leaned forward and peered out the window. The snow was getting heavier. "Shall we get going?"

Morgan nodded and tried not to stare at Ali's fingers as they gripped the wheel. The same fingers that had gripped her last night. The ones she'd hoped might do so again. But now, she learned it might be a one and done. Something bubbled up inside her and her eyes stung. She blinked.

Fuck, she would not cry.

She took a deep breath and looked away from Ali.

One night. If that was all this was, so be it. She wasn't going to come across as a loser. She had to be cool. She could totally do that.

"I'm not going to pretend I'm not disappointed." Morgan's voice cracked on the final word. She cleared her throat and composed herself.

Ali kept her eyes on the road as they made their way out of the airport and onto the road home.

“Because it feels like we could be something. We both live in Glasgow. We like each other. We’re very good at kissing. We’re even better at sex.”

Ali let out a strangled laugh as she guided them off a roundabout and past a sign that told them they were 32 miles from home. “I can’t argue with that. We were all those things.”

“Is it because of who I am? Because if it is, Nicole will get over it. Don’t believe a word of what she tells you, by the way. I was only terrible to the men I went out with. I’m far nicer to women.”

“Good to know, but it’s nothing to do with that.” She glanced Morgan’s way.

Morgan heated from the inside out.

“I’ve had a thing for you for longer than I care to remember. Nothing Nicole might think would deter me from seeing where this goes if it was an option. But it’s not.” Ali shook her head. “And before you say we could make it work, we can’t. New relationships need care and attention. We can’t do that if we’re thousands of miles apart. Believe me when I say I would love to see where this goes, but I don’t want to ruin it before it’s even begun. This is just a case of right place, wrong time.”

Morgan’s insides twisted once, twice, three times. There had to be a way around this. She didn’t want this to be the end. It was really just the beginning. But even as she thought that, she knew what Ali said was right. If she was leaving the country, it wasn’t fair to put ties on either of them.

“I could come and see you. I might even wait for you. It might work. Is this you being glass half empty again?”

Ali turned her head. Her smile was so sad. “This is me being a pragmatist, which I always claimed to be. It’s in my DNA. It’s what developers do. However, my teenage self is gagging right now. Morgan Scott is saying she’ll wait for me, like we’re in a fucking Austen novel and the wind is whipping

round my ears—

“Will snow do?”

“—and I’m telling her no.” Ali snorted at her own words.

“What if I want to wait?” Did that sound desperate? Probably.

But Ali shook her head. “There are too many obstacles, too many things standing in our way. Let’s just call this what it was. What it *is*. A glorious, ridiculous, crazy adventure. We got to see each other in the worst of circumstances. We laughed, we cried, we kissed, we had off-the-scale sex. But it was just for now. Something we can look back on and smile. I don’t want things to be awkward with us in the future. I want you to come into the pub next Christmas and have a drink with me.”

The traffic up ahead made them slow until eventually, they came to a standstill.

Morgan ground her teeth together. She hoped the traffic wasn’t a huge issue. Unlike the one Ali had just unfurled in the car. She couldn’t imagine having a drink with her in the pub next year. Unless she sat in the corner, crying into her beer.

The air in the car grew tense, despite them trying to keep it light. Morgan would remonstrate more if Ali wasn’t driving. Maybe she’d planned it this way.

“There’s really nothing I can say to convince you? I at least think it’s worth giving some thought. Not simply chucking it out right away.” Now she definitely sounded desperate.

Ali pulled up at some traffic lights. She reached over, took Morgan’s hand in hers, brought it to her mouth, and kissed her knuckles.

The effect made Morgan close her eyes. It transported her back to Ali doing exactly the same thing to her last night. It really wasn’t helpful.

“If this was last year, I’d be asking what you were doing for New Year and beyond. But I’m just trying to make it as painless as possible for us both up front.” She kissed her hand again, then put it back in Morgan’s lap. Ali

eased the car forward as the lights went green.

“It doesn’t feel that painless to me.” Morgan’s shoulders slumped as she spoke.

Ali nodded, never taking her eyes from the road. “If it helps, it doesn’t for me, either.”



AN HOUR and 15 minutes later, they finally pulled up outside Morgan’s family home, the same one she’d grown up in. Plus, true to form, you could probably spot the house from outer space.

“Is that a full Santa and six reindeer all lit up on your roof?” Ali peered out of the window. When she couldn’t quite see the whole thing, she undid her seat belt and clicked the button to lower the window. “Wow, it really is.” Her breath stained the nearby air.

Morgan saw their house through Ali’s eyes, someone who wasn’t expecting it. Every piece of greenery in the garden was lit with fairy lights. The black iron railings were strung with huge lit candy canes. Plus, there was a giant inflatable snowman in the front garden.

“It’s not subtle, is it?” Morgan laughed, then glanced out the window around their close. All the houses were similarly festooned. “It’s a neighbourhood thing. They all spur each other on, and every time I come back, there’s something different to admire.” She pointed at the roof. “Santa and his reindeer only arrived two years ago.”

“They make it. Tell your parents good call.”

The car was quiet for a few moments.

Morgan turned to Ali. “I guess this is where we say goodbye.”

Ali nodded but wouldn’t meet her eyes. “I think it is. We’re already late back. We need to spend time with our respective families.”

Morgan gulped, then sucked on her top lip. “We do. I have a gingerbread

house to decorate and a phone to pick up. I need to know what I've missed in the past 48 hours I've been without it."

"So much," Ali replied. "The world of communications has blown up without you."

"I sense some sarcasm." Morgan smiled, then held Ali's stare.

Their gazes danced in the air between them, and the car grew warm. There was so much to say, and they both knew it. However, Morgan didn't know where to start. All she knew was she wanted to spend more time with Ali when they weren't in a crisis. To see where this might go. But Ali had already made her feelings clear.

"There's nothing I can say to change your mind? You won't at least consider another option? Because they could be on the table."

Ali closed her eyes, sighed, then massaged the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger. "It's for the best. I don't want you waiting for me for a year. What if I meet someone and then I feel guilty? What if you do?"

"Because that happens all the time in my normal life. Women just throwing themselves at me on the street."

"You might meet the love of your life on New Year's Eve this year. You never know."

"Then again, I might not." Morgan's brain pulsed as she shuffled her thoughts, trying to get them in order. But she'd make a terrible croupier. Her thoughts refused to be ordered, instead lying on the floor of her mind and refusing to budge.

She took a deep breath and made a final plea. "What about if this is the moment we're meant to grasp? What if we've met each other and got together en route home for a reason? We could have been like Walt, gone home and been none the wiser. Maybe this is the change we're meant to notice and act on."

But Ali either didn't want to hear what Morgan had to say, or she wasn't ready. She shook her head before Morgan had even finished speaking.

“If it is, then fate will play out how it’s meant to. But I can’t start on my new adventure with conditions. It’s not what my dad would have wanted. He wanted me to travel and see the world, because he never did. I’ve got to honour his wishes and not get tied down.”

Morgan was about to point out she never wanted to tie Ali down, but then she thought better of it. This wasn’t just about Ali’s new start. This was about her dad, too. From the little Morgan had gleaned on this trip, Ali hadn’t dealt with his death yet. Which meant Morgan had to tread carefully.

Ali wasn’t going to listen tonight. She’d made up her mind, and she wasn’t going to bend. But maybe tomorrow. Or the next day.

Morgan would keep trying.

This wasn’t over.

“Will I see you for a drink at least one day? It seems weird if this is it.”

Ali’s smile that greeted those words was at least genuine. “I hope so. Come into the pub. We’re not open tomorrow as you know. Tonight and tomorrow, I need to spend some time with my mum. But Boxing Day, let’s have a drink.” She let out a heavy sigh, and finally let her gaze settle on Morgan.

All the blood inside Morgan rushed south, and her vision swayed. Ali had that effect on her.

“I’m going to miss being in a mess with you.” Ali’s smile was soft and sincere.

“I’m going to miss *you*,” Morgan replied. Then she winced and shook her head. It was the truth, but it wasn’t what Ali wanted to hear today. She held up a hand. “Sorry, it just slipped out.” She paused. “I take it you’re not going to say anything to Nicole? What happened on the road stays on the road?”

Ali smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I think so. It makes everything easier, doesn’t it?”

Morgan swallowed down the flash of anxiety that flared inside. “Whatever you want.” She flicked her thumb to the boot. “I’ll get my case

and you can get home.”

She tore her eyes away from Ali’s beautiful face, then got out of the car and stretched, her back clicking after so long in one place. She grabbed her backpack from the backseat and slid into her coat, the chill acute in the country air. Up above, the stars twinkled in the village darkness. She’d always loved that about living here, not in the city. The stars always brought her home.

When she reached the boot, Ali was waiting. She pulled it open, checked the luggage tags, and got out Morgan’s case. “Can you believe we bought the same case from the same place?”

Morgan shook her head. “Excellent taste, clearly.”

“I’d say so, wouldn’t you?”

Ali held her gaze, and it took everything Morgan had not to sweep Ali into her arms and kiss her into next week. But that wasn’t on the cards. She’d forgotten this part of meeting someone and getting to know them. The not knowing. The stomach-churning uncertainty. Especially when the significant other was moving thousands of miles away imminently.

“Morgan, I—” Ali began.

“There you are!”

Morgan blinked, then turned to see her mum walking towards them.

Something flashed across Ali’s face, and she stepped back.

Really, Mother? Now?

Morgan slipped on her exaggerated smile, when really she wanted to bundle her mum back into the house, lock the door and then rush back to let Ali finish her sentence. What had she been about to say? Morgan would never know.

“You’re later than you said you’d be. I’ve been looking out the window waiting for you.” She reached Morgan and pulled her into a hug.

Morgan went with it, her mind a blur of emotions.

She’d forgive her mum. Eventually.

Her mum kissed her cheek, then let her go.

“And Ali, how are you?” Now it was Ali’s turn for a hug.

Her mum was terrible at reading a room.

“What a palaver you’ve had getting home, eh? Such good luck you found each other and could do it together.” Her mum pulled her cardigan close. Her dyed golden hair was shaped into its usual bob. She often got mistaken for a younger version of ex-tennis pro and TV presenter Sue Barker when they went shopping. Usually in Sainsbury’s.

“It definitely was, considering the time it took.” Ali turned on her high-beam smile.

Its glare dazzled Morgan.

“But Morgan and I made the most of it, didn’t we?”

“It was an adventure,” Morgan agreed. “An illuminating adventure.” There was so much more to say. Maybe she’d finally find what she wanted to say on Boxing Day.

“I better get going,” Ali said. “I’ll see you around?”

Morgan nodded. “You will.”

“Say hello to your family, won’t you?” Morgan’s mum told Ali.

Then, just like that, Ali got in the car and drove away.

Morgan felt like she’d lost a limb, but she couldn’t tell her mum. However, watching the red lights of the car fade and turn the corner, Morgan wanted to run after it. Tell Ali to stop and come back. To rethink everything she’d said. To stop and see what was right in front of them. A seed of something that could be pure fried gold.

Her mum’s arm wound around Morgan’s shoulder as they headed back to the house.

Morgan grabbed her suitcase with the other hand, and the wheels rattled along the ground, breaking the neighbourhood’s silence.

“Thank goodness you made it home for Christmas Day.”

“Sorry I missed Dad’s play. How was it?”

“Terrific. Not a single one of those kids fluffed their lines, and nobody threw up in the wings like the past two years. Truly a Christmas miracle. Don’t worry, you can watch the video. Plus, I made sure Annabel saved you the gingerbread house roof to decorate.”

Morgan thought of the gingerbread pub on the backseat of their hire car. She couldn’t hope to do it as well as that, but she’d try her best.

Had she tried her best to tell Ali what she was feeling?

No.

But she would.

CHAPTER 24



Ali parked the car in the street round the back of the pub, but sat for a few moments before going in. Leaving Morgan and being strong about their future had been hard, but necessary. She couldn't go to New York and start afresh with a girlfriend in tow. That wasn't the deal she'd made with herself.

Even if that girlfriend was Morgan Scott.

Could she?

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Coming home was all about reconnecting with her family, and already Morgan had impacted that promise. She didn't want that to happen. She was going to be strong and focus on being present with her mum and her sister and everyone else. She was going to talk about her dad, and be in the space where he used to be. She wasn't going to moon over Morgan.

In fact, if there was one thing Morgan had taught her, it was how to be excited about coming home for Christmas and spending time with her family. Ali should be, too. However, it didn't stop the nerves creeping up her spine as she stared at the back of the pub. At their adjoining house, and her parents' bedroom, now just her mum's. She had to get over it. The only way to do that was to step inside the pub and say hi to her family and friends.

Ali unclicked her seat belt, then checked her hair in the mirror. The bags under her eyes weren't a surprise after the past two days. She smoothed them

upwards and smiled at her reflection. Because even though she was tired, she couldn't deny Morgan had put a smile on her face. Their night of passion still pulsed in her veins. It had given Ali a tantalising taste of what might be available if she met someone when it was the right place, right time. Morgan had shown her what she was missing. Once she was settled in New York, maybe she'd meet someone out there who made her feel the same.

Or maybe she'd come home and meet Morgan. Was it only Ali who'd wanted to push Morgan into the toilets and fuck her in a cubicle when they'd stopped for a loo break at Keele Services on the M6?

She closed her eyes. That was not for now. Today's mission was to get back into the bosom of her family. At least, what was left of it.

Tears welled inside, but Ali clamped them down. She would cry this holiday, she knew that. But she didn't want to arrive with red eyes. There had been enough of that last time she was here. This was a new day, and Ali was going to present her best self. Her real self. The self she'd been daring to think about again ever since Morgan had tapped her awake. Had made her think there could be a happy life again in her future.

Ali blinked. Morgan again? It had only been three days and one steamy, incredible night. Why couldn't she get her out of her head?

She snapped the mirror back to the car roof, then got out. Ali shivered as the cold air hit her. Then she grabbed her coat and paused, a hand over the gingerbread pub. Should she take that first, or her case? For maximum impact, she chose the gingerbread pub. She didn't have a front door key, so she'd have to walk through the main bar while carrying this piece of art. She glanced down at The Rising Sun sign on the biscuit pub, then up to the real-life one. She tipped her gaze to the sky.

"This one's for you, Dad."

Ali pushed open the wrought-iron gate and stepped carefully down the six large steps into the pub garden. Even though it was December, there was still a smattering of smokers and drinkers. One couple near the door were already

slamming tequila shots, and it wasn't even 7.30pm. The Rising Sun was fitted out with many gas heaters, a huge stretch tent to keep the warm air in and the cold air out, along with bunting, flowers and fairy lights. Plus, now it was Christmas, there was a life-size Santa at the door to the pub, along with mistletoe and paper snowflakes suspended all around. Ali couldn't help but smile.

She missed this place.

She missed home.

She pushed open the side door with her bum. The warmth hit her like a brick. She breathed in the scene of fake pine trees and smiled. It was a far cry from Dave and his Christmas tree farm. Inside, the bar was packed, and the atmosphere crackled with festive cheer. Anticipation leapt from everyone as they contemplated the next day, and those to come. It was the Christmas Eve magic she'd told Morgan about. A time of hope, the calm before the Christmas storm. Before you burned your turkey and had a row with your sibling, before you opened the disappointing present and drank too much port. A time when Santa really might turn up with exactly what you wanted.

She glanced down at the gingerbread pub. Her mum might not know she wanted this, but she would when she saw it.

Ali nudged her way carefully through the busy pub, the volume turned up high. When she reached the L-shaped bar, she slipped behind it. It only took a few seconds for her sister to spot her. When she did, Nicole's mouth turned into a huge, all-encompassing smile and she let out a little scream. Her sister was dressed in mind-bending pink, as usual. Her spirit animal was a prawn.

"You made it!" Nicole finished topping up a pint of Guinness, took the payment, then walked over and wrapped her arms around Ali.

A flush of love worked its way from Ali's toes to the tips of her fingers.

Yes, she'd missed this. Now she was here, she wondered why she'd stayed away so long. She was an idiot. Her dad might not be here, but the rest of her family was. She had a lot of time to make up for. Starting now, as she

hugged her sister hard.

When she came up for air, Nicole gave Ali's cheek a squeeze.

Ali even excused that.

For now.

Then Nicole moved her head sideways, her gold hoop earrings glinting under the pub lights. She peered into the white box Ali had set on the bar just before she was crushed. "What's that?" she asked, moving closer and lifting the lid. "Oh my days, it's a gingerbread Rising Sun. Where the hell did you get this?"

Ali grinned, but the truth died on her lips. *Morgan bought it for me.* She couldn't say that, could she? That would admit too much. To herself, if to nobody else.

"I got it up north, in Helen's village. A bakery made it. Isn't it perfect?"

Nicole stuck her head in the box now, inspecting it fully. "It's absolutely perfect. Mum's going to love it."

Ali looked down the bar, but could only see Sheryl and Brian serving. "Talking of, where is Mum?"

"Talking to customers somewhere. She was here a minute ago." Nicole grinned, then pointed. "And now she's behind you!"

Ali swivelled, and in moments, her mum deposited a leaning tower of pint glasses on the bar, then took her youngest daughter into her arms. She squeezed Ali until she could squeeze no more, before moving her out to arm's length. "My littlest daughter. You made it! Where's Morgan? Did she go home?"

The mere mention of Morgan's name made Ali's stomach churn. "She did. She's with her family, and I'm with mine." Her tone was light, like it didn't matter.

She ignored the way her heart flip-flopped when Morgan's name sat on her lips. That was an inconvenient truth.

"What are you doing out collecting glasses? I thought you had staff to do

that?” Ali asked.

At 60, though many of her friends had retired, her mum refused to do the same. “Working keeps me young,” she always said, even before Dad’s untimely death. “What would I do otherwise? Watch TV and wither?” Ali could never imagine that happening. Her mum was far too full of life. She was also slathered with fake tan, her skin tone the same colour as a blood orange. Nicole had warned Ali, but seeing was believing.

Mum laughed, then moved her silver-framed glasses up her nose. She was shorter than her two daughters. They’d both gained a few inches from their dad. “They need to be collected, so what’s the harm?” Her eyes fell on the box. “What’s that?”

Ali’s heart pumped that bit faster as she picked it up and held it up to her mum. “I got it in the Lakes. It’s a gingerbread Rising Sun.”

Her mum’s eyes widened as she flipped the lid, then gazed at the model. “It’s incredible. It even has tiny iced people and lights in the window!”

“And snow on the roof, like a proper Christmas fairy tale. Maybe that will happen on Christmas Day too. It never normally does, but this year feels different,” Nicole added.

“It always did when you were little and your dad was alive.” Mum glanced at Ali, then Nicole. “Maybe if he’s up there looking down on us, he’ll send some down for Christmas morning.”

Ali’s skin prickled at the thought. She didn’t believe in the afterlife, nor that her dad was floating somewhere up above. But she’d glanced to the sky earlier when she arrived, and she did it again now. If it helped them all to think he was watching over them, there was no harm at all.

“He’d have hated the gingerbread pub though, wouldn’t he?” Ali said.

Her mum laughed, then squeezed her arm. “He’d have loved the craft of it, but he wouldn’t have eaten it for love nor money. Which is why it’s perfect for us. I love it.” She kissed Ali’s cheek. “We should let everyone else see it, too.” She carefully lifted it out of the box. “Nic, grab one of those

wooden boards from the back. I want to show this off.”

Moments later, the gingerbread Rising Sun was on the end of the bar, and getting the attention it deserved.

Nicole leaned into Ali. “I’m not sure I want to eat it after the whole pub has breathed on it, but it looks amazing.” She nodded towards their mum, chatting with customers about it. “Look how proud and pleased she is. You did good, little sis.”

Morgan did.

“It’s about time, isn’t it?”



A WHILE LATER, Ali’s suitcase was safely upstairs and she sat with Nicole at the end of the bar, both nursing half a cider. Mum insisted they take a break after Ali stepped in to help with a drinks rush. She’d then disappeared into the garden, handing out candy canes as Christmas treats. She took her responsibility as the landlady seriously. Plus, candy canes at Christmas were a pub tradition. Mum was determined to keep those up, even with Dad gone. Ali had forgotten to tell Morgan about that tradition, hadn’t she? Maybe her family had more of them than she realised.

“How’s she been? First Christmas without Dad?” Ali still had her Christmas jumper on. It seemed fitting in the pub.

Nicole pondered the question. “Okay. I think the pub has been a great constant. I wondered if it might be too much for her to do on her own, but she’s risen to the challenge. She’s always liked to keep busy, so it suits her. She misses Dad, but we talk about him and I’ve insisted she take time off. Brian has been terrific, too, really stepping up and sharing the load.” Brian had been full time for a few years. When Dad died and Mum needed some time, Nicole promoted him to pub manager.

“Sounds like I’m the one who hasn’t dealt with things.” Ali gave her

sister a sad smile as the truth escaped from her lips.

Nicole shook her head. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. Live your life, just like we all do. But our lives are here, which means we can’t avoid dealing with Dad’s death. This pub is where he always was.” She paused, then shook her head. “Where he *still* is. It’s probably strange for you, first time back, right?”

Ali glanced around the space. On a nearby wall were photos of customers through the years. Her dad holding aloft a darts trophy the pub team had won. The huge painting of a rising sun expertly done by one of their old regulars. She shook her head. “I think I’ve built it up in my head to be bigger than it is. But when I stepped into the garden, it felt like home.”

“That’s because it is, stupid.” Nicole nudged her shoulder.

“You know what I mean. I wondered if it would feel the same without Dad. But it does, because you’re all still here.” Why hadn’t she realised this before? “I’m sorry I haven’t been back. I’ve left you to deal with everything.”

Nicole shook her head, then put an arm around Ali and kissed her cheek. “It’s what big sisters are for. You’re here now, and that’s the main thing. Although I was wondering if the whole issue with getting home was another ruse not to come. That you’d be spending Christmas in the Lakes with Morgan and Helen.” She paused. “Talking of which, how was that? How the hell did you and Morgan end up travelling together? Helen called earlier to see if you were back yet. She said it was lovely to see you, and that she really liked Morgan.”

Ali blushed, not daring to hold Nicole’s gaze for fear she’d see right through her. To the truth that she’d slept with Morgan. That she liked her.

It didn’t matter anymore.

But the question now flashing at the forefront of her mind was, had Helen said anything? Ali curled her toes in her shoes. She’d love to ask, but that would only tell Nicole everything she needed to know. Instead, she stayed calm and answered Nicole’s question.

“It was just one of those strange coincidences. We were on the same flight that got cancelled, from there we shared a car journey together with Mrs Claus...”

“Mrs Claus?”

Ali laughed, remembering Imogen and Sam. The face of romance and hope. Was she the opposite? Morgan had accused her of being glass half empty.

Was that true?

“It’s a long story.” Ali waved her hand. “One that if I said it out loud, you’d struggle to believe. Anyway, we travelled together after we got stranded at some middle-of-nowhere services after Mrs Claus bugged off.” She shivered as she recalled the snowstorm. “But in the end, I’m glad we did.” She paused. “Plus, it was nice getting to know Morgan.”

Nicole tilted her head and narrowed her gaze.

Was it Ali’s imagination, or did her sister seem like she could read Ali’s mind?

“It’s just, you know, weird,” Nicole added. “My sister and my oldest friend. Together.”

“We’re not *together*. I mean, not *together together*.”

Ali’s words stumbled out of her mouth like terrible drunks. They’d witnessed a few in this pub. “We were obviously *together* as in we were travelling home with each other.”

Her stomach twisted as she prepared for the inevitable reaction.

Or perhaps Nicole would let it slide.

“I didn’t mean you were *together*.” Nicole gave her a confused look. “Unless I’m missing something here?”

Or perhaps she wouldn’t.

Her sister moved her bottom jaw from side to side, then rested her chin on her palm, elbow on the bar. Her conker-brown gaze didn’t move from Ali. “Tell me, darling sister, whose cheeks are going redder by the second. Did

something happen between you and Morgan on this trip home? Mum mentioned it, but I waved it off. I told her you wouldn't be that obvious. Two lesbians, stranded, obviously they're going to have sex, right?" She raised a single, pencil-thin eyebrow in Ali's direction. Her sister always over-plucked. "Was I wrong to defend you?"

"It wasn't like that. We just enjoyed each other's company. Despite the issues, we had fun."

Fun? Fun was an impromptu afternoon in a pub on the river. A gig where you knew more songs than you thought. It was not three days trying to get home with your first love and then sleeping with her.

Or maybe Ali's definition of fun had suddenly changed.

Still Nicole stared. "Now I know something's up. 'We enjoyed each other's company'. When you talk like a BBC presenter from the 1970s, Houston, we have a problem."

Ali pulled out her 'don't be so ridiculous!' face, then shook her head. "Nothing happened." The lie burned her throat. "I just got to know her a little better, and I realised that I've probably never had a proper conversation with her in my whole life until the past few days—"

"It's like you're rambling to cover something up."

"I'm not!" Just like that, they were quarrelling teenagers again. But even Ali knew her cheeks were the colour of deceit. The warmth she felt could probably power the pub. At the very least, boil a kettle.

Nicole leaned so close, her breath tickled Ali's face. "I remember the crush you had on her when you were younger. These things don't just go away."

Ali almost stopped breathing. "You knew about that?" She'd never breathed a word to anyone apart from Tobias. Those long, hot, tortured years were ones she thought she'd endured alone. Now, apparently, she'd had an audience. Which only made it ten times worse.

But not as bad as telling Morgan they didn't have a future.

Glass half empty.

“How did you know?”

“I’ve got eyes,” Nicole said. “That, and you were always tongue-tied around her. Always clumsy. I hope these past few days have cured you of that, at least. I know Morgan and I don’t see each other much anymore, but I still have a lot of time for her.” She pressed the tip of her index finger to Ali’s forearm. “Just so you know, if anything happened, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. I love Morgan and I love you. Although Morgan was a bit of a player back in the day, and leopards don’t usually change their spots.”

“Leopards might not, but maybe lesbians do.” She was defending Morgan now. Not the smartest move. Time to course-correct. “But that’s beside the point. Nothing—”

“—happened, I know. But I wanted to let you know, just in case anything changes.” Nicole kissed her cheek, then gave her a wink.

How could her older sister be so lovely, and yet so annoying all at the same time?

“Oh my god, look at this dinky gingerbread pub!” A woman who’d clearly had far too much to drink stuck her hand out to touch it, but Nicole jumped in.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it? I’m going to move it behind the bar for its own safety. I’d like The Rising Suns—both of them—to still be here on Christmas morning.” Nicole disappeared with it, then came back right away. A crush at this end of the bar meant they were back on duty.

Ali rolled up the sleeves of her top and served an older couple a pint and a half of lager. She took their payment, jingling as she moved, then stabbed the receipt onto the metal pin. When she turned back to the bar, she took a deep breath.

Because there, on the other side, looking just as delicious as when she’d left her, was Morgan Scott.

CHAPTER 25



*I*t wasn't the first time Morgan had seen Ali behind the bar, but it was the first time she'd done so since they'd had sex. Now, everything about Ali was different. She noticed the flex of her forearm when she reached for a glass overhead. The way her fingers wrapped around said glass. Her easy smile to the customer.

It was nothing like the suggestive smile Ali had given Morgan just before she kissed her lips. Or the way Ali had wrapped her fingers around Morgan's neck before she slipped her tongue into her mouth. The jolt of that memory made Morgan slide into a temporary trance where Ali was surrounded by a ray of light. Right up until the bald man to her right elbowed her in the neck as he tried to muscle his way to the bar.

"Hey!" Morgan turned to the bloke.

"Sorry love," he said, clearly not sorry at all.

When she looked back up at the bar, Ali's eyes were on her, a mix of confusion and something else on her face. That was fair enough. Ali had told her nothing could happen. They'd agreed not to see each other until Boxing Day. Now, here she was.

Ali gave her a small wave as she poured two pints of Moretti for the woman at the bar. When the woman paid and left with her drinks—coming perilously close to dumping half of one down the front of Morgan—Morgan

squeezed to the front.

“Did you forget something?”

Many answers swam to the front of Morgan’s brain, but she didn’t utter one. “I think we’ve got the wrong cases.”

“But I checked the tags when we unloaded yours.”

Did Ali sound peeved?

“Plus, I saw them put my luggage tag on mine.”

“I know.” Morgan’s gaze dropped to Ali’s lips, and she forced herself to focus. “I have a theory about how it happened, but you’re busy.”

Ali gave her an embattled smile. “Do you want to wait at the end of the bar and I’ll try to be done as soon as I can?”

“Sure.”

Her gaze lingered on Morgan a few seconds more than necessary. Then Ali blinked and served the next customer.

Morgan edged out of the crowd that was still three-deep and walked around to the end of the bar. She sat on a spare bar stool and took in The Rising Sun, still packed despite the absence of Tony Bradford. Morgan wasn’t surprised. The pub had always been a pillar of the community, because Ali’s family made it so. As Ali’s mum always said, you walk in a stranger, you leave a friend. Morgan had walked in a few times and left with a variety of friends. She’d even picked up a woman in here six Christmases ago when she was on the rebound and took her home to have sex, before sneaking her out before her mum realised what had happened. Those were different times.

“Hey, stranger.”

Morgan looked up to find Nicole beside her, resplendent in pink like a stick of Blackpool rock. Morgan grinned, got off her stool, and gave her friend a hug.

“How long’s it been? Three years? I thought you were avoiding me until you kidnapped my sister.”

What had Ali told her? Morgan laughed all the same.

“Your sister was willingly kidnapped. You need to tell her not to talk to strangers in airports. You never know what can happen.”

Nicole’s smile was still the same one that had lit up Morgan’s whole life. She’d always been a bundle of positivity, and Morgan was pleased to see nothing had dimmed her wattage. Not even the death of her dad.

“I’m not going to ask you what happened, but my sister has been acting strange since she got back. Like she’s hiding something. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Don’t give anything away.

“Don’t you always think that about your little sister?” She placed a hand on her friend’s arm. “I’m sorry I haven’t seen you in so long. The last couple of years I’ve only done a flying visit, but I should have stayed long enough to pop in and have a drink with you.”

“Damn right you should have. Good job I’m the forgiving sort.”

“Also, I wanted to say I was so sorry to hear about your dad. He was a great man.”

“Thank you. And yes, he was.” Nicole’s eyes glistened as she spoke.

“But it looks like the place is doing as well as ever.”

Her friend nodded. “It is. We’re lucky. We have a very loyal customer base.”

Morgan squeezed Nicole’s forearm again. “Luck’s got nothing to do with it.”

Ali walked up behind her sister, her face pensive. “Whatever she’s saying, don’t believe it. That’s a blanket rule.”

Morgan’s heart swelled in Ali’s presence.

“Nicole was just accusing me of kidnapping you, and it’s a fair cop.” Morgan snagged Ali’s alluring gaze. “I also kidnapped her suitcase. Which is why I’m here. I wanted to check you had mine, too. Have you opened it yet?”

Ali shook her head. “I got back and was put to work behind the bar before

I could blink.” She stood back. “You want to come through and I’ll check?”

Morgan nodded, then followed Ali through the small plating-up area—with the gingerbread pub sat on the side—and into the family hallway.

“I haven’t been in here in years.” Not since she was in her mid-20s, if Morgan had to guess. “Nicole and I spent many nights in our late teens sneaking drinks from the bar. I’ve no idea if your parents ever knew.”

“I suspect they did. They weren’t stupid.” Ali nodded towards the stairs. “You want to come up?”

Twenty-four hours ago, that line would have signified something completely different. Now, she ignored the heightened anticipation on her skin as she followed Ali up the stairs. She bit down her smile that Ali still jingled.

“The place looks great, by the way. I love what your parents did with it.” The walls were covered in crisp, patterned wallpaper that looked straight out of a magazine. Plus, the light fittings were a copper-inspired triumph that was all back in vogue now, as it had been in her great-grandparents’ era.

Ali paused on the landing. “Yeah, my parents have a way of making places feel just right.” She paused. “*Parent.*” She drew her mouth into a straight line.

Morgan went to grab Ali’s hand, but stopped. That wasn’t in the script anymore. “I’m sure your dad had a hand in it, too.” She pointed to the right. “Definitely in hanging that Mexican hat over the hallway cocktail cabinet.” Ali’s dad had always been obsessed with Mexico, along with its food and drink. Tequila had been his drink of choice.

“That has Dad written all over it.”

Ali led Morgan through to what had been her bedroom, now the guest room.

“This has had a makeover, too. It looks like a boutique hotel room.” The walls were a cool midnight blue, the skirting boards and ceiling crisp white, with splashes of chrome and gold on the accessories. Morgan was impressed.

“It’s not bad, is it?” Ali put her code into her case lock, but it didn’t budge. She glanced up. “Okay, what’s your code?”

“1234.” Morgan would fail sleuth school on the first day.

“Seriously?” Ali put it in and the lock opened. “How the hell did that happen? I hope you’ve got mine.”

Morgan crouched down, unzipped the case, and checked the items. Yes, it was hers. “The only thing I could think was, we took the wrong cases from when we got out of the taxis. Remember that was the first time we met on our doomed trip?”

Ali nodded, her face inches from Morgan’s. “I do.” She exhaled. “That must be it, right?”

“Uh-huh.” Morgan gulped. Ali was so close, her instinctive reaction was to kiss her. But she couldn’t. No matter how much every hair on her body craned towards Ali. No matter how her brain screeched inside that they were meant to be. That this was right.

Ali didn’t agree.

“There you are!”

Morgan jumped at the interruption, jerking forward and head-butting Ali instead. Smooth work. Now, rather than kissing her, Morgan clutched her head and toppled sideways. The pain in her skull was acute, but it had nothing on her embarrassment, currently running red hot through every cell of her body. She looked up to see Ali’s mum in the doorway. Had she always been orange, or was Morgan seeing things?

Ali got to her feet, rubbing her head with a frown. She still jingled. “I’m going to change this bloody jumper,” she muttered.

“Did I interrupt something?”

Ali shook her head. “We were just checking cases because ours somehow got mixed up.” She pointed. “That’s Morgan’s, so she must have mine.”

“These airlines and their mix-ups. Did I tell you about the time your gran went to Paris and her case flew to Athens? Spent the first three days of her

trip with the same clothes on, including pants!”

Morgan got to her feet. “Hi, Mrs Bradford.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m Elaine, you know that.” She paused. “Could you give us a hand for another ten minutes, love?”

Ali nodded. “Of course.” She glanced at Morgan. “You okay to wait and we’ll sort the cases out?”

Morgan nodded as her head throbbed. “I already told you I’m prepared to wait.” Shit. She hadn’t meant to say *that*. “I’ll get your case from the car in the meantime.”

Ali stared, then nodded. “That would be great, thank you.”



MORGAN PUT the front door on the latch, then took her case out to the car and brought Ali’s in, making sure for about the tenth time the padlock didn’t open and it was indeed Ali’s case.

It was. She shivered as she returned. Fuck winter. Summer was definitely more her vibe.

However, she’d do romance in the winter if that was what Ali wanted. Red wine, snow, roaring fire, the works.

She put Ali’s case on the floor by the front door, then stuck her hands in the pockets of her jeans and glanced around the hallway, her teenage years playing in her ears like a tinny speaker at a bad party. She’d had fun here with Nicole. Back then, Ali had been an afterthought. Very much in the background, a tiny speck on Morgan’s watercolour of life. Never once had she figured in Morgan’s thoughts or daydreams. How times had changed. She was very much figuring now.

Morgan spied a photo of Ali and Nicole when they were kids. Nicole was around eight, and Ali grinned up at her, the tell-tale home-style wonky fringe in full view. It was around the time Morgan stole Ali’s trumpet. To make

amends (albeit 30 years later), she'd bought her another one from the gift shop in Lower Greeton. She wasn't sure she'd get to give it to her now. They weren't on their trip anymore. They'd gone off road.

A cheer went up from the bar. Morgan strode towards it and peered through the plating-up area. Ali dashed past, serving someone, not looking left. Out of sight, she heard Elaine cackling, her laugh as loud as her skin tone.

Maybe Morgan should just leave. They'd agreed this would be family time, and this was Ali's family home. But she should hang around to say goodbye at least.

The gingerbread Rising Sun was still on the side. Morgan hadn't seen it up close, so she carefully picked it up, held her breath, and put it down on the counter in front of her. She leaned in, marvelling at the lit windows, the gingerbread bar, and the biscuit bar stools. She'd never have the skill to make something so intricate. Gingerbread biscuits and bigger cakes, she could do. She'd love to have the patience for the fiddly things, but it wasn't her style. She reached out a finger to the outdoor table and the gingerbread umbrella, painted bright pink. The level of detail was off the scale. She leaned forward a little more. How had they done that?

She poked the tip of her finger onto the top of the picnic table. It was softer than she'd imagined, but still sturdy enough. It didn't need to take much weight, so she guessed that made sense.

"How's it looking?"

The words jolted Morgan. It also jolted her finger unexpectedly and suddenly forward.

Right into the picnic table.

It caved under pressure. Then, like the absolute best episode of the Great British Bake Off where one cake falls off a stand, it snapped in half with consummate ease.

"Shit!" To rescue what had just happened, Morgan tried to pick up the

two halves of the table to stick them back together again, but only snapped off the benches, too. Which then also split into a few uneven pieces. As a final insult, the umbrella toppled left and broke, too.

Admitting crushing defeat, Morgan took her hand away—her fingertip now adorned with pink glitter—and stared.

The model had looked beautiful. Now it looked like a drunk had gone on a rampage in the garden. The whole sequence probably only took ten seconds, but it felt like the longest ten seconds of her life.

In moments, Ali stood beside her.

Morgan didn't dare risk a look at her face. This wasn't doing anything to help her cause.

“I did ask ‘how’s it looking?’, didn’t I?”

Morgan nodded. “You did, and I’m sorry. I was just admiring it, but you coming in made me jump. Not that I’m saying it’s your fault.” She risked a glance right.

Ali caught her stare and sighed. “We have to fix it before my mum sees it.”

Morgan’s brain ran on overdrive. A thought popped into her head. She turned to Ali. Whatever was or wasn’t happening between them, at least Morgan could fix this.

“I have a possible solution.”

Ali’s brow furrowed. “Go on.”

“We could take it back to mine and bake a new table and benches there? I’ve baked gingerbread before, and my mum will probably have the ingredients.” She paused. “I assume your mum wouldn’t?”

Ali snorted. “I told you, we’re a strictly no-baking family.”

Morgan gave a slow shrug. “It’s worth a try. Even if we just bake a normal biscuit table and stain it brown with nail polish, nobody will know, right?”

Ali covered her face with her hands. “I can’t believe we got it all the way

back from up north, then break it in the pub kitchen.” She peeled her fingers away. “You were joking about the nail polish?”

“Either that, or your mum’s fake tan. Although it looks like she might have used it all.” She put a hand on Ali’s arm briefly. The touch stilled them both.

“Harsh, but fair,” Ali replied.

Morgan stared at her fingers, still connected to Ali. Her heart swelled. How she wanted this connection back. However, it wasn’t hers to ignite.

“One way or the other, we’ll fix it. I’ve already brought your case in and put mine in the car, so we’re good to go.”

Ali gave her a nod, then carefully placed the pub inside its box. She grabbed their coats from the bottom of the stairs. “I’ll just let my mum know I’m heading out for a little while.” She gave Morgan the gingerbread box with the words, “Don’t drop it!” then grabbed some keys from a hook on the hallway wall.

“You don’t need your keys, by the way. I’m driving my dad’s car.”

“I thought you didn’t drive?”

“I do here.”

CHAPTER 26



Driving with Morgan at the wheel was a novel experience. Throughout their journey back to Devon, Ali was in charge. Now, the tables were turned. She'd be a liar if she said she wasn't pleased to be spending more time with her, but it wasn't what they'd planned.

They'd agreed to have more time apart, so that Ali's plan could bed down in her heart and her mind. Some time away from Morgan to see this as what it was. A random three days together, an illusion. Once she was back in the real world, and off to New York, she was sure Morgan would fade from reality. But that wasn't going to happen if Ali kept looking over at her long fingers currently wrapped around the steering wheel, as well as breathing in her bergamot smell.

Moments later, they turned into Morgan's road, the jollity in stark contrast to the tension that hovered in the car. Morgan pulled into her parents' driveway, and they got out in silence. Ali got the pub from the backseat and slammed the door. Morgan retrieved her suitcase from the boot, then gave her a weak smile in the illuminated air as they walked across the drive and up to the front door. They stopped beside a frosted Christmas tree.

"I assume you have one inside as well?"

Morgan nodded. "Main one in the lounge, one in the dining room and a small one on the side in the kitchen. If she could, my mum would have one in

every room along with a Santa's grotto in the garden, but my dad put his foot down at that. She lets him put his foot down when she thinks he needs it."

"Smart woman." Ali stared at Morgan. At her smooth skin. Her full lips. Ones that Ali would not focus on one bit. However, when she glanced upwards, a sprig of mistletoe was stuck above the front door. She took a sharp inhale of breath, then let her gaze wander back to Morgan's face.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to insist on a kiss."

"I wondered if it was one of your many traditions." A shimmer of anticipation worked its way from Ali's heart to her throat. Kissing Morgan wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. But she pushed that thought from her mind.

Morgan opened the front door, and they walked into a hallway decked out in tinsel, with Christmas cards strung from the white picture rail. A wooden nativity scene was lit on a side table, and through the open door to the kitchen, Ali saw a tiny countertop tinsel tree. Morgan hadn't been kidding when she said her family took Christmas seriously. She left the case at the bottom of the stairs and took Ali's coat.

Ali jingled as she shrugged it off. "I swear, I'm about to murder my jumper." She followed Morgan through to the kitchen, and they put the gingerbread pub on the marble-topped island, one of the biggest Ali had ever seen. When they turned, Mrs Scott stood in the doorway, a questioning smile on her face.

"Hello Ali, didn't expect to see you here so late on Christmas Eve. Not that you're not welcome, of course."

Luckily, Morgan hijacked the conversation before too many questions were asked. "If we wanted to bake some gingerbread, do you have the ingredients?"

Morgan's mum frowned. "You want to bake gingerbread *now*?"

It was a fair question.

But Morgan styled it out. "We had a bit of a gingerbread malfunction.

Plus, it's Christmas Eve, Ali's never baked any, and I promised her in the car on the way down. I'm going to decorate my part of the gingerbread house roof while we're at it, so I thought, two birds, one stone."

It almost made sense to Ali when she put it like that.

Mrs Scott turned to Ali. "I can't believe you've never baked gingerbread. You're in for a treat. All the ingredients are in the baking cupboard in the island. There's some icing already made in bags. Just remember to clear up after yourselves."

Ali watched her go, then turned to Morgan. "Where's your gingerbread house, then?"

Morgan disappeared, then came back with it. The house had a white picket gingerbread fence, gingerbread bushes in the front garden and resembled a kid's drawing of a house. Four windows, a sloped roof, crazy luminous paving and the front door even had a wreath on. However, the roof was starkly plain, and needed some attention.

"Did you say your sister did the paving?" It was quite the statement.

"She was feeling hormonal at the time."

"I can tell. Pollock-esque."

"In her defence, she is very pregnant. And very mad at her husband for putting a baby inside her. You know some people say that pregnancy is just the best? My sister would disagree."

Ali grinned. "I think every woman I know would say the same." She raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to show me your baking skills, then?"

Morgan held up both hands and waggled her fingers. "These hands have many uses. Prepare to be wowed."



AFTER CHECKING them on her phone—"Look, Dave sent my phone back unscathed!"—Morgan weighed out the ingredients for gingerbread, then set

about making it. She beckoned Ali over with a crooked index finger.

Ali shuffled along the counter obediently.

“You want to do this first bit?” She pointed at the pan. “We need to get the dough made so we can chill it.” She paused.

“Baking and chill is not the same as Netflix and chill, right?”

Morgan raised an eyebrow. “It would be a bit awks with my parents in the next room. Besides, I thought that was out of bounds?”

Ali sucked on her top lip. That wasn’t the question of a woman who wanted boundaries. She pulled back her shoulders and fixed Morgan with a stare. “I know I’m giving mixed signals.” She put her hands on her hips to create a boundary. “What I said earlier still stands. We can’t work because I’m moving countries. Nothing’s changed.”

Something in the side of Morgan’s jaw clicked as she gave Ali the faintest of nods. “You’ve made yourself very clear. This is just about gingerbread. Nothing more.”

A thick silence settled on the space. Ali didn’t dare take a breath, in case it lodged in her throat and choked her.

Perhaps this wasn’t the best idea, after all. Because she knew just as well as Morgan that this was *never* just about gingerbread.

Morgan, however, was on a mission. She put the butter, sugar, and syrup in a small pan. “Stir this until it’s melted, then take it off the heat.”

Ali blinked, then nodded. “I think I can do that.”

Morgan then mixed bicarb, ginger, cinnamon and flour in a bowl. She tested the butter mixture for heat, then added it to her bowl. “Okay, now I just want you to bring it all together. Don’t be shy. Get your hands in there.”

A landslide of wrong responses formed on Ali’s lips, but she chewed them up and swallowed them down before any escaped. She didn’t want to leave any room for doubt with them.

Namely, that there wasn’t a ‘them’.

Once the dough was mixed, Morgan put it in the freezer to chill. “And

now, we get the piping bags to do the roof of our family house. You want to help?”

Ali shook her head. “I don’t really think that’s appropriate. It’s a family thing and, well, I’m not part of the family, am I?”

Morgan stared, then took a deep breath. “Strictly speaking, no. But I feel like you should have a go. After everything we’ve gone through this week. Plus, you didn’t expect to be here tonight. Decorating the roof will be an excellent distraction from any tension. It’s art, and art is therapy.”

Ali laughed. “You’re offering me therapy on Christmas Eve?”

“It’s normally when it’s needed most.”

Ali couldn’t argue. “Okay. I’ll play.”

Morgan beamed. “The golden rule to remember is, if you bugger it up, you can always smudge it and pass it off as snow.” She filled a few small china bowls with Jelly Tots, Smarties, mini marshmallows and Midget Gems. The sound of them hitting the bowls made Ali’s mouth water and her stomach rumble. She hadn’t eaten since she arrived home, and it was only now she remembered she was hungry.

“Don’t be shy with the sweets or glitter either. When it comes to gingerbread house roofs, the gaudier, the better. Make it so my sister’s paving looks tame.”

Morgan got some pre-made icing from a deep drawer in the island, then cut the bag around the nozzle. Then she stepped up to the roof, squeezed the bag, and expertly coaxed the icing out until she’d piped a row along the apex of the roof like it was an everyday occurrence.

It wasn’t in Ali’s world.

“That’s impressive.”

Morgan hadn’t been lying about her baking skills.

Neither had Ali.

Morgan held up the bag. “You want to give it a go?”

Ali’s response was instinctive and immediate. She shook her head.

“That’s a big fat no. I’ll just mush some sweets on the side of the roof. I feel that’s where I could shine.”

“You need some icing to stick them to.” Morgan fixed her with a warm smile.

Ali wobbled under its glare.

“Wouldn’t it be good to learn a new skill this Christmas Eve?”

“I just wanted some food and a cup of tea.” It was the honest truth.

“I’ll get you a mince pie when the gingerbread’s in.” Morgan paused. “What do you say?”

Ali went to say no, but instead said, “Okay.” She walked up to the roof, and Morgan made way for her.

What was she doing? It was as if her body was acting independently of her brain.

Once Ali was settled in front of the roof, Morgan stepped up behind, her body warmth pressing ever so slightly into Ali.

Flashing red danger signs lit up all over Ali’s body, but she didn’t move. She couldn’t. Mainly because she liked it and she didn’t want to. She felt Morgan’s hot, sweet breath on the back of her neck, and then Morgan’s breath hitched. Was she trying to gauge Ali’s reaction?

Ali should say something, tell her to stop.

Only, she was too busy trying to regulate her breathing and her thoughts.

Moments later, Morgan wrapped her hands around Ali’s waist and shifted closer behind her.

Ali’s heartbeat thudded in her ears.

The bells jingled on her front. She bit down a smile.

“Pick up the piping bag.”

Morgan’s voice brought the mood back. It was liquid silk in her ear. Smooth, just like her baking skills. Plus, some others Ali had tried desperately hard to forget.

She gulped, then did as she was told.

“Take care when you’re working with the gingerbread. As we know, it’s fragile and easily broken.”

A little like Ali’s boundaries. She turned her head, caught Morgan’s smile, and her mind scrambled.

What the hell was she doing?

But Ali stayed static, as her mind jammed with panic. However, this was the good panic. The kind of panic she could bottle and sell all over the world.

“Remember, I’m a communications expert, so follow my lead. I know just when to press and when to stop.”

Something deep inside Ali rumbled at that. After the night they’d spent at Helen and Jamie’s house—was that only last night?—she wasn’t going to argue. With Morgan, her insides were still molten lava, however she might fight it.

Morgan’s fingers closed around Ali’s.

Ali’s mind flailed.

“Now, gently squeeze the piping bag. You won’t get this the first time, but consistent pressure and confidence are the key to good piping.”

She tried to focus on what Morgan was saying, but it wasn’t easy. When she focused on Morgan’s fingers, she remembered them inside her. How they filled her exquisitely, as if Morgan’s fingers were made just for her. How just a simple movement had set off an intoxicating shock wave of wonder and lust inside her. A feeling she could conjure up at will. As she was doing now.

Must focus on piping.

But holy hell, that was hard when her insides pulsed and her heart rocked.

Ali squeezed. Hardly anything came out.

Morgan’s fingers pressed around hers.

Ali’s insides pulsed some more. She gulped.

Another squeeze. Finally, some icing appeared on the roof. In a splodge, yes. But there was icing.

However, Ali was far more focused on Morgan’s breath in her ear. Her

arms that were still wrapped around her waist.

Until they weren't. When Morgan stepped back, Ali wanted to turn and grab her. She wanted to fix Morgan's arms around her and demand she never let her go.

But again, boundaries.

New York.

Glass half empty.

But fuck, she wanted to top up the glass. Fill it to the brim. She wanted Morgan to fill her more than anything in the world.

Morgan stood beside her. "Hold the icing in the palm of your hand, squeeze with your fingers, and do it consistently and with confidence. It's the same with most things in life you want to get good at."

Ali glanced left, watched as Morgan ran her tongue along her top lip, then returned to the roof. A flash of Morgan as she came pressed into the front of her mind. Then it was gone. She took a deep breath.

Confidence and consistency. She could do this. She squeezed. Another splodge. It wasn't going to be a masterpiece, but it wouldn't be naked, either.

The word 'naked' lodged in her brain then, as she recalled Morgan this morning. Naked in bed beside her. Why was she saying it couldn't happen again?

Because of a non-existent future.

"Two splodges already. You're a natural."

Ali snorted, but produced another splodge.

Morgan reached over and retrieved a pink-and-white-filled icing bag, cut the bag around the nozzle, and piped neat, uniform swirls across her roof.

"Did your mum teach you this?"

Morgan shook her head and paused. "My nan. She taught my mum, and then she taught my sister and me. It was one of her Christmas traditions." She swept her arm around the kitchen. "Everything you see and smell in this house all stems from her. She was the Christmas queen, and she was the one

who always had to bake her own gingerbread.”

Warmth swept up Ali. She loved that Morgan was so connected to her family.

“Nobody in my family bakes. It’s a badge of honour. But we keep the local bakeries in business.”

“In that case, we’re going to make some gingerbread stars and gingerbread people for you to take home, too. You can splodge until you can splodge no more. Your family will be amazed.”

“They’ll also think I’m lying.”

Morgan walked to the baking drawers and pulled out some cutters in the shape of stars and people. “I’ll tell them, and they’ll have to believe me.”

“You forget my sister knows you.”

An arrow of happiness pierced Ali’s heart. That was the thing here, wasn’t it? It was a crying shame this couldn’t work, because they didn’t just have a mutual attraction and chemistry. They had history. Foundation to build on. They were a solid gingerbread house that simply needed decoration. Ali stared at Morgan, then shook her head. Morgan already decorated the world just fine.

More than fine.

Morgan narrowed her eyes. “What? Do I have something on my nose?”

A shake of Ali’s head. “Nope. I was just thinking, this is not how I expected my Christmas Eve would go. Baking gingerbread. With you. Here. Not after everything.” She glanced down at the piping bag in her hand. “Who knew I could feel so much contentment being a shit baker?” Her hand shook as she spoke. “You know what? Ignore me. I’m a bit addled from all the travelling, and the lack of food. Plus, walking back into the pub was overwhelming. As is being here with you.”

What on earth was she saying?

She fully expected Morgan to take a step back. Literally and metaphorically. They’d spent a few days together, had one hot night, Ali had

brushed her off and now she was redrawing their boundaries every five seconds? Even she knew she was acting a little crazy.

But Morgan didn't move. Instead, she reached out a hand and placed it on Ali's arm.

That was all. Just one tiny touch. But it was enough to make Ali's pulse sprint. Enough for her cheeks to heat to nuclear. Enough for every nerve ending she had to fling itself open, waiting for more.

With Morgan, she'd flipped the switch.

Ali flicked through her mental notebook for an emotion that fitted what she was feeling. Aroused. Alive. But also, *comfortable*. Ali flinched as the final one hit her. Yes, that was what it was. With Morgan, she felt comfortable. Like herself, but alive. If she was brutally honest, she hadn't felt like that with anyone else that mattered for a very long time.

It was a crime they couldn't be more.

"It's okay." Morgan's words were low, almost whispered. "I get it."

Ali's arm shook under Morgan's touch. "Do you?" Was she about to have a breakdown in the middle of decorating a gingerbread house? It was so out of character, it was almost comical.

But Morgan's steady gaze on her made her feel seen. Reassured. Safe. Ali breathed through it and steadied her nerves.

"I do."

Ali's heart thudded like a kick-drum. She hung on Morgan's every word.

"We could have a future. A great one. But it's up to you to change your mind. I'm all for it." Morgan's blue eyes shimmered as she spoke. "Whether you like it or not, we make sense. We're not typical, but that's a good thing. We are precisely who we need to be and where we need to be, and I wish you would see it. I'm not saying we're destined, far from it. But I think we might be if you'd give us a try." She put a hand to her chest. "I feel it here. Every time you're near me."

Ali gulped, then stepped towards Morgan. Her chest ached with want.

She still didn't think they could work in the long run. But maybe another short run would get Morgan out of her system.

She glanced at Morgan's soft, full lips. She was desperate to feel them pressing against hers once again.

"How's the baking going?" A male voice sliced through the moment, killing it dead.

For fuck's sake.

If it wasn't Morgan's mum, it was Morgan's dad.

Ali jumped back, as did Morgan. Her heart clattered to the floor, so much so, she almost felt winded. Ali picked up the piping bag and tried to remember how to hold it, but it was useless.

She was useless.

Morgan made her useless.

In the best possible way.

"Going well," Morgan replied. "Just getting the chilled dough."

She heard the freezer opening, but Ali didn't dare turn around. She couldn't face Mr Scott right at this second. Not with all the illicit thoughts about his daughter still whizzing around her brain.

"We're just about to bake, so shouldn't keep you up too long."

"Nonsense," Mr Scott replied. "I love it. Reminds me of your nan." He paused. "I'll leave you to it. We're going to bed soon. See you in the morning, love. Will we see you tomorrow as well, Ali?"

Okay, she couldn't ignore him forever. She didn't want to appear rude.

"Not tomorrow." She turned her head. "Merry Christmas for then!"

He wished her the same, then disappeared. As if by some unspoken agreement, they kept quiet for the next few moments, until Morgan's mum appeared and said good night, too. Only after a decent amount of time had passed did Ali dare to look at Morgan. When she did, Morgan was staring at her, too. She gave Ali the widest grin in her armoury.

"I remember now why I left this village, and particularly why I moved

out of my parents' house. It's lovely, but it's limiting."

Morgan rolled the dough, then offered Ali a cutter in the shape of a star. "You do the stars. I'll do the bench to replace the one I broke."

"What about the umbrella?"

Morgan raised an eyebrow, looking very pleased with herself. She pulled out a kitchen drawer and produced a cocktail umbrella. "My plan is to stick this in the still warm dough, et voila, instant umbrella. What do you think?"

Ali shook her head. "That you're a communications expert with a solution for everything."

"It's my job."

"I can see why you're in demand."

Morgan licked her lips. "You might never see my best moves."

CHAPTER 27



A while later, Morgan stood back and surveyed their handiwork. The pub garden furniture was restored, and the new-look table and umbrella even added a little extra kitsch that she was very much here for. Plus, they'd also made a plate of gingerbread stars, which Morgan and Ali had iced the edges of. A solid evening's work.

"Not bad, even if I say so myself," Morgan said. "For emergency baking, we did a lot of extras." She glanced at the clock. 10.45pm. "You must be starving. How about a mince pie and a glass of Bailey's before you go?" What's more, they'd boxed up any sexual tension. For now. What might have happened if her parents hadn't been in the house was anybody's guess. Morgan sensed a wavering on Ali's part, but that was all. They hadn't chatted in any depth. All she knew was if she lit a match in this room, it might go up.

Ali eyed her. Now the baking was done, there was no more distraction. Was she thinking the same thing?

"You've been promising me a mince pie all evening. I'd like two and a Bailey's, please." Ali paused. "So long as you warm them in the microwave for 15 seconds and serve them with cream."

"I'm not a monster."

Ali laughed.

Morgan's heart swelled. How she wanted to keep that laugh in her life.

Morgan wasn't sure how she could negotiate that deal, but her mum's mince pies were a good way to start.

She grabbed two from under their glass dome, heated them, and squirted whipped cream on top. It melted immediately.

In seconds, Ali was by her side. She bit into one pie, made a sound that Morgan would like as her new ring tone, then turned to face her. "You didn't warn me your mum's pies were a new religion."

"Now you understand why I have to come home. Mr Kipling mince pies, while lovely, simply don't cut it."

"I might have to come round every day now on some flimsy pretext just to have one of these." Then Ali winced. "Which isn't what I should say after everything I said. I know that." She blew out a long breath. "This is why I wanted us to have a break from each other. It's been very intense over the past few days, and I wanted to get some distance."

Morgan let her finish, and didn't fill the gap in conversation. Instead, she let Ali's words hang.

The surrounding air throbbed with red-hot uncertainty mixed with possibility. Morgan wanted to wrap them both in it, squeeze out any doubts Ali had. But Ali had to work it out for herself. Morgan couldn't force her to do anything, no matter how much she wanted to.

Ali ate another mince pie, then gave a satisfied sigh. She licked a bit of stray pastry from her lip.

Morgan followed its trajectory. She'd never been jealous of some buttery pastry before, but she was now. Ali's face was a work of art she wanted to stare at for days.

"Can I steal some to take home with my gingerbread stars?"

If Ali kissed her again, she could take the family jewels as far as Morgan was concerned. "Of course." She paused. "Shall we go to the lounge for a quick Bailey's?"

When they walked through the door, Ali gasped behind her. Morgan

understood. Her parents' lounge was like a picture-postcard of Christmastime. A fully decked-out tree with presents spilling out from under it. An enormous fireplace with six stockings lining it for her parents, her sister and brother-in-law, Morgan, and her upcoming niece or nephew. The fireplace itself was a work of festive art, topped with greenery, candles, pine cones and ribbons. What's more, the log burner still burned, giving the room a gorgeous focal point and a warm glow. A large cream rug nestled in front of it.

When Morgan turned to look at her, Ali shook her head.

"I mean, I know places like this exist, but it's normally in a magazine. Your house *bleeds* Christmas." Ali walked over to the mantelpiece and breathed in the scent of pine. She ran her fingers across the top of some red ribbon, then looked up.

Morgan did, too.

A sprig of mistletoe hung over the fireplace.

She lowered her gaze. "Is that what I think it is?"

Morgan nodded. "Mistletoe."

When their eyes met, something clicked inside Morgan. Something that hadn't clicked before. In that instant, she knew she couldn't let this go. That it was too important. That *they* were too important. She had to fight. She *wanted* to fight.

Ali stepped towards her, her gaze lasering Morgan's skin with its intensity. She reached out an arm and pulled Morgan towards her.

Everything Morgan owned pulsed.

Electricity crackled in the air.

Morgan swallowed down, steadied her hand, then rubbed her palm up and down the outside of Ali's shirt before slipping it underneath.

Ali sucked in a sharp breath.

Morgan closed her eyes as she continued to stroke Ali's back. She was right back to last night. She couldn't remember the last time she felt like this.

The last time she'd touched someone and never wanted to stop. She couldn't fight this. She didn't want to fight this. And by the look on Ali's face when Morgan opened her eyes, she was having trouble fighting it, too.

"Morgan," she began.

Tension rippled between them, so thick Morgan could almost see it and taste it. Anticipation patrolled her skin. Excitement thumped in her brain.

Morgan had never felt this turned on in her life.

"Yes?"

"What am I doing? What are we doing?" Ali reached up a hand and slid her fingers around the back of Morgan's neck.

The bells on her jumper jingled.

Ali took a step back, ripped it off, then resumed her position.

She smelled of gingerbread, of sugar, spice, and all the things Morgan had always wanted.

"I'm not jingling the rest of the night," Ali said. "Also, I'm trying so hard not to want you. But you're killing me looking like that."

They were the last words she uttered before she closed the space between them and pressed her lips to Morgan's.

If she was asked later in kissing court, Morgan would point to this action.

Orchestrated by Ali.

She kissed her first.

She didn't stop, either. Ali's lips were like painted gold on Morgan's. They kissed her furiously, the same way Ali rode a tandem. Full on, no fear. Ali's arms wound around her.

Morgan's mind unwound in crazy time.

They still didn't make a sound. Noise would taint the moment, which was all fast lane, warp speed.

Eventually, Morgan pulled back, panting.

When they stopped kissing, broke their lips apart for a few seconds, Ali's pupils were dark with questions. Her fingertips stumbled as she flicked open

the buttons on Morgan's shirt, pulled back her lacy black bra, then took Morgan's nipple into her mouth.

It wasn't just Morgan who wanted this.

"I fucking love your breasts, have I told you that?" Ali's words were husky, tangled.

Morgan stared, not able to form a coherent thought. "Not in so many words, but in actions..."

Ali sucked her left nipple in reply. "I didn't want you to be in any doubt." She ran her hands over them once more, then tugged on Morgan's fingers until she followed her down to her knees and onto the fireside rug.

Desire dripped down Morgan like a slow waterfall. It came in unhurried, deliberate drops that slid along her skin, their slick trails leaving steam in their wake.

Ali eased off Morgan's shirt, and she shrugged off her bra. Before she knew it, Ali was topping her, grinding into her. She slipped a thigh in between Morgan's legs before travelling south, kissing Morgan from her neck to her navel.

Morgan glanced up at the Christmas stockings, the names on the front blurring into one. She closed her eyes. Now was not the time to be thinking of family. She didn't want to think about anyone but Ali. The two of them, and this moment.

Seconds later, Ali made sure that was going to happen when she undid the buttons on Morgan's jeans, slid down the zip, and shuffled Morgan out of them.

Morgan should have felt exposed, lying on her parents' rug in her briefs. But she didn't. Ali hadn't promised her anything. But Morgan didn't need any promises. The only thing that mattered in this moment was action. By the intense look on Ali's face, she knew that, too.

Seconds later, Ali was beside her, fingers soft as sunlight on Morgan's skin. They skimmed her stomach, danced on her thighs. Ali kissed her way to

Morgan's belly button, before her hot breath settled at the top of Morgan's thighs.

Thunder roared inside her. Morgan needed something to hold on to, but there was nothing. Not a bed frame. Not a pillow. Not even her dignity. It was overrated, anyway.

She glanced south just as Ali's teeth lifted the edge of her pants. Ali's index finger slid to hold the material up. Then her tongue worked its magic as she licked her way along Morgan's pant line.

Morgan closed her eyes as pure lust rolled through her. A second wave crashed down when Ali slid off Morgan's underwear. Her breathing hitched, and every part of her went onto high alert. She'd imagined this moment happening again ever since it happened for the first time. She spread her legs, making herself an invitation for Ali. Then she got onto one elbow, hooked an arm around Ali's neck, and pulled her in for a steamy kiss. As she slid her tongue between Ali's lips, Ali slid two fingers into her.

Morgan moaned into her mouth as a desire bomb detonated inside her. Lust took all its clothes off and streaked around her system. And why not? If there was ever a time for it to happen, it was now. She was naked and Ali was inside her. What it all meant, Morgan didn't know. Right now, she didn't care.

As Ali's fingers slipped slowly in and out, Morgan tried not to think of more nights like this. Because she'd love there to be more. All Morgan had ever wanted was to find a partner who got her. Who understood the rhythm of her heart. Rhythm was certainly something that Ali was no stranger to, as she showed Morgan now. If this were a dance, Ali was adept at the slow, quick, quick, slow. As Morgan twisted and moaned with sheer pleasure, Ali responded in kind. As Ali's strong fingers moved inside her, Morgan's mind spun around and around, until she was as close to the edge as she possibly could be.

"You feel incredible," Ali told her, her fingers right where Morgan

needed them most.

She wanted to tell Ali she did, too, but she couldn't speak. All Morgan's energy was wrapped up in the physicality of the moment. In replying to Ali in the only way she could. By letting go. One more thrust, one more stroke, and Morgan did just that, coming undone with a delicious moan that started in her throat and landed in her heart.

Morgan flung her head back and coasted through the crest of the wave, a kaleidoscope of emotions rampaging through her. She wrapped her hand more tightly around Ali's neck as she rode out her orgasm, before finally opening her eyes to check she was still where she'd started. Physically, that was true. But mentally and spiritually, Morgan was somewhere else altogether. From the look in Ali's eyes as she bent to kiss her lips one more time, she'd felt it, too. At least, Morgan hoped she had. And if she hadn't, Morgan wasn't going to let her go tonight until she definitely had.

"That was... I don't even have the words." Morgan had uttered nothing truer in her life. She was depleted, but in the best possible way.

The moment was so raw, so intimate, Morgan almost had to look away. But she didn't, because she was in it too. Just her and Ali. There was nothing else in the world.

Morgan's throat was dry, unlike every other part of her.

Ali stared some more, then looked away. She pulled out of Morgan and rolled away.

It took a few moments for Morgan's body and brain to recalibrate, but eventually, they did. Her heart lurched. Ali didn't look at her. That wasn't the action of someone happy with what had just happened, was it? However, with the sugar rush of sex still glittering inside her, it was hard to bruise the moment.

But she had a sneaking suspicion Ali might try.

Morgan closed her eyes to wallow for a few more gorgeous seconds.

When she opened her eyes, Ali stared at her. She had a look on her face

Morgan couldn't compute.

"Why do I feel like you're about to run away?"

Ali winced, then shook her head. She reached over to the coffee table, grabbed a tissue from the box, and wiped her hand. "I can't..." she began. Her gaze searched Morgan's face. Then she dropped it to the floor. Seconds later, Ali rolled over and put her bra and jumper back on.

She jingled once more. The bells weren't welcome.

Morgan held her breath as she waited for Ali to pull the plug.

"My heart says you're perfect. Exquisite." She rolled her gaze up and down Morgan. "And you are." She leaned in and kissed Morgan's shoulders. "But the issue that I'm leaving the country still stands. So maybe we really do finally call this what it is. A festive fling. Then we leave it at that."

Morgan couldn't form a coherent argument right now. It was unfair of Ali to ask.

However, it turned out Ali wasn't going to stick around to chat. In moments, she stood up, ran a hand through her chestnut hair, and stared at herself in the mirror above the fireplace.

Whatever argument she was silently having with herself, she would never win.

Despite her body telling her to stay horizontal, Morgan jumped up, pulled on her pants and jeans, shrugged on her shirt, then faced Ali.

"You've only got one reason this won't work. Because you're moving. I could give you 50 why it just might. Because we know each other. We like each other. We're fucking dynamite together." She stared. Damn, she was beautiful, and also infuriatingly stubborn. "Tell me we're not."

Ali licked her lips, then cast her gaze to the ground. "Being dynamite in bed means nothing when I'm in New York. We don't have enough to keep us tied."

Morgan reached out and held onto the mantelpiece. If Ali kept saying things like that, she was going to need something to keep her upright.

“Why would you say that after you just told me you can’t keep your hands off me or stop thinking about me? Why did you kiss me and fuck me like you really meant it?” Morgan shook as she spoke. She was turned on and angry, not a combination she’d ever experienced before. Ali made her feel unique and original things. This one wasn’t so welcome. “And don’t tell me you didn’t mean it, either. I’ve had bad sex before. I’ve had disinterested sex. This was not that.”

Ali’s chest heaved, and she looked away.

At least she wasn’t denying that part.

Nobody could.

It was a rock-solid fact.

“I just came to make gingerbread and things got out of hand.”

Morgan spluttered, her thoughts flaring red. “That’s what you call out of hand?” She couldn’t quite believe what Ali was saying.

But then again, she could.

Ali was back in defence mode. Glass half empty. She stuck a hand in her pocket. The same one that had just fucked Morgan. Now it was out of bounds.

“I should go. My family will wonder where I am.”

“I wasn’t holding you hostage.” Morgan did everything she could not to shout, but it wasn’t easy. She didn’t need her parents getting up to witness this. It was hard enough for her.

Ali stared, then turned.

In the kitchen, there was an awkward pause as Ali eyed the cake box containing the gingerbread pub, along with the tin of home-made biscuits, and Tupperware of mince pies. Then she frowned.

“I just realised I didn’t drive here. Which means I don’t have my car.”

Fuck. The last thing Morgan wanted tonight was to drive Ali home. She needed her to disappear, then she could have a breakdown in peace.

“I’ll call you a cab, then get you a bag for your baked goods.”

Luckily, the taxi said it would arrive in two minutes. When Morgan told Ali, she looked just as relieved as Morgan felt. She went to the drawer where her mum kept her carrier bags, and slid the tin of gingerbread biscuits and the mince pies into a Sainsbury's Bag For Life. Then she held up a finger. "Wait there." She dashed up to her room, battling with herself and questioning her logic with every step, then came down with a wrapped present. She slid it on top of the baked goods.

When she glanced up, Ali shook her head. "Why are you giving me a gift?"

Morgan shrugged. "I told you, our family has a tradition of giving a present on Christmas Eve. I bought you one. It's not exactly the best circumstance to give it to you, but I want you to have it. Take it."

Ali took a deep breath, went to say something, then thought better of it. "Thank you." Her deep brown gaze threatened to swallow Morgan whole.

Morgan ground her teeth together, but luckily, a car horn outside broke the silence. The cab was here.

Ali picked up the bag, then the pub box. "Can you open the front door?"

Morgan nodded, not quite believing this was where tonight ended. But it seemed like it was.

"Happy Christmas, Morgan." Ali turned in the open doorway. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Then, in seconds, she was gone.

CHAPTER 28



Ali unlocked the front door, then carefully manoeuvred all her gingerbread products inside. Once they were safely on the hallway table, she pulled the door closed, then unwound her mustard scarf. She buried her head in it, trying to conjure up her real life. Not this fake charade she'd been starring in for the past few days. She had no idea who this person inhabiting her body was. The one who made gingerbread and fucked women at will. Or rather, one specific woman.

She should talk to Tobias. She missed him. So much had happened since she'd left Glasgow. Perhaps she needed a voice of reason to tell her what to do. Her head was resolute and kept instructing her mouth what to say. However, her body was sluggish. It knew something was up. But Ali didn't have the strength to unravel it just yet. Tobias was the king of shagging people and walking away. If anybody would know what to do, it was him.

She glanced at her watch. 11.50pm. Laughter sailed through from the bar, along with a cheer and a chorus of 'Last Christmas'. Ali poked her head into the main space where her mum was cashing up.

"Hey, Mum." She willed her voice to sound more upbeat than she felt. She didn't know how to box up the feelings that coursed through her. How did you rationalise falling for someone, sleeping with them twice, then walking away? Even thinking about it left her dazed, as if she'd just applied a

left hook to her own face. Which, in a way, she had.

“There she is! Home for two seconds, then she buggers off. Are you here to stay now?”

Ali blushed. “One hundred per cent. But I am dog-tired. Has Nicole gone?”

Her mum nodded. “Gone to play Santa.”

Of course. It was Christmas Eve still, just about. “Is it okay if I slope off to bed, too? I promise I’ll be here all week to catch up.”

Her mum kissed her cheek. “Get some rest.”

Ali gave Brian and the stragglers in the bar a wave, then took the bag Morgan had given her upstairs. She put the baked goods on the kitchen counter—had Mum upgraded since the summer?—then sat down at the square wooden table pushed against the wall. She pulled out Morgan’s gift and turned it over in her hands. She didn’t deserve a gift, she knew that much. The urge to leave and put what happened behind her had been strong when she was there. But now, it seemed callous. She shook her head. She wasn’t going to dwell. Otherwise, she’d never forgive herself.

She grabbed her phone from her bag and called Tobias. No answer.

Perhaps it was a sign she should open the gift. It was the least she could do: fulfil Morgan’s wishes on this, if nothing else. The wrapping paper had reindeer on it, just like her jumper. She glanced down and flicked a bell. Then immediately silenced it. Ali took a deep breath and tore open the paper.

Inside was a small cardboard box. The price was still in pencil in the corner. £3.49. When she lifted the lid, her heart lurched. She pulled out the toy trumpet and held it with her oversized fingers. It was yellow, red and blue, and supremely plastic. Just as she remembered. More importantly, *Morgan* had remembered, and bought her a gift that meant something.

Damn it all to hell.

She glanced up to the opposite wall, where a photo of her parents in Tenerife was a new installation, too. Her dad grinned at her. Like he was

watching her. Telling her to take care and not give away her future for anyone.

Ali's phone lit.

Tobias.

"You called?"

"I did."

"What's up, Buttercup?"

"Everything." Ali slumped in her chair. She didn't have to play it down for Tobias.

"Sounds juicy." He paused. "First up, are you home?"

"Yes, thank god."

"Okay. Second, when I left you last night, you were on the precipice of shagging Morgan, The Love Goddess. Please tell me you did."

Ali didn't even pause. "I did."

"Yes! Finally! And how was it? Did it get your lady juices humming? If it didn't, I don't want to know."

It had done all that and so much more. "Yes, it definitely did." She paused. "But then I drove home with her and told her nothing could happen because I'm going to New York."

Silence on the other end of the line, swiftly followed by laughter.

"Oh Ali, you're so sweet, and so fucking lesbian. Way to kill the mood. You're not marrying the woman, you're just having sex with her."

"That's why I'm calling you. I need advice from the king of no-strings sex. How do you do it?"

"Practice," Tobias replied in a low, stern voice. "Also, shutting down all your emotions. It's a skill I learned at the start when men were such shits to me. How the tables have turned."

She knew it was his defence mechanism. They'd discussed it many times before. She also knew he was only half-serious. The other half of him would love to meet someone who mattered.

“How did she take being told nothing could happen?”

Ali frowned. “She wasn’t over the moon, but I think we can safely say neither of us is very good at following through, seeing as I just had sex with her again in her parents’ lounge.”

Tobias spluttered. “What the fuck? Who the hell are you?”

“I have no idea.” That was the truth. “It’s like she brings out this side to me, this animalistic, primal side that I didn’t even know I had.”

“I’m not sure what to say to that.” He was enjoying this, wasn’t he? “And do you like it?”

Ali ran her fingertips over the toy trumpet. Did she? “I think I do.”

“I definitely do,” he replied. “But telling her it’s over and then having sex with her is mixed messages, don’t you agree?”

Ali smiled. “I’m aware it could be conceived as such. What do I do now?”

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t fucking know! That’s why I’m calling you.”

“Tell me one thing—why does you going to New York mean nothing can happen? There’s a lot of technology that can help with that. You can have video sex to your heart’s content.”

Ali grinned. An image of a naked Morgan lying underneath her earlier flashed into her mind.

Not helpful.

“But it won’t be the same. I don’t want to put pressure on myself when I’m leaving. Plus, I promised my dad I’d give this my all. How can I do that with a new girlfriend to worry about?”

Tobias was silent on the other end for a few seconds. “But what about if, having met Morgan, she’s it? What if you end up in New York and all you can think of is her, but she doesn’t want to know because you wouldn’t consider it in the first place? You’ve held a torch for this woman for the last 20 years.”

“Longer.”

“My point exactly! She’s shaken you up. What I’m saying is, think long and hard about this decision before you shut it down completely.”

CHAPTER 29



“Shit the bed, you look ready to drop!” Morgan hugged Annabel after she waddled through the door. She took her coat and hung it on one of the hallway hooks.

“Thanks. I haven’t heard that about ten times a day from every person I’ve met over the past week.”

Morgan winced. “Sorry.” She greeted Josh as he walked in behind Annabel. He was so tall, he always ducked under normal-sized doorways. He bought his jeans at a special shop that catered for people with legs the length of the M1. “How’s my favourite brother-in-law?”

“Looking forward to having dinner with someone other than your grumpy sister.” He leaned down and kissed Annabel on the cheek. “She agrees, don’t you?”

“Fuck, yes. Pregnancy and me are not friends. The sooner this is out of my body, the better.”

Morgan put her arm around her. “Come into the kitchen and have a mince pie. That’ll cheer you up.”

They followed Morgan into the kitchen, where her mum was already busy making dinner. The turkey was in the oven, the spuds were prepped, as was all the veg. Now it was a case of military precision and timing, of which her mum was a master. Morgan had spent many Christmases watching and

learning, but she was still impressed every year.

“What the hell happened to the gingerbread roof?” Annabel stood over it, a grin on her face. “If this is a ploy to get me laughing, you succeeded. This is brilliantly bad.”

Morgan ground her teeth together. She’d forgotten about that. It didn’t look like her work. It looked like she’d been ambushed.

Annabel looked from her parents to Morgan. “Were you drunk? That’s the only way I can explain it.”

She shook her head. “It was a joint effort. Me and Ali Bradford.”

Her sister frowned. “Ali Bradford, as in little Ali?”

“She’s not so little anymore.”

Annabel peered closer. “Whatever her day job is, tell her not to give it up for cake decorating.”

More looks, which Annabel followed. She frowned. “Is there something I need to know? Something to take my mind off the giant bowling ball currently trying to stop me from breathing?”

“Nothing.” Morgan shook her head. “She just wanted to try baking.” She walked over to the roof. “For a first time, it’s not bad.”

“Now I know there must be something you’re not telling me. You’d normally be right here with me, laughing too.”

Morgan shot her sister a look.

The silence hung in the air.

Annabel tried to take the temperature of the room, then gave up and sat down.

“Josh, I need a cup of tea.” She scowled at him.

Josh stood up too quickly, cracking his head on the dining table light fixture. He winced, but ignored any pain, knowing this wasn’t his moment.

“On it!”

“She was here later than I imagined she might be,” Morgan’s mum piped up.

“Who?” Morgan asked, dread pooling in her stomach.

“Ali. I heard you in the lounge.” Mum paused. “Didn’t we, Roger?”

Her dad nodded his head, then stared at his feet.

Morgan wanted to die on the spot. Had they heard the sex, or the arguing?

The sound of Josh filling the kettle pierced the moment, and Morgan had never been so pleased. She wanted to kiss him.

“I’m still not letting this go,” Annabel began—quickly followed by a scream.

Morgan swivelled her head to see her sister staring at the floor. When she raised her head, her face was ashen.

“Fuck, fuckety, fuck!” Annabel lifted one foot, then the other. “I think my water just broke. Looks like this baby wants out a little sooner than planned. Damn it, I hope it’s not born on Christmas Day. He or she will hate me for the rest of his or her life. I know I would.”

“I don’t think you get much choice in the matter.” Their mum took off her apron and handed it to Morgan. “Roger, get the car keys.”

Annabel shook her head. “It could be ages yet, Mum, and I haven’t even had a contraction.” Right at that moment, she doubled over. “Okay, first contraction!” she shouted.

Alarm spread over Josh’s and Mum’s faces.

Her dad stepped in. “You and Josh are her birthing team, so we all need to go, just in case. I’ll drive us to the hospital. Are you okay finishing up the dinner and driving your mum’s car over later?”

Morgan nodded. “Of course.”

Moments later, coats were back on, and Annabel was escorted to the car.

“If you have it quickly, you could be back in time for the turkey!” Morgan shouted.

She got a middle finger from the pregnant woman in return.



EVEN THOUGH HER mum was in her sister's birthing party, she still found time to message Morgan with precise instructions for finishing the Christmas dinner.

'The potatoes need longer than you think. The parsnips need honey and garlic powder. Make sure you whisk the gravy with the meat juices once it's rested. The turkey comes out at midday!' It made Morgan smile. There was no way she was doing that with the gravy either. Seemed a bit much. She'd add the meat juices to a jug of Bisto and hope her mum was too wowed by her new grandchild to notice.

Keeping busy also meant she was distracted, and so less likely to think about the last few days. About last night. About baking gingerbread in this very kitchen with Ali. Getting fucked on the lounge floor by Ali. Morgan's insides pulsed and her cheeks flushed with warmth at the memory. Even if they would be the shortest-lived couple of the century—did they even count as a couple?—she'd look back on the last few days with a certain fondness. She was still getting over how good she and Ali Bradford were together. Also, how stubborn Ali was once she'd made up her mind. Even when she was clearly breaking both their hearts. Definitely Morgan's. She could only hope Ali felt the same deep down.

Maybe she should talk to Nicole, ask her to make Ali see sense. Only, that would mean Nicole would have to know, and Ali didn't want that. She wanted to sweep what had happened this week under the carpet, write it off as a festive fling. Maybe, in time, Morgan could do the same.

She slid her hands into her mum's padded red oven gloves and opened the oven door. Heat licked her face, but the smell of roasted meat made her mouth water. She pulled out the turkey—enough to feed an army by the size of it—and moved it to the end of the island. Then she got two clean tea towels from the second drawer down and tucked them around the bird. That could rest while she got on with the rest of the dinner.

Two hours later, Morgan sat at the island with a well-earned cup of

coffee, phone in hand, willing more updates from anyone. Her sister. Her mum. Ali. It was all quiet. She'd come home to spend time with her family. This was not how she'd envisioned Christmas Day.

She keyed Ali's name into Instagram and scrolled until she found her. Her profile was private. She couldn't stalk her there. What was Ali doing? Was she thinking about her, about last night, or was it all boxed up and done? Morgan would love to know.

She sipped the last of her coffee, then jumped off the stool and put her blue mug in the dishwasher. The dinner was in containers on the side. She put the lids on, wriggled most of it into the fridge, then got her phone, house keys, car keys and put them all in her bag. Her phone vibrated, and she dug it out.

'Come quickly, she's had the baby. It's a girl!' That was from her dad.

Morgan blinked, delight blooming in her chest. She was an aunty. How about that?

Her finger hovered over WhatsApp. The person she most wanted to share the news with was Ali. But she couldn't. It was Christmas Day, and they'd agreed that today was off-limits. Instead, she walked through to the hallway and slipped on her coat and scarf, along with her Christmas pudding hat. Then she pulled the front door closed, and got into her mum's bright yellow Polo, adjusting the mirrors as she gunned the engine.

She was off to meet her baby niece.

She was going to focus on that.

Not on Ali Bradford one tiny bit.



THE GOOD THING about driving on Christmas Day was that the mid-afternoon traffic was almost non-existent. Morgan had to drive by The Rising Sun to get on the main road to the hospital, but she tried to put that out of her mind.

She stabbed the radio until it spewed out a festive hit and settled back. She missed driving, but she didn't have a car in Glasgow. Maybe she should get one. At least then, she'd never have a trip home like the one she'd just endured. Although if that hadn't happened, she'd never have reconnected with Ali. She'd never have had some of the best orgasms of her life.

Maybe if she got a car, she could go on trips with Ali.

Only Ali was going to New York. She'd made that very clear indeed.

Morgan flicked on her indicator to turn right onto the road that housed The Rising Sun. She wasn't going to look as she drove past. There wasn't another car in sight.

"And now, it's time for that well-known Christmas classic, 'Stay Another Day' by East 17," said the radio announcer.

Morgan rolled her eyes. "It's not a Christmas classic, it was just released in December and has bells in it!" she vented, then glanced down to locate the tuner button. Was it left or right? Was this the volume or the tuner button? She squinted at the radio, then stabbed one button. Nothing happened. She stabbed the one next to it. The car filled with static noise.

"Goddammit," she muttered. Irritation scratched her skin.

When she looked up, a grey car headed straight for her.

Morgan clutched the steering wheel as fear pierced her everywhere. Where the hell had the car come from and why wasn't the driver even looking up? Was he trying to tune his radio, too?

Everything went into slow-motion as Morgan dragged the steering wheel left to avoid the full-on collision. But the other car wasn't moving, and it was almost upon her.

She'd spied it too late. The air in the car flickered and buzzed. Inevitability slapped her in the face.

"Fuck!" she screamed as she closed her eyes and waited for the brutal impact.

CHAPTER 30



*H*er nephew Harrison hurtled into the lounge in his brand-new Superman costume, one arm raised up high. He climbed onto the cream sofa with his too-short, four-year-old legs, then flung himself off, shouting “I’m Superman!” When he landed in a heap on the lounge carpet, he seemed momentarily stunned. But then, as only kids do, he righted himself, narrowed his gaze, and ran through the entire process again.

On the third failed attempt to fly, Nicole reached over and grabbed him, giving him a hug to stop another flight. It distracted him for a moment. Next to her, her husband, Stuart, was studiously ignoring the noise, engrossed in his phone.

To Ali’s right, her mum hovered over the gingerbread pub, a gingerbread star in her hand.

“This pub is just the perfect gift. It almost seems a crime that we might have to eat it.” She paused. “I still can’t believe you mended the table and baked gingerbread stars with Morgan last night. A baker in this family. I barely recognise you.”

Ali puffed out her chest, as if Paul Hollywood had just given her a handshake. None of it would have been possible without Morgan. She bought the pub, broke the pub, then fixed the pub. She was the communications and solutions expert.

The absolute best way she communicated with Ali was with her lips pressed against hers, and her fingers deep inside Ali. She blinked, then shook herself. Thoughts like that were not safe for Christmas Day.

What was Morgan doing right now?

Ali glanced up at the fireplace, a framed photo of her parents smiling back at her, so happy together on their wedding day. They had many more years of happiness, as her mum kept telling her. She always said she wasn't going to dwell on the past, but look to the future. That's exactly what Ali was doing in prioritising New York.

Although she knew what Tobias had said was also true.

Had she made the wrong decision? Was Morgan someone she should give more thought to? She hadn't slept last night thinking about it.

What if she was turning down the love of her life?

That thought made her jump up from the sofa. Christmas dinner sat heavy in her stomach. It had been delicious, but she'd overdone it on the roasties.

"Anyone want a wine top-up?"

Her mum nodded. "I might have my first glass with dessert. I'll get the crumble and custard ready soon."

They'd all agreed on a rest after their lunch. The queen's speech, followed by a spot of present opening. Her mum had bought her an NYC baseball cap, along with a New York guidebook, as if the internet didn't exist. The whole family had been thrilled with their double lot of gifts—the originals, and the ones Ali had bought in Lower Greeton. The village where everything changed.

Ali grabbed the chardonnay from the fridge and unscrewed the cap. She refilled her glass, then poured a new one for her mum, who'd followed her in and now leaned against the counter.

"Dinner was delicious."

Mum nodded. The bags under her eyes were far more pronounced since the summer. That's what came of grief, and having to run a business solo.

Ali walked over and gave her a hug. It was spontaneous, and her mum seemed surprised. Eventually, she gave in and hugged her back. When Ali let go, her mum looked at her with suspicion.

“What was that for?”

She shook her head. “No reason. It’s just been a while since I’ve been in this kitchen with you. I’m allowed to hug my mum, right?”

“Always.”

Her mum took a seat at the table. Outside, the white clouds persisted. Snow was forecast, but it hadn’t arrived yet. Ali sat at right angles to her mum and they clinked glasses.

“Merry Christmas!”

Her mum smiled. “It’s good to have you home. Did I say that already?”

“Once or twice. I’m glad to be here spending it with you.”

“I love your shirt, too.” Her mum stroked her arm. “Are they foxes or dogs?”

Ali smiled. “They’re reindeer.”

Her mum peered over her glasses. “Are they really? Very stylish and festive.”

They heard a wail from the other room, followed by the sound of crying.

“You think Harrison has finally learned the costume doesn’t give him special powers?” Her mum laughed, then peered over the top of her glasses.

“Can I ask you a question? No getting mad at me.”

Ali stilled. “Sure.”

Her mum held her gaze. “Morgan. Is anything going on? I know I mentioned it on the phone, but you told me in no uncertain terms that nothing was going on, so I believed you. But now your sister reckons there is, but I don’t want to assume. Then, you did bake gingerbread, and that’s very out of character.”

Ali pressed her teeth together. Did she know the answer to that question?

“We hit it off while we were travelling. Something happened, but it can’t

go anywhere with me going to New York, so I've nipped it in the bud." Her heart pulled the duvet over its head. She tried to stop the sides of her mouth turning downwards, but she wasn't sure she was successful.

"You look and sound thrilled about that decision." Her mum paused. "Why couldn't it work? There are things called planes."

"It's a long way, Mum. Expensive, too. Besides, you know what Dad said. To travel, follow my dreams, and not let anything or anyone tie me down or stand in my way. I'm trying to honour his wishes."

Mum sipped her wine, then sat back. "Your father said a lot of things, but they were mainly about him. He wanted to travel with no ties, but then we met and had Nicole, then you, and he never regretted that. Not for a second. Plus, we still got to travel, just with you kids in tow. He wanted you to live the life he didn't, but he wouldn't have traded the life he had for anything."

She exhaled. "He wanted you to have adventures, but also to find love, too. I want that for you as well. It's what any parent wants for their child. Love and happiness. You've got the adventure lined up with your new job, but maybe Morgan's an adventure you hadn't bargained for. An exciting, unexpected one. If she is, and you like her, be open to it. If you want to make it work, you will. You can have a new job *and* a new girlfriend. If it's on offer, why not have it all?"

A loud, clattering crunch of metal made them both jump. Ali's blood froze.

Her mum dashed into the lounge. "You okay?" Her voice was frantic. Neither of them could bear anything else happening to someone they loved this year.

"It's outside," Nicole shouted.

Ali dashed to the window. Two cars had smashed into each other almost outside the pub. On Christmas Day of all days. Smoke spewed from the yellow car's bonnet.

"Is someone dialling an ambulance?" Ali shouted. She ran through to the

lounge, where Nicole nodded, talking into her phone.

“Let’s go down and see if we can help, shall we?”

Ali nodded at her mum. They grabbed their coats and keys, went through the pub, which Ali always found eerie when it was empty, then unlocked the door to the street.

It was only when Ali got up close that her heart jumped into her throat and her bones turned to jelly.

She stopped, then stared. Her pulse sprinted, then screamed. All the air left her body. She couldn’t quite process what she saw.

Because Morgan sat in the driving seat of the sunshine-yellow car.

Walt, the old guy from their plane, was in the other.

They’d had a head-on collision. Both airbags were fully inflated, and blood oozed from Morgan’s forehead.

Ali immediately ran around to Morgan’s door and tried to open it, but it was crinkled from impact and jammed shut.

She rattled the handle and banged on the window. “Morgan!”

Please let her be okay! Ali put a hand to her hair and pulled. Why had she said all those things when she didn’t mean them? Why had she let Morgan think she was willing to let her go? She wasn’t. She wanted her in her life. But now it might be too late to tell her.

“Morgan!”

They’d only just found each other. She couldn’t lose her now. All the potential futures she’d imagined overnight exploded into a million fragile pieces. Ali’s heart sank to its knees, trying to piece her future back together. Blood roared in her ears.

“Morgan! Stay awake, you hear me? Stay awake!”

She didn’t open her eyes.



ALI PACED the waiting room in the A&E, flashes of doing exactly the same thing this summer with her dad far too fresh in her mind. She still remembered the nicotine-coloured walls, the posters with curling edges. This room only had a tiny window, which meant a severe lack of light and hope while you waited for any news. Ali's mum sat on the edge of her blue plastic seat, ready to spring at any moment. Being back here wasn't easy for either of them.

Her mum checked her watch, then stood up. "Shall we go outside for a bit of air? I always find hospitals so stifling."

Ali bit her top lip. "I don't want to miss any news."

"They've only just taken her in, and she was stable in the ambulance. We won't hear anything for a while yet."

Her mum was probably right. Ali followed her out into the cold, biting air. She pulled her scarf close. "You sure we won't miss anything?"

"Positive," her mum replied. "I have more experience in hospitals than you, remember? Plus, anything's better than sitting and thinking about the last time we were here."

Ali stepped forward and pulled her mum into her second hug of the day. She squeezed her tight.

Her mum shivered in her embrace.

"Thanks for coming with me."

"Good job I hadn't had a drink so I could drive, isn't it?" She held Ali at arm's length. "She's going to be okay, sweetheart. They're just checking her out as a precaution. But she was talking when she got out of the ambulance they said, so that's a good sign."

Ali knew all of that on the surface, but until she saw and spoke to Morgan herself, she wasn't going to be calmed.

Her mum steered her to a nearby bench, and they sat down. Ali leaned her head on her mum's shoulder and took a deep breath.

"We slept together. Twice. But I told her nothing could happen because I

was going to America. Bad timing.”

Her mum’s arm snaked around her. They sat like that for at least a minute without talking.

“But this has made you see that maybe you might have feelings for her?” She paused. “I have to say, the whole gingerbread thing was a big sign.”

Ali swallowed down, then nodded. “It doesn’t make any sense. We only slept together for the first time two days ago.”

Laughter from her mum. “I told you about when your dad and I met? In that bar in Tenerife? How I knew he was going to be important to me by the end of our first drink, even though he didn’t know, the dozy berk.” Her face creaked as she smiled. “Plus, this is not out of the blue, is it? You’ve always liked Morgan. It’s not just a few days. She’s been in your life for decades.”

Did everyone know about her crush on Morgan? She guessed when you were little, it was hard to hide things. Even when you were an adult. Apparently, baking gingerbread on Christmas Eve is a dead giveaway.

Ali wriggled out of her mum’s embrace and sat back, lifting her head to the sky. Right at the moment, it started to snow.

Her mum mirrored her stance, and they both opened their mouths, letting the snow fall in.

“I asked your dad for some snow and he delivered.” Her mum raised a thumb in the air. “Cheers, love!”

A tear stained Ali’s cheek, but she smiled all the same. “Happy Christmas, Dad!”

They sat side by side, laughing through the tears, mother and daughter getting their thoughts in order before they spoke.

“Have you spoken to Morgan about going, about how you’re feeling?”

Ali shook her head. “I didn’t truly know until I saw her in that car. I wanted to dive in and rescue her. She can’t be hurt.” Ali would never forgive herself.

“She won’t be.” Her mum’s fingers wrapped around Ali’s. “You haven’t

spoken at all?”

“We have. She wants to see where it goes. Even if I go to New York. She said she’ll wait for me, and come to visit.”

“I don’t see a problem, then.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t go to New York at all. Maybe I should move closer to home to see you more. I’ve been a bad daughter this year, I know.” Ali slumped forward as she spoke.

“Don’t talk nonsense. Your dad got one thing right—this is a great opportunity, and you’re not passing it up for me. You’re going, no question. Coming home when you don’t want to *would* make you a bad daughter.” She squeezed again. “Look at me, Ali.”

Ali sighed, then straightened up. She turned to her mum, her eyes still glassy. But no matter what, her mum always had her best interests at heart. Even when her heart was clearly breaking being back here.

“If you think Morgan is someone who could be important to you, what’s the harm in trying? If it doesn’t work out, at least you tried. New York isn’t the moon, you can come back, she can visit. Just not when I’m there, because I want my little girl all to myself.” She leaned in and kissed Ali’s cheek. “Don’t put your life on hold in any area. It’s short. Grab happiness where you can, while you can.”

“You sound like one of those cheesy posters.”

“I like those cheesy posters.” Her mum gave her a wink, then shivered. “While this snow is lovely, it’s also freezing. Shall we go in and see if Morgan’s family has found her yet? They might appreciate a friendly face.”

Ali got up and held out her hand. Her mum took it.

“I know you’re worried, but try to smile. Morgan will appreciate it when you see her.”



AN HOUR LATER, Ali's black Docs squeaked on the shiny corridor floors as she carefully carried two coffees back to the waiting area. When she arrived, Mrs Scott stood there, red eyes, mascara streaked down her face. Ali almost dropped the coffees, but held on. When she put them down, Mrs Scott wasted no time in pulling her into a bear hug.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am to you both!" she said when she let Ali go. "You calling the ambulance right away, being there on the scene, then calling us, too. You really saved the day. Luckily, we were already here, so we didn't have far to go."

"Have you seen Morgan?" Ali needed to know.

Mrs Scott nodded, her wiry bob static. "I have. She's fine. I mean, shook up, but more concerned about the other driver. Who is also fine. You two know him, I believe?"

Ali nodded. "He was on our flight back. The one we never took. His daughter lives in Dartmouth."

"Apparently he was on his way to get cranberry sauce from the corner shop, and he was checking his sat nav and not looking where he was going. He was very apologetic, and luckily, they're both walking away with cuts and bruises, but nothing else."

Relief soaked Ali to her very core. Ever since she walked out the door of Morgan's family home last night, she'd had a sense of foreboding she'd done the wrong thing. Even when Tobias and her mum pointed it out, she was still on the fence. But this accident had shown her what was important to her.

That was Morgan.

It had always been Morgan.

Her whole body filled with warmth at that thought. She needed to see her, to tell her what she felt. To tell her she'd changed her mind. She really hoped it wasn't too late. What if Morgan had banged her head and realised the past few days were something to be chalked off? There was only one way to find out.

“You must be so relieved, Diane,” her mum said. “I know if that was Nicole or Ali, I’d be frantic.”

Diane threw up her hands. “I know! Both daughters in hospital on Christmas Day doesn’t sound promising, does it? But luckily, they’re both fine. One of them, in fact, has just given birth.” Her face lit up as she spoke.

“That’s wonderful news!” Her mum hugged Diane.

They’d known each other all their lives, too. Standing at the school gates. Toasting their daughters’ successes. Lifting them back up after they fell down in whatever way. Ali was suddenly immensely grateful to them both. These wise, wonderful women. She hoped she became half the woman they both were.

“What did she have?” Ali asked.

Diane’s smile, if it were possible, got even wider. “A girl. They’ve called her Camille, after my mother. Born on Christmas Day and named after the woman who simply adored Christmas. It really couldn’t be more fitting.” She leaned over. “I’m going back to see the new arrival and her parents. Roger’s in with Morgan right now, but poke your head in. She’s been asking for you. She knows you were there. Kick him out, have a little time for yourselves. Just the two of you.” Diane wrapped her fingers around Ali’s hand, held her gaze, and squeezed. “I think she’d really like that.”

CHAPTER 31



If cooking dinner solo hadn't been how Morgan anticipated spending her Christmas Day, a car crash and a hospital stay trumped that by a country mile. If she'd seen a script of her life over the past week, she'd have sent it back to the writer's room, telling them it was too far-fetched. But it was real. Morgan had the bruises to prove it.

She stared out the window. It was snowing. Where was Ali right now? Was she still here, or was she back at the pub, staring out at the snow? She still wasn't sure it was romantic, but she'd always remember the last few days as just that. Whatever happened next.

When she'd opened her eyes and seen Ali's scared face in front of her own, Morgan had panicked. Did she look that bad? Was her leg about to fall off? She was in shock. Maybe the pain would come later. But none of it had. Instead, she'd been whisked away in an ambulance, and she was still very much alive.

Someone clearing their throat made Morgan look up. When she saw who it was, the sun came out in her heart.

"You came." She sounded croakier than she'd imagined.

Ali gave her a shy smile. "I did. I was hardly going back to my Christmas Day after seeing you in a crash, was I?"

"I hoped not." But Morgan hadn't dared to dream. "Are you coming in?"

She patted the edge of the bed beside her. “Sit, please. But don’t judge me. I might not look my best.”

Ali shook her head and followed Morgan’s instructions.

When Morgan saw what was in her hand, a grin spread across her features. “Are those for me?”

“I couldn’t turn up empty-handed, could I? Especially not for the chocolate-giving queen.” Ali put the box of Celebrations on Morgan’s bedside table. “It’s about time someone brought you a box of these, isn’t it?”

Morgan nodded as hope bloomed inside. “Nobody ever brings me chocolates.”

“Maybe that’s about to change.”

Morgan gulped, but didn’t allow her brain to wander. She was still alive, and simply having Ali this close made her limbs relax. She sensed something had changed since last night, but she wasn’t sure what. However, after the day she’d had, she wasn’t leaving anything to chance. She reached out her fingers and brushed them along Ali’s forearm.

Ali stilled, caught her gaze, then grasped Morgan’s fingers in her own and squeezed.

Morgan’s eyelids fluttered shut briefly. Her chest ached with anticipation.

“I saw your mum. She said you were okay. Is that true? No internal issues?” Ali’s voice cracked with concern.

“I’m lucky. Walt wasn’t going too fast, neither was I, so we should both be fine. He popped his head in when he was being wheeled on the trolley to apologise.” Morgan shook her head. “It wasn’t all his fault, though. I was trying to change the radio station because ‘Stay Another Day’ came on and you know what I think about that. It’s not a Christmas song.”

Ali put a hand to her forehead. “Will you let that go? The irony is, I want *you* to stay another day. We all do. Please, from now on, accept East 17 for what it is.”

Morgan gave her a weak smile. “I’ll try.” She peered closer. “I like your

shirt. Are they dogs or foxes?"

"They're bloody reindeer!" Ali pulled the material out. Now she looked closer, they did look a little like foxes. With small antlers.

Anyway.

She eyed Morgan and shook her head. "I was so worried when I saw you. I feared the worst." She paused, her eyes searching Morgan's face. "But it made me realise what's important. What I want. What you mean to me."

Morgan tried to sit up, then winced. Somehow, she didn't want to be slumped for this announcement. She wanted to be upright and fully present.

"Do you need help?" Ali got up, plumped up a couple of pillows, and helped Morgan sit up. She stopped midway as she drew back, their gazes connecting.

Morgan put a hand on her arm.

Ali glanced down at it, then back up to Morgan.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Morgan couldn't be sure until Ali said the words. "You know what I want to happen, but I have to hear it from you, too."

Ali gave her the faintest of nods. "I'm saying, seeing you in a crash made me realise I don't want to be without you. The thought of something happening to you was too real and if anything had, I would have spent the rest of my life regretting it. And yes, my original point still stands. It's terrible timing. I'm just about to live in New York."

Morgan's grin ripened to the point of splitting. "I've always loved New York."

Ali laughed. "I'm glad, because you might visit more than you'd bargained for." She paused. "Morgan Scott, if you're prepared to deal with our time and distance differences and see where this goes, then I am, too." She leaned in closer, so their lips were now inches apart.

Morgan's heart thumped in her chest. She wasn't sure this amount of adrenaline was great for somebody who was just getting over a car crash, but

honestly, she didn't care. If she was going to die, there were worse ways to go than having Ali Bradford telling her she wanted to make a go of things and laying a kiss on her lips.

"Turns out," Ali continued, "I'm not quite over my childhood crush."

Then she moved her lips forward and pressed them to Morgan's, making Morgan's heart dance like nobody was watching.

Last night, as she'd slept fitfully, Morgan hadn't thought this would ever happen again. If that had come true, it would have been a crime. Now, even though Ali's kiss was light, tentative—Morgan was lying in a hospital bed—it still lit up Morgan's body. Ali's lips painted visions of a future in Morgan's mind. A future filled with kisses, with laughter, with love.

When Ali pulled away, Morgan blinked. Love? She wouldn't say that just yet. She didn't want to scare Ali away when she'd only just come back onboard.

But what a Christmas Day this was turning out to be. One for the ages.

Ali's gaze roamed Morgan's face, concern flickering in her eyes. "That didn't hurt, did it?"

Morgan laughed, then wished she hadn't. With her bruises, laughter was not the best medicine.

"Your kiss did the opposite of hurt. It gave me hope." Then she closed her eyes, embarrassed.

But Ali squeezed her hand. "I couldn't sleep last night, questioning everything. All throughout today, I was thinking about you, wondering what you were doing. Something wasn't right. I hope I would have worked out that I liked you too much to lose you. Enough to give us a go. But someone once told me I am notoriously glass half empty, and they might have a point." Ali screwed up her face and gave Morgan a rueful smile. "I'm really sorry for everything I said and did, for all the ridiculousness that blurted out of my mouth. My only defence is that I'm completely stubborn and stupid."

Morgan smiled. "You're only a bit stupid. But a lot stubborn. Good job

you're also gorgeous and finally come to your senses, isn't it?" She paused. "Are you finally admitting this might not be a festive fling? That you might just have feelings for me?"

Ali laid the lightest of kisses on her lips, then nodded. "Of course I have feelings for you. How could I not? You're Morgan Scott. The woman of my dreams. Now a reality who's not as perfect as I always thought. Which is a good thing." Ali paused. "But to be clear, you *are* perfect in a lot of ways, though."

Morgan's grin reattached itself to her face. "What ways are those?"

Ali cocked an eyebrow. "You're pretty darn kissable, for one. You've got great tits." Another kiss. "And I almost cried when I opened your present last night. That was perfect."

"I'm glad you liked it. I'll look forward to you playing me something later. Plus, I thought it was about time I made up for my crimes of 30 years ago." Morgan gazed into Ali's eyes. "But I'm curious. How am I not perfect?"

Ali flicked her head to the window. "You don't think snow's romantic, and you think romance is for summer. Have I changed your mind on that one?"

"I think you're living proof that romance and snow are the perfect couple."

They both stared out the window as the snow fell in droves.

Ali sat on the bed, her bodyweight warming Morgan deliciously. "A little like us?"

"I hope so." Morgan had never meant three little words as much in her entire life.

"Plus, if you're coming to New York in winter, they have bucket loads of snow, so you might have to get used to it. I bought you a present that'll help, too."

"I'm intrigued. Just don't make me ride a tandem bike in a snowstorm

again, okay? Once is enough to last a lifetime.”

Ali let out a howl of laughter at that. “Pinky promise.”

They were both silent for a few moments. The weight of their words and decisions settled on them like a cashmere blanket.

“I’m really glad you’ve changed your mind.”

“Me, too.” Ali moved her mouth from side to side. “You sure you’re up for it? I might be there over six months. It could be a year. Maybe two.”

Morgan shrugged. “We’ll cope. I can visit and work from there. Plus, there’s Zoom, WhatsApp, phone sex.” She laughed, then winced with the pain. Ali fussed over her, but Morgan shook her head. “I just need to stop laughing. Say something serious, please.”

Ali stroked her chin with her thumb and forefinger, then held Morgan in place with her gaze. “Serious, huh? Okay, how about this.” She hopped off the bed, then got down on one knee.

Every organ Morgan possessed froze. Her heart, her lungs, her brain. What the actual fuck?

“Morgan Scott,” Ali said.

Morgan ground her teeth together as her psyche screamed.

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

Oh thank the fucking stars!

Ali jumped to her feet, shaking with laughter. “You should have seen your face.”

“I said serious, not heart-stopping!”

Honest-to-fucking-god.

“I’m sorry.” Ali leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I just couldn’t resist.” She paused. “You haven’t given me an answer, by the way.”

Morgan rolled her eyes. “It’s a yes, although it should be a no after that stunt.” She pressed her head back into pillows, glanced out the window, then back to Ali. “What a fucking Christmas Day. It’s snowing, I’ve got a ridiculously hot girlfriend, and a new niece.” She stared at Ali. “Life is good.

A wise woman once told me I might meet the love of my life on New Year's Eve. Now, are you going to spend New Year with me this year in Glasgow, girlfriend?"

Ali leaned forward again and kissed Morgan's lips. "I thought you'd never ask."

EPILOGUE



One Year Later

“CAMILLE!” Annabel sighed. “Josh, will you grab her before she crawls right across the bar and pulls over the massive tree?” Josh was already on it, squatting down to scoop up his toddler daughter. He then stuck his face into her stomach and blew a raspberry, which drew giggles from the little girl.

To Ali’s right, her mum and Diane sat at the end of the table, laughing about something and drinking a glass of Chablis. Her mum’s fake tan was far more bronzed this year. She’d told the whole family to destroy any evidence of last year’s dodgy orange hue.

They were also all under strict instructions to not get in a car this year, either. “No hospital visits this Christmas. Everybody understand?” Diane had told them the night before. There had been nods all round.

What a difference a year made.

At the table set for 12, Morgan’s dad reached over and popped another pig-in-a-blanket into his mouth. Then he sat back, patting his stomach. “I need to stop eating those, don’t I? The trouble is, they’re so moreish!”

“You’re not wrong, Roger.” Nicole leaned over and got one for herself and Stuart, then one for Harrison, who was thankfully non-flying this

Christmas. This year, he'd come dressed as a dinosaur, which meant he just had to roam around and roar. Everyone preferred the dinosaur to Superman.

Over the past year, with Morgan flying back and forth to see her and vice versa, their families had become more friendly. So much so that when Elaine had invited the Scotts over to spend Christmas Day at the pub—"with no one else, not open, just us!"—they had readily agreed. Diane and Roger had brought an array of elaborate desserts and a cheeseboard for afters, while Ali and Morgan had taken charge of the dinner. As Morgan had told anyone who would listen all day long, "I did it all last year and nobody appreciated it. This year, it would be nice if someone did." Morgan had done most of the cooking, but under her watchful eye, Ali had become a useful sous chef. She could cook far more than a tortilla these days.

"That was a gorgeous dinner, even if I say so myself." Ali rubbed a hand up and down Morgan's thigh as she spoke.

Morgan slipped her a sultry grin. "Not that I want to do it every year." She turned to her dad. "You and Mum can take over again any time you like."

But Roger shook his head. "No, it's over to you now. Plus, we hardly ever get to enjoy your cooking these days. You're in Glasgow or New York, so it's a treat when it happens."

Ali felt a little guilty about stealing more of Morgan's time away from her family, but they'd survive. She'd flown back into Glasgow on December 20th, and together, she and Morgan had hopped into Morgan's snazzy new purple Mini (replete with furry festive dice), and driven the length of the country to come home for the holidays. After last year's calamitous trip, they'd both agreed they were taking no chances. They'd managed the drive in just over eight hours, with not a single hiccup. Their luck was changing. That was definitely true, as proven by the past year.

Roger leaned over and refilled their glasses with the Shiraz he'd bought.

"I like your shirt, by the way. Very jaunty," he told Ali.

She glanced down. “Thank you. I thought I’d be clear this year and go for something obvious after last year’s fox/dog/reindeer headache.”

Morgan smirked. “I love your foxy reindeer shirt. But this one’s good, too. Christmas trees are always a winner. We should send one to Dave, the Christmas tree man.”

“He would love it!” Ali had already made sure everyone in Glasgow shopped with Dave for their tree, Morgan and Tobias included.

Nicole, dressed in an eye-popping bubble gum-pink dress, turned to Morgan. “How are you feeling about relocating for good? I can’t believe you’re going, by the way. You hook up with my sister, almost become my sister for reals, and then you bugger off to New York.” She gave an exaggerated eye roll, then winked at Morgan.

Ali loved that as well as landing the most gorgeous girlfriend in the world, Morgan and Nicole had got closer in the past 12 months, too.

Morgan took a sip of her wine before she replied. “It’s not forever, but I’m looking forward to living in the Big Apple. Who wouldn’t be? I can live out my American dreams in the city that never sleeps.”

“I’m sure you’ll have a ball. I’m just jealous.”

Morgan poked Nicole’s shoulder. “You know the solution? Come and see us. We’ve got a lovely apartment with a very comfy sofa bed.”

Ali nodded. “I’ve told everyone the same. That includes you and Diane, Roger.” She’d said the same to her mum, and eventually got her to visit in September for a week. Getting her away from the pub for that long had been a feat. Ali hoped they’d be able to perform the same magic next year, too.

Ali’s job had gone very well. So well, she was now an integral part of the team, and was likely to stay in New York for at least another year, maybe more. All of which meant that after careful consultation with her employers and potential clients in the US, Morgan had taken the leap and was about to move to be with Ali. Long distance had proved a challenge they were up to, but Ali couldn’t wait for the moment they were both on the same continent

and in the same time zone every day. She couldn't wait until they were sharing the same bed every night.

Morgan had visited almost every month when Ali hadn't flown back herself, and they'd already had some magical times in their new home city. If Ali had thought their first kisses and sex were good, they'd built over the year to spectacular levels. But it wasn't just about sex. It was about love. She'd told Morgan she loved her at the top of the Empire State Building. Morgan had said it right back, and they'd kissed, long and hard. After being so worried and fearful that long distance simply wouldn't work, Morgan had showed her it could. That if you really wanted something, you could make it happen.

Ali really wanted Morgan, and the feeling was mutual. One year on from their spectacularly eventful Christmas, their lives were just about to get more settled than ever. Mundane. But if it was mundane with Morgan Scott, Ali would take it any day.

She leaned over and laid a kiss on Morgan's lips, then gave her girlfriend a beaming smile. She was certain they were going to stay the distance. That Morgan Scott would one day be her wife. If she had any say in it at all, Ali was going to make it happen.

"What was that for?" Morgan kissed her back.

"Just because you're you."

They stared, then laughed. They did that a lot. Whenever they were in Glasgow, Tobias told them they were nauseating. Ali could live with it.

"Hey, lovebirds." Ali looked up, and was nearly struck in the head by one of Camille's flailing legs. "Can you take her for a minute so she doesn't swallow the pub? We need to get madam's birthday cake sorted before we do dessert."

Ali took the chunk that was Camille and kissed her cheek. She wriggled in her arms. She smelled of sugar and spice, probably because she'd just smudged some of Diane's delicious mince pies into her chubby cheeks.

Camille pressed her sticky fingers to Ali's nose, and Morgan smiled her way.

"You look good with a baby," she told her.

Ali grabbed Camille's hands in hers and gave Morgan a look. "Don't be getting ideas." Camille danced on Ali's lap, rocking her tiny bum back and forth. "Although you are cute, aren't you? Happy birthday, Camille. What a year it's been. I hope your first year of life has been as good as my most recent."

Morgan leaned over and kissed Ali's cheek. "Couldn't possibly be," she told her.



THEY WALKED BACK to Morgan's family home, even though it was a 45-minute trek. Morgan had favoured getting in the cab with her parents, but Ali had insisted on the walk to get some air. Plus, it was still snowing lightly, and she wanted to make the most of it.

"You love snow, now, admit it." Ali snaked an arm through Morgan's.

"It's the most romantic thing ever," Morgan replied, one eyebrow raised. "Did you have a good Christmas Day? The first one with our blended families?"

"It was the best. Fab to bring everyone together, and I think it's really helped Mum to have your family around this year. We all still miss Dad, but with so much love and laughter in the air, you don't get as much time to mope, do you?"

That was the plain truth. This year had been hard, but they'd got through all the milestones once now: Dad's birthday, Christmas, her parents' anniversary, Father's Day. She knew grief appeared at odd times, but she also knew that with Morgan by her side, and her family strong and happy back home, she could cope. Life had a funny way of working itself out sometimes. This was one of those times when all her stars had aligned. Especially now

Morgan was moving to New York to be with her.

Sometimes, Ali felt like she was living in the pages of a romance novel, but it was actually her life. She woke up grateful they'd reconnected every single day.

"We're driving back the day after Boxing Day?"

Up above, the stars twinkled at them, just as they had the year before. To Ali's right, a neon bar sign flashed on and off in the front window of a house, proclaiming to the world they had 'Cocktails!' Had anybody ever knocked and asked for one?

"Yep," Morgan replied, blowing out a breath of smoky air. "I've got a bit of work to do, and then it's a Hogmanay party for the ages at yours, right?"

"At Tobias's flat, not mine. He's fully paying the rent now he's officially moved in and not just house-sitting. Means we're not responsible for clear-up, which suits me fine."

"I'll second that." Morgan pulled Ali close. "I heard from Imogen and Sam. They're coming to the party, bringing a couple of their friends, too." They'd met up with Imogen and Sam when they were back in Glasgow in the summer, and got on great. Imogen never tired of telling the story of how they met, and how she knew Ali and Morgan should be together before they did. Ali knew it would come up again at New Year.

"The party will be heaving, but that's just the way Tobias would want it. He'd be so ashamed if nobody came."

"He doesn't have to worry," Morgan replied. "Did I tell you he knitted me a scarf after I told him I liked yours?"

Ali nodded. She was thrilled that Morgan and Tobias got on so well. They met up when she wasn't there, and Morgan's new scarf was a warm grey colour with blue hues. It really brought out the flecks of teal in her gorgeous eyes. Tobias had also adopted Snowy the cat, but Ali and Morgan were both frequent visitors.

"The morning after, can we go to Francesco's for a dirty hangover

sandwich?”

“Of course, I would expect nothing else.” Morgan stopped Ali under a streetlight, then before she could say a word, she leaned down and kissed her.

All Ali’s thoughts flew from her head, and her feet lifted off the ground. Or at least, that’s how it felt. Morgan’s kisses had that effect on her. She only wished she’d started having them earlier in her life. But now she had them, she would never let them go.

She stared up into her rich gaze. “Today has been ideal. Just like you. I love you, Morgan Scott.” She never tired of saying it.

The skin around Morgan’s eyes crinkled as she smiled. “I love you, too, Alison Bradford. My original glass-half-empty girl, now transformed into a glass half full.”

Ali frowned. “I reserve the right to be glass half empty when I want to be.”

“Of course you do.” Morgan laughed, then kissed her again. “You think we’ll be in New York for Christmas next year? They have a Ferris wheel on Coney Island. I looked it up. Perhaps we could go when I move.”

Ali gave her a doubting look. “No fucking way you’re getting me back on one of those again.”

“Not even if I promise to kiss you again?”

“I can kiss you any time now. I don’t need to be 100ft off the ground to do it.”

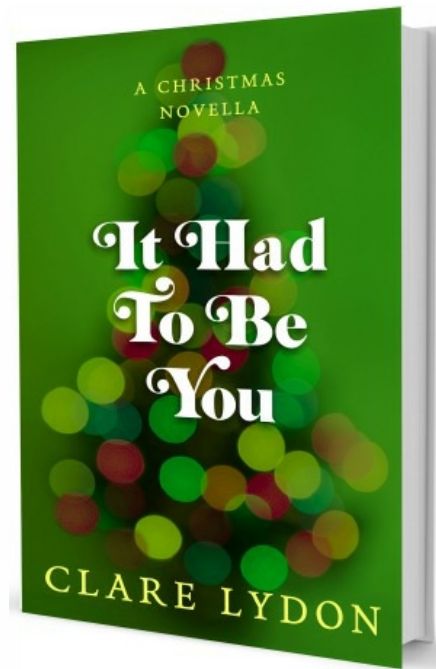
“Although my kisses sweep you off your feet, right? Just so we’re clear?”

Ali rolled her eyes. She was incorrigible. “You’re a fucking magician,” she told her. “Happy?”

Morgan grinned. “I really am. More than I ever thought possible.”

THE END

If you've enjoyed this book and want to read more, you can download a **FREE festive lesbian romance** *It Had To Be You* by clicking on the cover below:



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I love Christmas. The movies, the music, the lights, the food. But most of all, I love the lead-up to the big day, with all the anticipation that involves. I love that everyone is in the mood to celebrate. I love that for a few days, everything stops, and you get to take time off. I don't wish it could be Christmas every day as that would take the magic away. But I'm thrilled we get to anticipate Christmas and be in the mood for three months every year. Consider this boxset the start of your festive celebrations.

I hope you enjoyed reading *All I Want For Christmas*, *Christmas In Mistletoe* and *The Christmas Catch* as much as I enjoyed writing them. Somewhere along my writing journey, I got known for writing Christmas stories that make you laugh. I hope all three of these hit your funny bone and left you feeling festive.

Which is my favourite? I couldn't possibly choose. Tori and Holly was my first, and also the first nailed-on romantic comedy I ever penned. Fran and Ruby's story got me in the feels with its eccentric cast and glorious setting. Who doesn't love a Christmas Tree farm?

Meanwhile, *The Christmas Catch* puts my two leads, Morgan and Ali, into a myriad of tight spots. I loved making them suffer, but I also loved the journey they went on and how they came out the other side. Their story is about finding love where you least expect it, and overcoming adversity. Your worst days might turn out to be your best. That's what Morgan and Ali discover.

Thanks to all my early readers and my ARC team, you really are the best at catching my last-minute errors, and making sure my books are the best they can possibly be.

Heaps of praise to my wonderful team of talented professionals too: Kevin Pruitt for the Christmas-tastic (with bells on) cover (and Rachel Lawston for *Christmas In Mistletoe*). And a tip of the nib to the original editing trio of Laura Kingsley (RIP), Cheyenne Blue & Kelli Collins for their eagle eyes and brains. Also, to my wife for supporting me at every turn, and for indulging my Christmas obsession with good grace and humour. You're the best, darling.

Finally, thanks to you for buying this book and supporting me on my writing journey. I appreciate it more than you could ever know. I write a new Christmas book every other year, so expect another in 2024. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, and merry Christmas!

If you fancy getting in touch, you can do so using one of the methods below:

Website: www.clarelydon.co.uk

Email: mail@clarelydon.co.uk

MY CHRISTMAS FAVOURITES

I love Christmas, so here's a list of my top Christmas things...

Christmas Film

This is a straight toss-up between *The Holiday* (Kate Winslet & Cameron Diaz looking gorg) and *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Because let's face it, the original Dickens was a bit dull, but added muppets = winner!

Christmas Tune

'Last Christmas' by Wham! takes it by a whisker, just ahead of The Pogues and Kirsty MacColl's 'Fairytale of New York'. Shout out for Phil Spector's 'A Christmas Gift For You' also, which is spectacular.

Christmas Food

Mince pies, with custard or Bailey's cream. Delish.

Christmas Drink

Mulled wine or mulled cider.

Best Christmas Present

'Now That's What I Call Music' Vol I. I was a chart-obsessed child. All

those hits in one place? I almost fainted.

Worst Christmas Present

A doll. A garlic baguette holder. A bottle of Sandalwood perfume. Thanks, Mum.

Christmas Decoration

Twinkly lights and mistletoe.

Christmas Event

Christmas markets! I heart Christmas markets! Particular good ones in the UK are in Bath and Birmingham. But mainland Europe does it better, natch.

Christmas Memory

Hiring Margate Youth Hostel for five days and spending Christmas there, along with nearly 50 of my family. Warm, fuzzy feelings!

Christmas Treat

Anything by Lindt. Reindeer, Santa, Snowman. I'm not fussy.

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I hope you enjoyed this festive boxset, *Christmas Romance Galore!* If you have a moment, I'd also really appreciate an honest review on the site you bought it on. Reviews are hugely important as they encourage new readers to take a chance on me — if my book's got some reviews, they're far more likely to give me a try. So if you'd like more books from me, please take a moment to leave your thoughts. And it doesn't have to be a novel — even a few lines makes a difference and every review means so much!



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