

THE ART OF CHRISTMAS

1

THE BOYS OF CHRISTMAS

2

CHRISTMAS AT THE
LITTLE VILLAGE SCHOOL

3

From award-winning author

JANE LOVERING

CHRISTMAS TREATS BOX SET



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BOOK 1: THE ART OF CHRISTMAS

An utterly perfect Christmas story about new beginnings

JANE LOVERING



May the hard bits in your mince pies always have a reasonable explanation.

Chapter One

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The attic was powdered with dust and mascara'd with webs, and the Christmas tree was in the corner, half-buried in a chaos of paper as though a semi-literate poltergeist had blown through. This was the first time in eighteen months that I'd been up here. I hadn't bothered with Christmas last year and now the tree looked as though it was paying me back for my neglect of the previous festive season by trying to play hide and seek with some spectacularly oversized spiders. It was clearly losing, since several spiders had taken up residence amid the plastic fir cones, where I could see them waiting, legs drawn up, like really scary coiled springs.

I stopped, head and shoulders through the hatchway, and my breath stuttered. First time in eighteen months. First time I'd been up in this attic since Jonno died . . .

He hadn't meant to die, of course. I would imagine that most husbands don't — they could just get a divorce which would be easier on everyone and not involve so many vol-au-vents. But sometimes, as my friends reminded me, shit happens. Shit, like a heart attack out of nowhere, visited on a healthy-seeming thirty-five-year-old man, leaving me with a house I couldn't afford, a job I was good at but didn't like and a bunch of friends who seemed to expect me to shrug off my grief, and party like a newly-single woman almost as soon as the last 'In Deepest Sympathy' card was off the mantelpiece.

That grief settled around me again, as tangible as the dust caught in the reluctant winter sunbeams insinuating themselves through the roof tiles. Eighteen months. That's how long it had taken me to really come to terms with Jonno being gone. That's how long to stop waiting for the car on the drive, the key in the door, the heavy arm over my shoulders in bed. It felt, sometimes, like a lifetime, and to stop waiting felt like betrayal.

'Right, Harriet.' I used my firmest voice, the one that generally worked on my office colleagues. My words puffed out in little clouds on the icy air. 'We can do this. Small steps, but it's time we had Christmas again.'

And then I cried for half an hour.

Christmas had always been us, me and Jonno. Ever since we'd got together, what, eleven years ago? I leaned back against the crumbly brick wall, rocked there by the shock of how much of my life had been lived with him. Eleven years. A third of my entire life, eleven Christmases of amalgamating the best traditions of both our families, of putting up the decorations on the fifteenth of December, and the Christmas Eve jokey balloons and mince pies. And now — I wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my fleece — now I had to do it without him.

There was a box of baubles in the corner. Assuming a smile which would have caused any onlookers to have me committed on the spot, I pulled it over to the hatchway and then went in after the tree, which seemed to have crawled back even further into the dust, as though it too wasn't quite sure if now was really the time. *Maybe another year*, it seemed to say, shrugging the dust more firmly around itself, like a dirt duvet, *maybe in another year you might feel more like celebrating . . .*

Getting the decorations down had always been Jonno's job — in fact, I remembered, as I negotiated a relentlessly disused rowing machine and a cardboard box labelled 'Car Manuals', the attic had been his province. While I'd annexed the conservatory for my sewing machine (almost as disused as the rowing machine, it had to be said) and the big spare bedroom was filled with my somewhat cack-handed attempts to decoupage a fire screen, Jonno had taken over the attic. My heart juddered again as I saw the fingerprints along the edge of a plastic-wrapped bundle, prints blurred by time and the increasing dust. Traces of Jonno. Like the lone sock I'd found down the back of the bathroom radiator when I'd half-heartedly painted last summer, the twisted-framed sunglasses in the depths of the kitchen drawer. Little

elements, like pieces of a jigsaw that I'd caught and held in the deepest part of my sadness, as though if I could collect enough of them I could rebuild him.

If you'd had children . . . my treacherous brain tried to whisper, as I picked my way over to the tree, but I stopped those thoughts dead in my head. Distracted them with the physicality needed to try to move the bundle lying directly in my path. Whatever it was inside this plastic wrap was heavy and lumpy, and I had a momentary fear that this was all going to end with me finding out that Jonno had been a secret serial killer who'd hidden portions of his victims in this very attic, carefully wrapped in plastic film and visited on special occasions.

Too much TV, Harriet. Too much imagination, and too much time spent on your own exercising it. I told myself off. Too much time alone, wasn't that what was at the bottom of all this sudden desire to return Christmas to the calendar? Maybe a few very small parties, sausage rolls with the neighbours and a couple of the girls from work round for drinks? A slow, careful return to the social person I'd been when Jonno and I . . .

The tree lay on a raft of flattened and bent pretend twigs, like the victim of a polyurethane hurricane. Jonno had never been any good at packing it away, every Twelfth Night had seen him drag the tree up to the loft with a lot of swearing and a few thumps, and that was the last I'd see of it until the following December the fifteenth, when it would emerge minus a lot more needles and with its trunk a little more realistically gnarled. And somehow . . . I panted as I tried another hold on the bundle . . . he'd managed last time to get it wedged behind these plastic-wrapped lumps that I was *fairly* sure weren't body bags. They'd been heaped neatly, ziggurat-fashion in front of the tree, like a monument to Christmas memories, and I had no idea how Jonno had ever circumvented them, particularly whilst shoving six feet of imitation Scots pine through a hatchway. I tugged heftily at the plastic wrapping. It stretched ridiculously whilst refusing to budge its contents, and then tore where those needled branches of the tree that had remained realistically upright jutted into it. It tore a little more and coloured papers were revealed. Brightly coloured covers with lettering in fonts unknown to human eyes . . . Oh. I stood back as I realised what I was looking at, another section of Jonno's collection of what he would sigh and tell me were 'graphic novels, Harry. Serious stuff.' A small slice of a world I'd never really been

part of, his attraction to computer games and their offshoots; collectible figurines of improbably-proportioned women in gravity-defying clothing; cartoonishly drawn people, their stories told in speech bubbles and blocky panels. All alien to me, and an unexpected, if slightly stereotypical, fascination of my computer consultant husband.

He'd tried, of course; wanted to share his hobbies with me with an enthusiasm that sometimes bordered on the annoying, and, when I returned the favour, he'd turned out to be irritatingly better than me at handicrafts. But that was Jonno. Focused and painstaking. He'd showed me the detail in the coloured panels that gave depth to these stories, detail I would never have noticed by myself. I was too busy trying to read the text and race on to the next part of the story. 'Slow it down, Harry,' he'd said, covering the next page. 'Take your time. Take in the little stuff too.'

But I thought I'd have time. That I could learn to love these graphic novels, that we'd have years for him to educate me in the art of telling a story in artwork. And I wished, on a daily basis, that I hadn't been so dismissive, so impatient of his love of these novels that made medieval illuminated manuscripts look understated. Wished I'd had Jonno's patient and meticulous nature. Wished . . . that it had been different.

Once I'd managed to stuff the tree through the little access hatch and it had arrived on the landing carpet, divested of the large number of spiders that hadn't seen its passage across the attic floor as a hint that now might be a good time to look for new accommodation, I dug my old diary out of the bottom of my bag.

'Foxton Collectables, stockists of graphic novels, anime, manga and SF merchandise, how can I help you?' said the voice at the other end, slightly breathlessly reciting its way through the list as though in a race to get to the end before the caller hung up.

'Hello, it's . . .' I began, echoes of the last time I'd had to make a call like this were booming away in the back of my head.

'Harriet, right?' The man on the other end sounded as though he was smiling. 'Harriet Tennyson? Sold us a load of graphic novels, what, a year ago?'

'Uh . . .' was all I could think of to say.

'We don't get a lot of women ringing in.' Now the voice sounded a bit apologetic. 'Don't get a lot of *people* ringing in, to be fair, most of the

dealing we do on the net. Or in person, yeah, don't want to give the impression all our customers are the sort that hide away and won't come out before dark.'

I got a sudden mental image of a man. Tall and lean, with fair hair bushing from his head at improbable angles, he'd come to the house and capably dealt with the stacks of magazines and boxed figurines that Jonno had collected over the years and installed in the big cabinet in the living room. He'd been wearing a *Doctor Who* T-shirt and, even in my wobbly, shocked state I'd noticed, a pair of very tight jeans.

'Yeah, and you had an impressive set of *Final Fantasy* figures, top range.'

'Did I?'

Now the voice softened. 'Oh. Yeah, sorry, it was your husband's . . . I mean, he'd just . . . you were . . . I'm going to stop talking now.'

I found, almost against my will, my mouth had formed a smile. 'It's okay. Look, I was up in the attic and I found some more . . . graphic novels, and I wondered if you would want to buy those too? I don't have room to store them and I'm probably going to move sometime anyhow as soon as I can afford it, so . . .' *Move? Am I?* I hadn't even realised I'd thought of moving. Even though this house was too big and in negative equity, far too expensive for me by myself, it was the place I'd bought with Jonno. Moving would be like . . . *like getting over his death?*

The voice was talking again. It was a calm, steady sort of voice, as though the man at the other end — the blond man I couldn't help fixing in my head in the *Doctor Who* T-shirt, as though it was painted onto his chest like one of Jonno's figurines — was used to remaining as an island of cool in a sea of all-hell-breaking-loose. '. . . come tomorrow,' he was saying. 'Would that be okay?'

'But it's nearly Christmas,' I said.

'The dog's presents are bought and wrapped and I can kill myself on a mince pie overdose any time this week. Unless you mean you were entertaining? In which case, all you have to do is let me see the stuff and I'll give you a quick decision and be gone before your guests have time to say "Isn't he wearing a Utopia badge?". Or not, I mean, I'm not questioning the SF awareness of your friendship base here.'

'I just thought you might be too busy.'

‘Listen.’ There was a sudden whistling kind of emptiness down the phone. ‘That is the sound of the shop right now. Like I said, most of the business is done on the net these days, I mostly just keep the shop for show and to have somewhere to put stuff, the flat is full of dog hair and there isn’t much room for anything else.’

That unwitting smile had broken out on my face again. I could feel the tightness of my cheeks where muscles unaccustomed to use were flexing. ‘Then, yes tomorrow will be fine. I’m in all day, I’m taking some holidays that were due to me.’ Being forced to take holidays due was more like it. My constant presence in the office was beginning to make people nervous about their own jobs, and it had become a bit of a competition to see who could get in earliest every day. I won, of course. Nothing to stay at home for.

‘That’s great. My name’s Kell Foxtan, I’ll be with you around twelve?’

I gave Kell the address and hung up. I propped the tree up against the wall in the hallway and then went back up to the attic to work out how best to move the stuff down to the landing.

The graphic novels were carefully wrapped, as though Jonno hadn’t wanted even dust to get into them. I slid the first one from the pile and gave it a cursory glance. The cover was a moody red and black drawing of a girl on a motorbike, riding through what looked like a post-apocalyptic version of London. It had the title ‘Corinthia and the Bear’ lettered across the top and looked as though it had never been opened.

I flicked a few pages. Panel after panel of images flickered in front of my eyes, and it dawned on me that the girl in most of them, who seemed to be the Corinthia of the title, looked a little bit like me. Oh, she was more dramatic than me, all cheekbones and eyes, but her short hair and face shape with the dark eyebrows and roundish eyes made us similar. The Bear, I soon found out, was the name of her motorbike, on which she was jaunting around the British Isles following an unspecified ‘end of the world as we know it’. In this first edition she had found herself alone, coming around after falling into some kind of tunnel. Disorientated and confused, she was trying to find someone who’d been with her, a friend or lover, I deduced from the single-page panel which formed the middle of the novel.

In between reading, I got the tree down into the living room, where it stood alone and undecorated in a room that was still in a state of upheaval after a year of ‘about to be painted’. I’d been overcome with a flush of

wanting to change things, make the place look different to the one I'd shared with Jonno, but I'd lacked . . . still lacked . . . the energy to do anything about it, other than move some furniture and try a couple of sample pots on the wall. Consequently, it looked as though I was favouring the 'patchwork' school of home decorating, and that a busload of trainee removal men had come round to gain their BTEC in 'shoving stuff up against the walls'.

On the page, Corinthia frowned at the mess her life had become.

Chapter Two

I was up early the next day. No, I was *always* up early, but today I was up early to make sure that Kell Foxton didn't find me amid chaos. I threw a few random baubles on the tree, which was now carefully propped up in a makeshift stand formed from a bucket filled with bags of sugar, and tried to tidy the furniture so that the space didn't so much resemble a waiting room. Looking outside I could see that neighbours had their Christmas lights on, trees stood centrally in the big bay windows that typified these Edwardian houses, as though everyone was advertising their readiness for the season through the medium of decorated forestry products. I looked over at my bucketed plastic spruce, now at a 45-degree angle, as if the glittery balls and silver pine cones were far too heavy for its branches, and suddenly the whole of Christmas seemed too much trouble. What, after all, was the point? My parents were spending the season with my brother and his family; a carefully bred selection of half-Scottish overachievers. My workmates had families and friends. I had thought about volunteering myself to a centre that served Christmas dinner to the homeless, but had lacked even the energy to do that.

'You're lucky,' I muttered to the black and white illustrations showing Corinthia, her trademark flappy coat blowing behind her as she started up The Bear and rode through deserted streets, a monologue detailing her general despair iterated over her head in spiky balloons to show their internal nature. 'At least *your* society has collapsed and doesn't expect you to be agonising over white sauce versus custard in the company of half a dozen people you don't even like.'

I turned the page to see Corinthia, in a head and shoulders portrait, her words in a speech bubble. 'You think?'

I put the novel down and made myself a cup of tea. Should I offer Kell a hot drink when he turned up? Was that the kind of behaviour that was expected of someone selling the last of their husband's meticulously ordered and much-loved collection? I stared around the kitchen, last year's calendar picture of a startled owl illustrating May stared back. May. The month Jonno died. The calendar still bore the faint blue biroed lettering on the twenty-first, reminding us both that we were due to attend a dinner at his company that evening, and some scribbles he'd made on various days, of appointments and

meetings. I'd tried, really I had, to turn the page and reveal June's 'Hillside with Sheep', but the emptiness of the days, their lack of any marks to show that Jonno or I even existed, had stopped me. So, in this kitchen, neat, clean and precise though it looked, it was still eighteen months ago. A time warp back to when things had been normal.

I glanced down at the graphic novel I'd pulled from the pile and brought with me, almost unconsciously. Corinthia, her collar pulled up around her ears, was hunched into her coat, scanning the landscape from the back of The Bear. She was waiting for someone. Someone who had 'information' about her lost partner. The sense of danger in that one black and white panel made me close the book. There was something about her vulnerability, the frailty of that elongated figure straddling the powerful bike, that made me fear for what would happen when the 'someone' turned up. Somehow the artist had managed to fill his illustrations with a feeling of impending doom that made me feel like shoving the whole pile back into the attic and picking up a year's supply of *Heat Magazine* as a kind of antidote. Finding out what someone who'd once been in *EastEnders* had worn to go out to the shops might defuse this sense that something, somewhere, was horribly wrong.

'Oh, stop it, Harriet.' I'd taken to talking aloud to myself lately. Plenty of people do it, I told myself (not necessarily aloud), it's not the sign of a deranged mind, it's the sign of someone who likes a little bit of noise but hasn't yet resorted to *Homes Under the Hammer* running in the background, or a deep and abiding fetish for the local TV weatherman. I took a long, steadying breath that seared the back of my throat, and realised how cold the house was. I'd become so used to this vague chill that I hardly noticed it now, but it did occur to me that Kell might wonder if I'd got a touch of the Miss Havishams and that he might decline a cup of tea on the grounds that he suspected I'd be using pre-War teabags. Thank god I hadn't gone to the extremes of getting a cat — it's one thing to be thought of as a mad widow, it's another to reveal a penchant for Persians and remove all doubt.

I turned the heating on. In deference to the fact that I wasn't entirely sure how I was going to pay the electricity bill, I lowered the thermostat, but even with it set at a cool sixteen degrees, the house felt warmer. More home-like and less like a containment vessel for sadness. Even the rakishly-angled tree stopped looking quite so pathetic and took on a stylish, artistic appearance, as though the few baubles were a statement of something other than apathy. I

opened some of the cards that I'd been sent but had languished still in their envelopes and put them on the mantelpiece, then sat down with a few more editions of *Corinthia* and *the Bear*, to wait for Kell.

Corinthia had problems. She fought off an attack from a gang who wanted to steal *The Bear* for spare parts to repair their vehicles. She didn't dare leave the area for fear of missing this 'someone' who had information, so she hid out inside a warehouse. I found myself curiously sympathetic to her, she seemed so damaged by what had happened to her and yet was forced to be so strong and not show any vulnerability because of the expectation of attack. My tea cooled as I finished first one, then two editions, drawn into the story by some skilful writing and sparse but beautiful illustrations, which showed how it must be to exist in a world where all you ever knew has gone, and simply holding on to what you have is all you can do.

The knock at the door was sudden and interrupted *Corinthia* from an internal monologue, spiky bubbles revealing how conflicted she felt about her existence. It made me jump, a sensation I'd forgotten. All my adrenaline had drained away during those first few months in the cocoon of loss and I'd thought surprise and shock were impossibilities.

'Harriet Tennyson?'

The man on the doorstep had elements of the man I remembered, but put together in a different way. His hair was blond, but instead of being bushy, it sat sleekly, tucked behind his ears. In place of the T-shirt, under a coat that made him look as though a grizzly bear was attempting to hug him to death, was a collarless buttoned-up shirt, and the incredibly tight jeans were replaced with black chinos. It felt a bit like seeing an actor that you vaguely recognise from another role. 'Yes. Hello.'

'Kell Foxton.' He held out a hand. 'You're expecting me? About the graphic novels?'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' I shook his hand. A leather bangle around his wrist rolled down and brushed my fingers.

'You just looked a bit startled. I thought you might have forgotten I was coming. By the way, you can stop shaking my hand now, I think we've gone past the introduction stage and into the "this is weird".'

I snatched my hand back. I'd got so absorbed in the feel of another skin against mine, the sensation of touch and the cool leather of that bangle, that I'd held on far too long. Oh god, had I inadvertently done the 'desperate

widow'? Was Kell, who seemed about my age within a year or two either way, wondering if he'd been lured here under false pretences for breakneck sex or lechery? 'I'm sorry.' I stared down at my own hand, as though it was a badly-behaved dog. 'I'm a bit distracted.'

Kell smiled. 'No worries. Can I come in, or are you going to bring them to the door?'

Again I'd slipped into behaving as though I'd forgotten how social interactions went. Work was fine, my role in the office so defined over the years that I didn't so much go to work as put it on, like a suit. But here, in my house, where I had used to be so sociable, this renewing of old behaviours felt odd and forced.

I stepped back and let him inside, then led the way through to the living room. He shucked off the coat as he followed, revealing shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and draped it over a chair. 'Nice, err . . . tree,' he said. 'Very avant-garde.'

'It's my first time celebrating Christmas.' I tweaked self-consciously at the branches.

'Recent convert or did you just beam down from somewhere? Oh. Sorry, you meant since your husband . . . sorry.'

Well, that put us even for the hand-shaking faux pas. I found I was smiling. 'Yes. I'm just getting back into practice and I thought I'd start with that.' I nodded at the tree. 'And then I sort of ran out of steam.'

We both stared at the tree. As though the weight of our collective gazes was physical, the tree sank slowly down its sugar-packet counterweights until it leaned against the wall. A bauble fell off and rolled sadly along the carpet, coming to a stop at Kell's leather-booted toes. 'Mmmm,' he said. 'So I see.' He picked up the shiny red ball and looped it back onto the tree branch, then hoisted the whole tree upright. 'I'm not much of a fan of Christmas myself either,' he said, wedging it steady. 'But Frodo always enjoys it, so I make an effort. And, to make things even sadder, Frodo is my dog.'

I had a sudden vision of a dog, wearing a Santa suit, sitting expectantly at a dinner table surrounded by opened parcels. The whole thing was so incongruous, so completely unexpected, that I snorted with laughter, my throat constricting around the laugh as if to stopper it back into my body. Had I laughed since Jonno died? I couldn't remember. 'Seriously?'

With an inclination of his head, Kell pulled a wallet from the chinos and

flipped it open. 'Seriously,' he said, holding out a picture as one might show off a photograph of a baby or wife. The picture showed a dog of indeterminate size, spaniel-like ears and a black and white coat. His mouth gaped and a tongue flopped in a comic fashion from the side.

'Frodo.'

'Yup.'

'He looks . . . um . . .'

'I'm a sad person, I know.' Kell folded the wallet closed again and shoved it back into his pocket. 'But he's my Significant Other so I think I'm entitled.' Then he must have caught a glimpse of my expression because he added, hastily, 'Oh, not in a pervy way, grief, no. Just that I'm on my own and he's the constant presence in my life. Nothing sexy. Never felt that way about Frodo, honest.'

I felt my lips twitching again. 'I hope it's not because he's black,' I said.

Suddenly Kell was laughing. He had a deep, booming sort of laugh that seemed to come from somewhere other than his body, as though he was conjuring it out of the air, head thrown back so that his hair flopped over his forehead. 'I think . . .' he said when he could draw a breath, 'that is the first time anyone has ever pulled me up for *not* being sexually attracted to my dog.' Another deep breath. 'And just to reassure you, colour comes nowhere on my chart of "things not to fancy".'

I found I was looking down at my feet, at the carpet, at the tinselly scatter of fake needles which the tree managed to drop despite being plastic. Anywhere but at him. 'Kell is an unusual name,' I said, to the swirly pattern on the rug.

'My parents went to Dublin before I was born. Mum was impressed by the Book of Kells. I have to consider myself grateful that they didn't go to Hereford and lumber me with Mappa Mundi Foxton as a name.' He seemed quite happy to drop the subject of things he might possibly fancy, and I was pathetically and rather effusively glad. For some reason I didn't want to go anywhere near that particular topic of conversation. 'She's easily influenced by ancient manuscripts. Talking of which, these graphic novels you want cleared out?'

Gradually I inched my eyes up from the carpet. They crept, almost independently, up the length of those chino-clad legs, over the expanse of shirt, and up to that stubble-raked chin before coming to rest on an expression

which was somehow simultaneously gentle but business-like and topped with a pair of hazel eyes under brows the same golden brown as his hair. He had an easy kind of air to him, as though he'd be equally at home at a football match wearing his team colours, or walking through a town centre in a pale pink hoodie. Or standing in the living room of a socially inept woman . . . 'Oh, yes, sorry, that's what you came for, isn't it? They're over here. Well, some of them are, the others are still up in the attic, I just brought down a few to . . . I was reading them.'

'Don't look so ashamed, that's what they're for.' Kell gave me a grin that creased the corners of his eyes in a way that made him look simultaneously older and more boyish. 'I'm sure they can take a bit of being read.'

I picked up the first book and held it out to him. 'There's an awful lot of them, I'm afraid. If you don't want to take them, that's fine, just say.'

His reaction was startling. On sight of the cover his skin paled from the 'tanned during summer but naturally, not on a sunbed' tone to a washed-out white that made his unshaven cheeks look almost transparent, and one hand reached out, then withdrew. 'I . . .' he said, then sank down to sit on the sofa, eyes still fixed on the luridly coloured cover, where Corinthia straddled The Bear in that ruined landscape. 'Gah.'

'Are you all right?' I dropped the comic onto the floor and he winced. 'Do you need some water?'

His eyes never left Corinthia. 'Do you know what that is?' His voice was hoarse.

'Inoculated with anthrax, by your expression.'

'No. It . . .' he leaned forward and dropped to his knees as though he was about to start praying. A tentative finger reached out, almost brushed the cover, but withdrew. 'Is it? I mean, really?'

'Okay, the dog-as-significant-other was fine, now you're just being strange,' I said.

Kell sat back on his heels and looked up at me. He rubbed both hands over his face, then cupped them over his eyes, finishing by sweeping his fingers through his hair. 'I feel like I've had a religious experience.'

'Well you're not having an epiphany in my living room. You want that sort of thing, there's a church at the end of the road.' I felt 'stern' was the only possible approach to take, there was something dislocated about his expression that made him suddenly ridiculously attractive, and being that he

was on his knees in my front room and this was the first, even slight, stirrings of finding anyone appealing since Jonno died, I was going to play the 'school mistress' until it hurt. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'That.' Again the extended finger. 'That is Corinthia. It's like . . .' Slowly he got to his feet, ' . . . it's like the Holy Grail. Nirvana.'

'I've got the album somewhere,' I said, going for the quip because he looked so serious it was almost frightening.

Suddenly his hands were on my shoulders as though he wanted to shake me. 'Harriet.' His voice was quiet, intense. 'What you've got there, Corinthia. It's . . .' A headshake. 'It's amazing. It's a rumour, a fable, the sort of thing old graphic novel sellers tell their children about in hushed tones when they want them to be good. It's . . .' he turned to look at it, lying innocently, if slightly crumpled, on the floor beside us. '*It's real.*'

'Well of course it's real. It's cluttering up my attic.'

'Can I touch it?'

'As long as it's the novel you're talking about, then yes. Of course.'

He bent, almost in supplication, and picked up Corinthia. Stroked her cover. 'Wow. And these are the ones you want to sell? Seriously?'

'Assuming that if I say "yes", I'm not going to be struck by a bolt of lightning.'

He smiled, but I didn't think it was at me. 'Nick Grey and Joss Kerry. The dream team of writing and illustrating, a sort of Posh and Becks of the graphic novel world. They were just starting out when they did Corinthia, just getting settled into styles and formats, but because no one knew they would take off like they did, this was only published in very tiny numbers. Maybe a couple of hundred sets worldwide? And then, well, we all know what happened . . .'

'Humour me.'

'Nick Grey went on to write *Starman*, the most popular graphic novel of all time . . . come on Harriet, you *must* have heard of that one!'

Now he was looking at me, his hazel eyes alight with a fire of excitement. 'I think Jonno made me watch the film,' I said. 'But I put my foot down about the sequel.'

'And Joss Kerry is hanging in the Tate Modern these days. Well, not personally, but you know what I mean. And *this* . . .' he gave Corinthia a reverent shake, ' . . . you are sitting on a gold mine here, do you understand

that?’

A gold mine. Out of negative equity, sell the house. Move somewhere with no memories of Jonno . . .

‘Seriously?’

‘Do I look as though I’m joking?’ Kell flipped the novel open and stared at the first panel. ‘Or do I look as though I’m having some kind of anxiety attack? Gods. I need to think about this one.’

I looked at the picture too. Corinthia, standing alongside a tipped Bear, leaning heavily on the handlebars. Just emerging from her coma, just finding herself. Her eyes were wary and lonely as she looked around for her companion in the emptiness of a tunnel underneath Big Ben. *She’d lost the person she relied on. I know how that feels . . .*

There were goosepimples pricking at my arms.

A sudden burst of music made me jump, although Kell hardly reacted, he just slapped at a pocket. ‘Sorry. My alarm, got to go.’ Then he tore himself away from the black-clad charms of the girl with the motorbike and grinned. ‘Fro won’t walk himself, y’know. But thanks for . . .’ His gaze drifted back to the panels as though to a particularly exquisite triptych. ‘If it never goes any further than this, still, thank you. For giving me the chance to see that it was all real, that this really exists.’ He laid Corinthia down on the sofa cushion, as though her comfort was paramount.

‘Why wouldn’t this go any further?’ Then, feeling unwarrantedly as though I’d sounded like a thwarted girlfriend, ‘I mean, I still need to get rid of these.’

Kell tilted his head at me. ‘Harriet, you still don’t understand what you’ve got here. Me handling this, it’d be like sending a Chippendale chair to the local car boot sale.’

He was still looking at me. There was a tension in him that hadn’t been there before, almost as though the top of his head was attached to the ceiling, pulling him tauter, levitating him. *He wants this so much, but he’s prepared to let it go for you to get a better deal. He’s honest. Kind.* ‘I don’t know anyone else, Kell. Will you sell them for me, please?’

The tension relaxed. His shoulders came down and his eyes lost the slightly pained expression that I now realised had been in them, the grin was back. ‘If that’s what you want.’ A hand came out. ‘Shake on it. But not to a ridiculous extent, of course.’ We shook. Again the physical contact was

startling, so warm and unexpected, and that leather strap brushed my wrist like something alive. This time I let go before it got embarrassing. ‘Right. Frodo calls. Well, he doesn’t, but if he could manage the buttons I think he might.’ Now the grin was wide. ‘This has been possibly the best day of my life. Corinthia and the Bear. Wow.’

‘You’re not taking them away?’ I walked him to the door. Outside the pavements were icing over, streetlights coming on and bouncing off the hard edges of cold metal and stone. Clouds were folded overhead, dark and threatening and silent, like ninja laundry.

‘Uh, no.’ He stopped on the step. ‘It looks as though it’s going to snow again, and I daren’t risk them getting wet. Or damp, or even slightly moist. They’ve managed with you all this time, I think they’ll be safe enough.’ A pause. ‘Are you busy tomorrow?’

‘No.’ And the word sounded bitter. ‘No, I’m in all day if you want to come and pick them up then.’

‘Okay.’ He wrestled his way into the big coat and left. Before he went I saw him glance over his shoulder and I half expected him to call out a ‘goodbye’ to Corinthia. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow then.’

I went back inside, through to the little study beside the kitchen. It had been designated as the playroom on the estate agent’s description, and when we’d come to look at the house it had been full of ride-on toys and plastic boxes of . . . well, mostly other plastic boxes, as far as I’d been able to see. Now it was another chilly space where an IKEA desk and a Mac competed for space with the box files of work that Jonno had brought home. On the desk, still, stood a wedding picture; both of us happy. Me in my green dress, the one everyone had told me was bad luck, smiling as though I’d won the lottery and beside me Jonno, tall and dark and handsome like the traditional groom. His smile was less broad than mine, but happy. So happy.

I usually talked to this picture of us. Talked to Jonno mainly, but I’d also opened a dialogue with my ten-year-younger self. Asked myself over and over again, if I’d known how grief-stricken I would be at the loss of him, would I still have fallen in love? If I’d ever considered it would be less than ‘forever’, would I still have done it?

The answers I gave myself varied. On good days, when I could begin a smile, the answer would be yes. Better to have loved and lost and all that. And on bad days . . . on days when the mourning never seemed to end . . . I

wished I had walked away that night in the bar when he asked me to dance.

Today I had no questions to ask, no words of wisdom to solicit from either Jonno or myself. I felt a bit dislocated, really, at finding out we'd had what seemed to amount to almost a mythical object sitting in the loft all this time. Jonno had never said anything about having bought a collector's item, he'd never mentioned Corinthia at all as far as I could remember. All the stuff he'd had up there was acquired at sales, at house clearances. Sometimes he'd stop in at specialist shops when we were out somewhere and have a poke through the *Doctor Who* merchandise, but I usually wandered off at that point and found a coffee shop or looked in windows until he came back out again.

Had he known what he'd got? Oh, don't be silly, of course, he must have. He'd bought some second-hand copies of early *Starman*, not the very first editions but the first series, and they'd been carefully boxed up and put away, only brought out when we had the kind of company that might be impressed by such things. But I knew about those. Those had been the first things I'd sold to Kell, the money that I'd got from those had kept the worst of the bills at bay until I'd got my life sorted again. So where had he got Corinthia from? Why hadn't he ever said anything? Or, even worse thought, had he tried, and I'd 'yes, dear'd and carried on reading or sewing? Not taken any of it on board, because it was just Jonno, just his nature to collect? And, after all, I hadn't *needed* to know back then, we'd been comfortably off with both of us working, so the financial aspect wouldn't have been uppermost in Jonno's mind to mention. A little needle of guilt poked me under the ribcage with the knowledge that he might have tried to tell me how important they were, but that I would have lumped them in with his plastic figurines and his extensive science fiction novel collection and assumed that they were only important to him. Not listened. Nodded and smiled and let the words flow over my head, because there was always going to be another day to listen. Another day to 'Look, Harry!'

Or maybe he hadn't said anything. Maybe he was keeping them as an investment to bring out and surprise me with when we really needed it, a surprise savings account that, seemingly, was increasing in value almost exponentially. Why would he have said anything, after all? We were always going to have *time* . . .

I sat down on the sofa and pulled open another copy. Here, Corinthia had found the mysterious 'someone'. She and he, for it was a man, a tall man in

buckle-sided boots and a rakish collection of clothing, were eating stolen burgers near a ruinous and rusty-looking London Eye. He told her, in staccato panels that expressed her shock, that her partner, the person with whom she'd been riding, the person she had thought she was searching for safety with, had betrayed her. Sold her out for her motorcycle, because apparently, fully-functioning engines had become a rarity, and it had only been her falling into the disused tunnel that had saved The Bear from being broken up for spares and herself from . . . well, the rakish man had tailed off at that point, but I think both Corinthia and I knew what would have happened to her, in this lawless world where she had, apparently, been part of the deal.

At that point Corinthia dropped her half-eaten burger, threw her leg over The Bear, and rode out. There were panels of her riding ridiculously quickly (her speedo gave that away) down a motorway otherwise only used by horses and carts. There was a grim set to her face that revealed her inner turmoil and desire for revenge, and I put the novel down again, impressed with the skill of the artist. In a few lines of pencil he managed to capture so many emotions, and so much detail about this post-apocalyptic life — from the rearing, scared horses on the broken-surfaced motorway to the shanty villages along the way.

'Jonno,' I whispered, into the silence, 'I think I might have finally got what you loved so much about these things.'

In the corner, the Christmas tree slid slowly back to its resting angle and another bauble fell off.

Chapter Three

This time when Kell knocked at the door, I was a little bit more ready. I'd put some mince pies in the oven, so the house smelled fruitily seasonal, and I'd propped the tree back up at a more acceptable angle. I'd even hung some more of the baubles, so the branches now had a jaunty, festive air, rather than their previous inclination towards baldness.

I opened the door to Kell, looking harassed. He blipped his keys and the lights on a big, elderly Volvo flicked in reply, and, from one of the windows, a dog's face stared semi-accusingly at us. 'Sorry,' Kell said, following my eyeline. 'I can't get back to Frodo today so I brought him with me. We'll have a turn in the park when I've done here.'

Frodo's nose smeared along the glass and a pair of sock-puppet ears waggled up and down. 'You can bring him in here, if you like,' I said. 'It's a bit cold to leave him in the car.'

Kell stared at me. 'No,' he said. 'I mean . . . no, I couldn't.'

'He can go in the office if you're worried he might disgrace himself.'

'It's more that he'll disgrace me.' Kell looked from the doorway into the hall, which, following a bit of a heavy-handed polishing and the upturn of the heating now felt almost inviting, and then back out to the car, where the nose was being liberally applied to each window in turn. 'Are you sure, Harriet?' Then his nose wrinkled. 'Oh lord, mince pies. I do hope this isn't some kind of precognitive karma.'

'Yes, I'm sure.' I held the door a little wider. 'They're forecasting snow later, and that car is basically a biscuit tin with electric windows. He'll be warmer in here.'

'Ah. You were right, up to the "electric windows".' He went up to the kerb and blipped the car open again. Inside, Frodo began to make a high-pitched singing sound — like someone who's forgotten the words to a really awful song — and ran up and down the upholstery. Kell reached inside, snapped on a lead and then withdrew, towing the small black and white dog that I'd seen in his photo. Frodo was just as smiley in the flesh, about the size of a cocker spaniel but nowhere near as easily identifiable.

'He's housetrained,' Kell said, once we'd all got inside and the door was closed against a rattling wind and some spatters of snowflakes. 'More or

less.'

Frodo smeared his nose up my leg. I'd changed out of the perennial 'weekend joggers' that I'd been wearing ever since I got home from work at the start of the holiday, and into a black dress and flat boots. It felt more 'Corinthia' somehow; more suitable to hand her over dressed as though I could have come from the pages, rather than as someone who'd not read a fashion magazine since 1989. Bending down, I fussed the nearest ear. 'What breed is he?'

'Part collie, part knitting experiment.' Kell smiled down at the black and white dog, who thumped his bottom down suddenly and began to scratch behind an ear as though mining for something. 'At least, we know his mum was a collie. She never talks about his dad.'

'Bring him through. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Actually . . . I brought you a present,' Kell said, startling me so much that I nearly fell through the doorway. 'To say thanks for . . . well, for giving me the chance to have Corinthia.' From somewhere deep in the recesses of the coat, he pulled out a rather lumpy parcel wrapped in shiny paper with cars all over it. 'Sorry about the wrapping, but I'm rubbish. And sorry about the paper, but I've got nephews.'

I stared at the package. 'Kell, you shouldn't have,' I said, not in a 'how lovely' way but with more horrified tones in my voice. 'You're only getting her because I don't know anyone else.'

'Yeah, I know.' He seemed a bit embarrassed, bending down to fondle Frodo's ears. 'I just thought . . . honestly, it's nothing much. I also got this . . .' From another pocket he withdrew a bottle. 'Which definitely isn't anything much if the price is anything to go by, but we should really drink to this. It's like finding out that the Titanic didn't sink at all but was really just in someone's garden pond all along.'

'Thus making several terrible films redundant.' I put the gift down on the hall table. 'Unclip Frodo and we can put him in the office for now, where it's warmer. I'll go and get him a mince pie, does he like mince pies?'

Kell and I both looked at the dog. A small stream of dribble was issuing from the corner of his mouth. 'I'm going to say "yes".' Kell unlooped the lead. 'But he's eaten chairs before, so, you know, he's pretty unfussy.'

'Better keep him away from Corinthia then.'

'Oh don't worry, anything valuable stays in the shop. Been there, done

that, got the papier mâché. Have you got a corkscrew? We could have a glass of this now and then I'll be all right to drive.'

'I think there's one of those in the office too.' I led the way down the hall.

'I like the sound of your office more and more.' Kell followed me in. Frodo instantly went under the desk as though he belonged there, curled around himself twice and then lay down, with his head on his paws and a thin trickle of drool covering his muzzle. 'A place for dogs and a way of opening wine, what more would you need?'

I smiled at him as I went to dig in the drawer for a bottle opener. My face felt as though it had relaxed since he turned up, as though smiling was becoming easier and easier. He smiled back, and screwed an eye closed in a wink, revealing long eyelashes and a dimple in his cheek that made me feel suddenly hot and bothered, causing me to start rooting through the drawer as though that corkscrew held the secret of eternal life.

'Hey. Is this you and your husband?' Kell picked up the photo from beside the computer.

'Yes, that's Jonno. Ah, there it is,' I retrieved the bottle opener and turned to see that Kell was tilting the picture towards the light. 'What is it?'

'I know him.' Kell was frowning. 'He's not been in for a couple of years, maybe more, but . . . yeah, I know him. Used to come in with . . . did he have a daughter?'

My heart gave a sickening double beat. 'No.'

'Pretty girl, blonde, mid-twenties. They used to come in together maybe a couple of times a month . . .'

He stared thoughtfully now at Jonno's face. 'Kidding about, having fun. She was pregnant, five, maybe six months along last time I saw her.'

My mouth had gone dry. Between my fingers the corkscrew metal was very cold. The point dug into my flesh and I realised I was holding it so tightly that the handle was slipping. I put it down very carefully, before I damaged something.

Kell propped the picture up again with a shrug. 'Yeah, well, they came to . . . Harriet? Are you okay? You've gone pale.'

All I could think of was Corinthia's face on finding out that her partner had sold her out. Her solo ride out across that ruined landscape. 'Maybe it was a friend,' I said, breathing in hard. 'Just someone he met.'

Jonno. My husband, my love. My soul mate.

‘Look, I’m sorry, I assumed . . .’ Kell pushed his hand through his hair and all I could focus on was the way that his leather wrist strap rolled down his forearm. ‘Actually I don’t know what I assumed, I’m sorry. I thought they were a couple at the time and now . . . I don’t know what I was seeing.’

‘Are you sure it was him?’ I clutched at the only straw left to me.

Kell shrugged and stared around the office, eyes settling on a hand-drawn picture of *The Avengers*, framed in plain wood and hanging on the wall. He made a sort of pulled-mouth and head jerky gesture, rueful and yet definite. ‘That’s one of mine.’

My mind fixed on that statement with a laser-focused desire to change the subject to something that wouldn’t hurt. ‘You drew it?’

A nod, and a sort of shrug. ‘Yeah, well. I trained as a graphic artist. Had it in my head that I was going to be the next—’ a snorted kind of laugh, ‘—the next Joss Kerry, I only had to meet my Nick Grey and we’d take the graphic novel world by storm. Never happened, I opened the shop. End of.’ He put the photograph carefully back on the desk. ‘I’m sorry if it was bad news,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise. They seemed like mates, friends, it didn’t look like . . . well, like he was shagging her, if that helps.’

I had my back right up against the wall. At my feet Frodo let out a little whine. ‘Jonno really wanted kids,’ I said, aware that my voice was thin. ‘I was pregnant when we bought this house; perfect house for children, Jonno said, even though it was a bit too much for us. Too expensive, too big, but . . . he wanted to fill the place with children.’ My inner eye could still see his face; that despair on the night when it all went so wrong. ‘I miscarried very late on and . . . well, I can’t have any more.’

‘Hey,’ Kell put a hand on my shoulder. ‘That’s rough.’

A chilly little nose dug its way into my hand, and when I looked down I saw Frodo, tail waving, sitting on my foot. ‘Yes. It was.’ I stroked the domed head, with the crown of curly fur that made the dog look as though he was wearing a bad wig. ‘So maybe he . . .’ The tears came without warning, without even the usual prick behind the eyes or thickening in the throat, they were just there, suddenly, curling their way down my cheeks as though they’d been carved from the block of my soul. ‘Maybe he found someone who could.’

‘Hey,’ Kell said again, and pulled me, unresisting, into his shoulder.

‘You don’t know. It could all have been nothing. You’ve only got my word for it that he came in with a woman at all, and you hardly know me, I could be the world’s Official Biggest Liar.’ A comforting hand between my shoulder blades gave a cross between a rub and a pat. ‘Or blind. Or prone to mistaking people’s mothers for their wives and stuff.’

He smelled good. There was a calm, clean scent to his skin, as though he bathed in fresh air and dried himself on clouds. There was none of the sour, indoors-dried smell of single-man clothing that I’d half expected. And while he wasn’t massively muscled and his biceps didn’t strain at the sleeves of his shirt, he felt strong. This revelation and my reaction must have rocked him too, but he showed no sign of fear over being the messenger, just a kindly sorrow at my tears.

‘You could be,’ I sniffed, my forehead pressed against his collarbone. ‘But I don’t think you are.’ I drew my head back and looked at him, cursing the lack of pockets that made this dress a tissue-free zone. ‘And I’m really sorry about—’ I stepped back now and tried to use the backs of my hands to wipe away the tears, ‘—about dragging you into something like this. You’ve only come round to pick up a few magazines and I’m giving you the full soap opera.’ The backs of my hands were stiff now with the remains of crying, and I’d run out of clear skin. I didn’t dare use my sleeve.

‘No problem.’ Kell handed me a tissue. It looked clean. ‘I should never have opened my mouth, and, by the way, should there be a smell of burning? I didn’t like to say in case it was some trendy new home fragrance thing, only I’m fairly sure that they don’t usually come with smoke-effects.’ He jerked an elbow at the hallway, which was misty, as though fog was creeping from the carpet.

‘Oh hell! I forgot the mince pies!’

Outside the study the smell of burning sugar and incinerated currants was much stronger. Frodo poked his head out of the room and then went back to curling up under the desk. He’d stopped dribbling. I dashed into the kitchen and wrenched open the oven, from which the smoke was issuing, becoming blacker and more threatening with every passing second.

Kell and I looked at the small charred lumps in the baking tin. ‘I think I’ll just have that glass of wine,’ he said, tactfully. ‘Those look as though they may have passed their best by some margin.’

I thought I might cry again. ‘I just wanted to try to do something

Christmassy,’ I said. ‘Otherwise, it’s just another day only with worse television.’

‘Hang on, that’s the *Doctor Who* special you’re dissing there.’ Kell ignored the smouldering lumps and opened some cupboards until he found the glasses. ‘Don’t worry about the mince pies, Frodo’ll eat them for you.’

‘Seriously?’ I looked dubiously at the baking tray. It had stopped smoking but the smell of burning fruit was hard to ignore. There was a plasticised rim of welded sugar crusting around each pie, making it all look a bit like a nuclear accident. ‘I don’t think they can be considered a food item any more.’

‘I told you.’ Kell poured some of the wine he’d brought into two glasses. I saw his eyes pass over the calendar, over the outdated owls and the faded biro scribbles. ‘He once ate a whole chair, cushion and all, so he’s hardly a Masterchef judge, is he? Just let them cool down a bit first, a dog with a burned tongue is not something you want to hang out with. He’s cornered the market in the “pathetic expression” and if it’s justified he is completely impossible.’

I hadn’t forgotten what he’d told me. It was lurking in the back of my mind like a dark ghost, waiting for nightfall to come and haunt me, whistling through my thoughts and filling me with images that overlaid the reality of the Jonno I’d known until he was almost invisible. Waiting, lurking. But for now, I could push it aside, concentrate on practicalities, pretend. ‘We’d better just have the wine then. Drink to Christmas.’ I sounded as though I wanted to celebrate Christmas about as much as I wanted to celebrate International Cyanide Day, but I managed to strain my mouth into a passable imitation of a smile, as I took the glass that Kell filled for me. ‘Cheers.’

Kell held up his glass, containing only about half an inch of wine, and made a wry face. ‘Cheers,’ he echoed. ‘Here’s to too much food, feeling randomly guilty about everything, and the dog eventually making himself sick on sprouts.’

I swallowed. The hot sour trickle of alcohol made its way down my throat, burning out the remnants of past Christmas memories and the knowledge that this wasn’t the life I’d planned. I felt suddenly cheated, of the life that should have been — furtive wrapping of presents for excited children — and the life that had been, Jonno and I visiting his parents on Christmas morning, his sister and her twins and then home for an evening of self-

indulgence and happy silliness. And now, cheated of the memories of what we had had. Had Jonno been lying to me all along? Was he ever happy with me?

‘You’re very quiet,’ Kell remarked and I jerked back into the here and now to realise that his glass was empty and the smell of dead mince pies had largely seeped out under the back door. ‘Are you all right?’

And I realised that really, nothing had changed. Whatever Jonno had done, whoever the girl had been, he was still dead. I was still here, making the best of a life. I tried another smile and this one felt easier. ‘Just thinking. But, yes, I’m all right.’

‘Could I have another look at Corinthia? I want to see how many copies you’ve got in total before I give you a quote.’ He put his glass down on the work surface. ‘What sort of condition they’re in, that kind of thing.’

‘Course. That’s why you’re here, after all,’ I said brightly. Something about Kell, something about the quiet, reassuring presence of him, had temporarily fooled me into forgetting that this was a business transaction. Of course he was going to be nice to me, we’d not signed anything yet. Corinthia wasn’t, as he might say, in the bag yet. My mind kept tripping over the fact that, although he was standing here in my kitchen drinking wine, and his dog was scrunched up under my study table, he wasn’t a friend. Although he seemed kind and genuine, he was here to do a job. ‘Come through. I brought a few more down from the attic this morning, but there’s still quite a lot up there.’

He stood and stared down at the pile. ‘Can’t get over this,’ he said, pulling at the legs of his trousers so that he could bend down and stroke the covers with a gentle finger. ‘That there was a set of Corinthia and the Bear this close, all the time. Wonder where he got them from?’

‘You’re sure it wasn’t you?’

He didn’t even look up. ‘As sure as you are that you haven’t got a diamond mine in your bedroom.’ He flicked the top copy and it fell open on a panel of Corinthia riding down that ruined motorway, her face full of betrayal and loss. ‘Beautiful. Look at that inking, it’s just . . . exquisite. And she’s just so lovely, isn’t she?’ Now he did look up, and I noticed the green and brown speckles, laid each over the other like a mosaic, that gave his eyes the hazel colour. There were fine fan-lines in the corners that spoke of a life of laughter, and dark shadows underneath that said that the laughter had

probably been some time ago. ‘So lovely,’ he said again, still looking at me.

‘I hope she goes to a good home,’ I said, looking through the page at Corinthia’s pain. ‘I mean, someone who will read her, not leave her all stacked up in an attic like Jonno did. Even if she is worth money, she should still be looked at.’

Kell smiled. ‘Yup. We’ll make sure she goes to someone who’ll appreciate her.’ In the study Frodo gave a restrained kind of whimper, like a polite clearing of the throat, and he clambered upright again. ‘That’s my conscience calling. Better not outstay my welcome, and besides, he’ll need a bit of a gallop around before we settle in for an evening of Heinz finest and a Netflix marathon.’ He didn’t sound self-pitying, but there was an emptiness that rang between the words.

‘How long have you been single?’

His head jerked up as though I’d pulled on his hair. ‘What?’

‘You haven’t always been on your own, have you? The way you talk about your life . . . like there’s something that fell out of the middle of it.’

He didn’t answer, but walked into the hall and clicked his fingers. Frodo clattered to his feet, sounding as though he knocked over every piece of furniture in the study on his way, and emerged cautiously, one eye seemingly still alert for the possibility of mince pies. The dog got a rather overenthusiastic fussing, and a clipping on of the lead that took longer than it should have done. Then Kell straightened and looked at me again. ‘She left me. It hurt. Drawings don’t do that,’ he said softly. ‘They’re there, fixed, and the story is always the same.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Three and a half years. She wanted more than I could offer, that’s all it was.’ His eyes slid down as though the floor tiles were to blame. ‘I’d asked her to marry me, she said she had to think about it. Evidently she did, because I came home one day and she’d gone, but she’d left a note detailing all the ways in which I was inadequate and would never amount to anything. Dunno what that was supposed to mean, I’m an artist, not a stockbroker.’ A toe swivelled around as though stubbing out the memories. ‘I guess we’d just run our course and she didn’t know how to tell me.’

Frodo looked at Kell’s face and then at mine. His tail moved uncertainly. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘You think to yourself “I’m happy and this is forever”, and then, life just turns it all upside down . . .’

‘Yeah.’ A moment of silence. Then he stroked the dog’s mop of fur and smiled again. ‘Still, there’s things like Corinthia that make it all worthwhile. Surprises, shocks — I guess you never know what’s going to come at you next and some of it—’ A glance down to meet the dog’s anxiously rolling eyes, ‘—well, it’s not all bad. Life can turn the other way when you least expect it, don’t you think?’

I felt the chill of the house. The emptiness of the rooms and the echo of what could have been. ‘Can it?’

Kell’s long fingers curled across the domed head, and Frodo’s mouth relaxed into a wide-mouthed dog-grin. ‘I think so. If Melissa hadn’t left me I’d never have got Fro. She wasn’t a dog person, apparently, but once she’d gone . . .’ Frodo let out a short bark and then went back to grinning. ‘He’s a rescue dog. Well, he rescued me, anyway. And I realised, once I stopped wanting to scream, she did me a kind of favour, really. I’d been drifting along, bit of art work here and there, but once I had a dog to support . . . well. I took on the shop, started earning proper money. Have to keep Frodo in chairs and Netflix subscriptions somehow.’

‘Did you give up your art?’

Kell gave me a quick glance, then went back to smiling at Frodo. ‘Some of it.’

‘That’s sad.’

‘I still draw. Sometimes. I lost it a bit after Melissa went, haven’t really done much since, but . . .’ He shrugged. ‘It’s coming back. Slowly.’

I didn’t know if he realised he’d done it, but his eyes flickered to the door of the office, just a twitch, but it made me think. ‘That Avengers picture? The one you said you drew?’

Frodo stood up and danced a quick circle. It was like watching a sheepskin rug rotate. ‘Yeah. Your husband persuaded me to draw it. He saw some old stuff I’d done, just hanging around in the shop and he asked if I could . . .’ Kell sighed, a breath that seemed to take him by surprise. ‘So I did. It got me drawing again, and I owe him for that.’

I had to look away. Let my eyes trace the smooth, featureless run of the bannister rail as it wound down to the polished, non-committal finial shaped like an acorn. *Jonno would have known. He was that sort of man. He’d have listened, picked up those little giveaways that Kell threw out, charmed and chatted and persuaded . . . Jonno knew that he’d got Kell his art back.* I felt a

warmth pass over me, as though someone had breathed softly on my neck.

‘Anyway, better go. I’ll leave Corinthia here a bit longer, put a few feelers out in the community for people rich enough to afford her.’ Kell’s voice was back to practicality now, and Frodo clicked his claws on the tiling, sounding as though he was drumming his fingers with impatience.

‘How much . . . ?’ Funny. Yesterday I’d been so consumed by the thought that I could sell these graphic novels, make enough money to offload the house and move, and now it wasn’t about the money any more. Even asking felt like disloyalty.

‘Harriet. Last year a single copy went for fifteen thousand pounds. I mean, it doesn’t just multiply up, but you’re looking at a decent-sized lottery win. Not first-edition Action Comics stuff . . . that one edition went for close on a couple of million pounds, but—’ a hopeful eyebrow-raise, ‘—nice little windfall.’ Frodo flumped his bottom back down. Evidently, leaving was postponed.

‘Wow.’ I stared in through the door from the hallway to where Corinthia lay, almost carelessly scattered beside the chair where I’d been reading. A light from outside momentarily reflected from one of the tree’s baubles and beamed a disco-stream illumination onto her face. ‘That’s amazing. And your commission would be, what?’

‘Standard ten per cent.’ A tight strain almost of excitement in his voice. ‘Enough to make a difference to me.’

Between us, Frodo got up again and circled at the end of his lead again like a performing pony. We stood for a few seconds longer in the hallway, a room whose main purpose was comings and goings and Jonno and I had loved for its size and the impression of space it gave to the house. Now it contained a curious feeling, as though he didn’t really want to go and I didn’t want to say goodbye. Frodo settled the matter by cocking his leg in a non-nonsense way against the newel post and letting out an emphatic amount of wee.

‘Shit! Oh, look, I’m so sorry, he gets a bit . . .’ Kell reeled the dog in on the end of his lead. ‘Give me a cloth and some bleach and I’ll . . .’

‘Get him walked,’ I said. ‘I’ll mop it up.’

‘Bugger. I’m really sorry, Harriet. Now I probably owe you another bottle of wine just to make up for Fro.’ Kell hunted through his pockets for the car keys, pulling them out and rattling them at Frodo, who kept his eyes

focused on the front door. He probably felt the whole thing had been a total let down, what with the entire house still being full of the smell of failed mince pies.

‘It’s fine. It’s only dog wee.’ There was a practicality to our conversation which made me feel almost as though I belonged back in the human race again. We were talking about plain, everyday things, the sort of things that occupied the larger portion of people’s time; a long way from expensive graphic novels or the realities of faithless partners. As though — and the thought crept across from my hindbrain — as though we *could* talk to one another about anything. It didn’t have to be life-changing, it could just be — I looked down at the yellow patch spreading slowly along the tiled hall floor — dog wee.

‘If you’re sure. Look, I’ll get some quotes and come back, get this all sorted before the world closes down for Christmas, okay?’

And that feeling of intimacy was gone, leaving me berating myself for seeing something that wasn’t there. ‘Yes, that’s fine.’ I opened the front door and Frodo took Kell outside at speed, leaving his call of ‘. . . later, then . . .’ fading on the wind as they chased across the road into the park, a dual outline haloed in snow for a second and then vanishing into the darkening air.

I looked around at the suddenly empty hallway. The ghosts of might-have-beens overlaid reality for a moment as I remembered again what the house had looked like when we bought it, an untidy buggy parked near the front door and miniature wellingtons lined carefully along the wall by the stairs. A life that could have been.

And then I looked through into the living room. A light from somewhere was shining gently in through the window, illuminating the cards I’d propped up on the mantelpiece. The still slightly lopsided tree looked otherworldly and promising, and the spilled pages of *Corinthia*, invitingly open, made the room look a bit like a magazine illustration. It looked seasonal, festive. The emptiness and the superficiality were all within me. Everything I needed to make Christmas Christmas was here. Okay, so I hadn’t got the life I’d expected, well, neither had Kell. Neither had a lot of other people out there, and at least I had a house, a tree, cards from people who cared enough to send them. And a pile of graphic novels that could be worth a small fortune.

My husband had had a relationship I knew nothing about. I could forget that fact, sweep it under the carpet, after all, nobody apart from Kell had ever

raised it as even a possibility. Everyone had remarked on how devoted Jonno had been to me. How we lit up in one another's presence, how self-sustaining our relationship had been, especially after the devastating loss of our baby. So I could forget. If I wanted to.

I sat down and pulled another copy onto my knee. *What would Corinthia do?*

Chapter Four

I woke in the middle of the night to the renewed chill. The central heating had clicked off at ten and I must have become used to the new warmth, because this cold was eating into my bones. I twisted and turned in the bed, huddling into the ghost of comfort that was the pile of pillows I kept on Jonno's side, but the end of my nose was so cold it dripped and my fingers stunned my face when I tried to wipe it.

Tea. A nice hot cup of tea. The answer to all of life's traumas. I dragged my dressing gown around my shoulders and headed downstairs, where the residual warmth seemed stronger. The slightly paler patch of floor in the hallway, where I'd scrubbed up Frodo's transgression with some bleach, broke my frozen face into a smile as I remembered the ridiculous ears and Kell's mortification, and the phantom trace of mince pie smell that the kitchen held made me smile even more.

Memories. I was making new memories that made me smile, I realised, as I plugged in the kettle. As though I'd held my life story in some kind of stasis from the point of Jonno's death up until yesterday. As though I'd stopped living on the day his heart stopped beating and just gone through the motions of keeping my body alive, while my mind circled the past like a well-hit Swingball. Maybe — I cautiously admitted the possibility, reaching for the loose tea and the pot rather than the more convenient teabags I'd been using recently — maybe I'd finally hit the post.

I took the mug (another departure, I'd kept to the tradition of tea in cups and saucers in the last eighteen months, to do anything that I'd done during my marriage would have brought back memories of 'the last time', coupled to tears and that feeling of loss) back up to my bed and sat under the duvet with another edition of *Corinthia*. The cold seemed less relentless now. The small circle of white light from my bedside lamp and its hint of the dawn to come seemed to drive the worst of the chill away and the hot tea did the rest, as I lay and read further into the life of the young woman in the bravado coat.

Look, Jonno. Finally, I know what you saw in graphic novels, a million words in each pencil line. The artwork that shows, rather than tells, a story. You were right all along, this is what art should be, so why did it take me so long to see it? I glanced, without meaning to, over to Jonno's side of the bed,

impersonal now. Pillows and cushions replaced my husband's curled body, a clear space on his bedside table where his glasses used to rest on top of a pile of graphic novels. Corinthia shook in my hand for a second as I teetered on the brink of tears, but the rattle of her pages brought me back. *Maybe you knew it would take this story, and these pictures of a girl who looks a little bit like me. Maybe you hid them for me to find if anything happened, maybe you're grinning to yourself now. That lopsided grin you always had when you knew you were right, and that 'I told you so' look in your eye . . .*

The tears were gone, replaced by another small, unsteady smile.

Corinthia had ridden the length of the motorway, trying to escape the thought that she'd been betrayed. North, to where a rising sea level had caused such severe flooding that most of the population had become refugees, who huddled in makeshift camps, wrought with disease. She'd ridden for help, The Bear meaning she could cross distances that the horses found impossible. Over the Pennines, in winter, searching for medical assistance, then back to Sheffield, now a coastal city. It gave me a small shiver when she talked about the ruins of York, my own home, being nothing more than reflections in the deep water.

And then, after she'd helped some survivors and seen others die, she decided she had to go back. Back to London, back to the person who'd given her the devastating news. She had, as she said to a man she was treating with an anti-malarial drug, to find out the truth.

* * *

'Kell? I'm sorry, did I wake you?'

He didn't sound sleepy. 'Nope. *Breaking Bad* marathon tonight. Just ran out of Doritos, so you rang at the right time. What's up, Harriet?'

I paused. Simply hearing his voice was reassuring. That there was someone else out there, awake and alive at this time of night, helped. 'This might sound a bit crazy . . .'

'Hey, I just went into finer plot points with my dog. You haven't really experienced "crazy" until you've discussed the death of Gus with someone whose idea of narrative structure is dribble.' Then his tone softened. 'You having trouble sleeping too?'

'Sitting in bed drinking tea and thinking,' I confessed.

'Better than sitting in bed drinking tea and not thinking.' Still a gentle

tone. ‘So. Presuming you didn’t just ring for the pleasure of hearing my voice?’

‘Is there any way you can find out who that woman was who was with Jonno? Anything at all you can remember?’

‘Harriet.’ There was a bit of movement at his end of the line, and the vague noises I’d been aware of in the background stopped. He must have turned off the programme. ‘Are you sure? You could be opening a box of worms that might be better off left in the ground . . .’

I took a deep breath. Inhaled the warm steam from the tea, felt the aloneness of my situation. ‘Yes. I need to know, Kell. Good or bad, it’s over now, but I need to *know*.’

‘Okay. Hang on a second.’ There was the sound of the phone being put down and then I heard the noises of Kell moving off, talking either to himself or Frodo softly, too quietly to hear. There was a moment of silence. I tucked the phone under my chin and wrapped my chilly fingers around the warmth of the cup, feeling the comfort of the heat and the knowledge that there was someone else out there, awake and talkative, on the other side of this cold night.

The noise started gradually. At first, I wasn’t sure what I was hearing, but it became louder by degrees until it was unmistakable heavy breathing. A slow, measured inhale and then a moist-sounding outbreath, interspersed with a grunt. ‘I really hope you aren’t doing what it sounds like you’re doing,’ I said. My words were met with a wet sound, a sigh that nearly made me hang up, and then a definite crunch which made me realise what was happening.

‘Frodo! Frodo, leave that phone alone!’ I yelled. ‘Kell!’

The crunching got worse. It sounded as though someone was eating the biggest packet of crisps in the world, and they were doing it right in my ear. Just at the moment that the noise became nearly terminal, I heard a muffled yell. ‘Frodo! What the hell . . .’ A period of confused noises followed and then, eventually, the barely-audible voice of Kell came back on. ‘. . . Sorry . . . eaten the bloody phone . . .’ followed by a burst of static and then silence.

A curious sense of loneliness suddenly overcame me and I put the tea mug down because my hand was shaking, causing Corinthia’s cover to come under threat. I closed my eyes to let the blackness do its usual job — bringing back images of Jonno and me together — that had always managed so far to push that threatened isolation back. Calling up memories from those years of

togetherness after we'd got the awful news that my uterus had been so badly damaged that the only way we'd ever have a child was to adopt. How we'd thought long and hard about it and decided that we were enough of a unit together for now; adoption waited somewhere in the future, along with fostering, if we wanted it. Those nights of lying together, talking softly into the dark, about hopes and fears and the branching of possible futures.

But for some reason, it was Kell I saw behind my closed lids. A sudden, bright smile and that dimple, those tessellated eyes . . . I stared blindly into the darkness again, hoping that it would cool me down. Kell? I mean, yes, he was attractive, probably . . . was he? My hand felt the ghost-memory of the touch of his fingers and that leather bangle brushing my skin and I had to get out of the bed to prevent my mind wandering any further. I took the cup downstairs to the kitchen, but found myself walking past the office and catching Jonno's eye in his photo as I went past.

'Life is complicated,' I found myself saying to him. 'And now it's more complicated than ever, and I'm starting to realise that I'm not sure I ever really knew who you were.'

His dark half-smile continued, but now looked more secretive than it had before. He'd always been more restrained than me, less eager to go off on either a rant or an adventure, but his caution had been what kept me from the ridiculous extremes I'd sometimes found myself at. When the doctors had told me that motherhood was never going to be one of my callings, I'd decided that we should sell everything we owned and travel around the world. Vanish from real life for a while and immerse ourselves in other people, other places. Jonno had counselled steadiness, the possibility that we may not be able to afford to come back, and eventually his stability had asserted itself over me. Sensible. Reliable. But had he secretly been living that wild life himself? Had he found his own excitement, his own edge to walk, without me? Had the man who'd given Kell his artistic mojo back thought that I'd been stopping him from having something *he'd* always wanted?

I tipped the now cold remnants of the tea down the sink. Outside the kitchen window the air was full of beads of snow and the odd silence that it brought. I shivered and pulled my dressing gown closer — how had I not noticed how cold it was? How had I lived in this chilly mausoleum state for so long? I tweaked the timer and heard the thump of the boiler kicking into

life, loud against the quiet of the snow.

The kerfuffle at the front door made me jump. It wasn't exactly a knock, but it was a definite noise. I peered through the glass pane and saw a huddled mass on the doorstep, with a less huddled mass lower down. 'Kell?'

I opened the door and Kell and the dog fell inside amid a flock of snowflakes. 'Sorry, I didn't want to knock in case you were asleep again.' Kell was covered in white, melting swiftly into transparency. 'Only he ate the phone and you sounded as though you wanted answers urgently.'

Frodo looked up at me and raised his eyebrows. 'It could have waited until dawn,' I said, slightly weakly. 'Or, you know, January.' Kell shrugged and water dripped from his jacket onto the floor and Frodo, who shook himself emphatically. 'You must be frozen, come into the kitchen and I'll make tea. What time is it?'

Kell shrugged again. 'Four? Five? I kinda got out of the regular-hours habit. We're down to early-piss, breakfast, mid-piss and walk, indefinite hours and then late-piss. That's Frodo, not me, I'm not ruled by my bladder. Christ, I'm talking garbage, I must be tireder than I think.' He hung his jacket over a kitchen chair. 'Is it all right if I put him in the office again? We walked over, the Volvo doesn't do snow, so he should be empty.'

I turned back to the kettle, wondering if I was dreaming. This man I hardly knew, sitting damply in my kitchen with his elbows on the table and his head in his hands, muttering about sales invoices and receipts and looking so . . . natural . . .

The word caught me by surprise and I had to go back and say it again to myself. Natural. Yes. Strange as the circumstances might be — middle of the night, dark and snowy — it still felt somehow right that he should be here. As though he wasn't an intrusion or even an odd guest, but as though there was something inevitable about Kell. I took him a mug of tea. 'Your boots look soaked, you should take them off.'

'I've got holes in my socks.'

'If you are trying to make me feel sorry for you, you're failing. The days of women sitting at home darning her man's socks are so long gone they're practically historical.'

He gave me another of those sudden, illuminating grins. 'Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you.' One foot levered a boot off, buckles jingling, to reveal toes that were barely covered in any fabric at all.

‘Those aren’t socks, they are decoration. They’re more like fringes for your feet!’

Kell looked down and wiggled his toes. ‘You won’t want a look at my underpants then.’

Now I was laughing again, the feeling still strange enough to be remarked on internally. ‘Oh, you are so right. Drink your tea and tell me why you’re here at hours so small they hardly even register.’

He kicked off the other boot and then lined them up under the table. ‘We were both awake, and you sounded urgent. Netflix will still be there in the morning and the dog ate the phone so I couldn’t . . . am I making any sense here? Only, I’m aware that words are coming out but they all sound a bit strange.’

‘I have a theory that the world doesn’t properly exist between the hours of one and five in the morning, it’s just a sort of outline for the day,’ I said, sitting opposite him with my own cup now refilled.

‘Like a working sketch?’ Kell stretched his legs out under the table and I felt one foot brush against my leg. ‘Yeah. I know what you mean. We kind of, fill in the details when it gets light.’ The foot withdrew and he tucked his legs under his own seat. ‘Anyway. I found something.’

‘About Corinthia?’

He shook his head, his hair a darker shade with the water in it, which made him seem slightly unfamiliar. ‘About the mystery woman your husband hung around with. I remembered that she bought a picture, but she couldn’t take it home that day so she had to come back to collect it. I put a sticker on it so it wouldn’t get sold again by accident.’ A hand dug into the pocket of his jeans. ‘When she came back I put the sticker on the invoice. I’m a crap record-keeper, but when I keep something, I really hang on to it.’ There was a trace of something there in his voice, as though those words had been hauled over a glacier. ‘I remembered the picture when I thought about it, so I found . . . this.’

It was a sheet of lined paper. On one side was written ‘Sold. Daisy.’

‘So. Her name was Daisy,’ I said. Daisy. Fresh, young name. Was that what appealed to Jonno, her freshness? Her youth? Had I just got too far past everything he wanted in a woman?

‘Mm. And look.’ Kell turned the paper over. On the back was a scrawled address. ‘She paid for it in cash. I remember wondering what I’d do if she

went into labour and couldn't come back for it, and I asked for her addy so I could drop it in if I was passing, if she didn't make it back to the shop.'

'And you only just remembered this.' I raised one eyebrow at him.

'Long story. I was watching *Breaking Bad*, half thinking about . . . well, you, your husband, remembered chatting to him when he came into the shop a couple of times, and then there's the bit where Gus dies, and there's this explosion.' He stopped and looked at me expectantly. He cocked his head a little to one side and I nearly laughed again, he definitely spent too long with Frodo. 'I am waiting for you to go "oh, yeah, that bit", because if you say you've never seen *Breaking Bad* I am going to curl up in a corner and rock, despairing of the future of the world.'

'Sorry. But I can quote from Monty Python, if that helps.'

Another grin. 'Not really. But the picture, the one she bought, it was something I drew . . . well. Just after. When I felt like my whole life had been an explosion, like I was some kind of Ground Zero. After Melissa left me. That's what I thought when I drew the explosion, like I'd just detonated.' He looked down, a finger playing along the table top, drawing curls and lines invisible to me but as though he was tracing out a picture in his head. 'It was the last thing I drew. Until your husband persuaded me to do that Avengers sketch for him, and the whole thing just slotted together in my head. It's amazing what a lack of Doritos does for your thought processes.'

I looked at the address. A village, the other side of town, I remembered it vaguely from . . . Jonno had taken me out that way, aimlessly driving one Sunday morning. We'd stopped at a pub for a leisurely lunch . . . the memory welled up in my chest like a mental sickness, a day that had seemed like any other weekend sightseeing trip now tainted into blurred lines and savage expressions.

'Don't,' Kell said softly.

'Don't what?' I looked up and his expression was as soft as his voice.

'Don't let it make you retcon your memories. I can see you doing it, believe me, I did it myself, but it does no good. You were happy *then* and that's what matters.'

'Was I?' An image of Jonno, looking out of the car window as I sang to the radio . . . what was he looking for? A glimpse of her? Had they arranged to meet and had I, in a forgotten moment, jemmied my way into a trip that was supposed to be Jonno going alone?

A hand, still cold from the outdoors, touched my hand where it emerged from my dressing gown sleeve. 'Yes. You were. It's okay. It doesn't make us stupid, looking back and thinking we were happy. Whatever foundation that happiness was built on, we were happy. That's all that matters,' he repeated.

'I never opened your present.'

'I beg your pardon?' He cocked his eyebrows at me and made a comical expression which made me laugh again. If I wasn't careful this jocularity might become a habit.

'The one you gave me yesterday. I left it in the hall . . .' I went to get up and fetch it, but the hand, still on my wrist, tightened.

'Ah. This might not really be the time. Not while I'm here.'

'It's not something really embarrassing like a chocolate vibrator?'

'Gods, no! What kind of bloke do you think I am? Well, self-evidently, the kind that would give an edible sex toy to a woman he hardly knows, but I'm not, Harriet, I'm really not. I'm just the kind of bloke who . . .' Now he moved his hand and gave a deep sigh. 'Okay. I might as well be revealed in my true colours. Go on, open it.'

How long since I had a present? No, scratch that, the girls from work gave me presents last Christmas and on my birthday, but they were all conventional girlie gifts; bath foam and nail polish and scented candles. When had I last had a present from a man? Jonno had always despaired of knowing what to buy me, so I'd given him careful instructions, down to the catalogue number, so Christmas had never been a surprise. I held the square, flat parcel in both hands and took it back into the kitchen. The snow was kissing the window, pale flakes against the dark.

I pulled off the Ferrari-covered paper. 'It's . . . wow. No, it's just . . . amazing, Kell.'

It was a framed sketch of me. Me, in Corinthia's coat, collar turned up, a faint smile cheeky on my lips. I looked strong and poised to fight, but wickedly enjoying the moment. The room went very quiet.

'I'm sorry,' Kell said, eventually. 'I hoped I'd be miles away before you saw it.'

Somehow the picture was both detailed and vague. The face was impeccably drawn, absolutely me, although the expression wasn't one I was used to wearing. The clothes were more hinted at, lines that suggested the big black coat was worn over nothing, a swing of hair as though I was moving

towards something that was causing that enigmatic little smile. 'It's gorgeous, Kell. You make me look so . . . confident.'

'Shit. I feel as though I've been caught out in something.' Kell stood up and pushed himself away from the table. 'That's how I saw you, the very first time. Oh, not quite the *very* first time, that was just after your husband died and you were shell-shocked into next week, but when I came back the other day. I'd had this image of you in my head as this ghostly creature, only half in the world, and then, there you were, not knowing how strong you could be.' He was standing at the kitchen window with his back to me, watching the curved flakes scrape the panes. 'Standing half in light and half in shadow and not really knowing which way was going to take you.'

I gazed down at the picture. There was a kind of darkness to the tone of it, as though that half-smile on my lips could turn into riotous laughter or a psychotic grin. As though I stood balanced on the edge of madness. 'Seriously? This is how you saw me?'

Now he turned around. 'It was. But you've changed, somehow. Like . . . like you scared yourself the first time you laughed, but now you've found you really quite like it. Or something. Ignore me. Four hours' sleep and I are really not a great combination.'

'I'm going to put it up.' I got up too and headed through into the living room. The street light, filtered through the snow, shone in and made the tree look magical. Tinsel needles flickered in an unfelt breeze, refracting the light, bending it around the branches until the tree seemed to be clothed in a pale glow. The baubles, which seemed tacky and slightly ridiculous in the daylight, hung heavy and promising. 'I'll put it on the mantelpiece for now.' I propped the picture up and the odd lighting effect made my smile look broader. 'Perfect.'

He was standing there in the doorway. Just standing. 'Yes,' he said. 'You are.'

'Kell . . .'

'Too soon? I'm sorry. I have no critical faculties at all, just an old comic book shop and a dog that may turn out to be the secret to disposing of nuclear waste.' He flopped down onto the sofa, nearly bare feet jutting towards the ceiling. 'Ignore me.'

I sat next to him. 'It's not that it's too soon, not really. I just feel that I'm . . . re-evaluating a lot of stuff. Jonno. My relationship. I think . . . I thought I

loved him so much. I thought we were this golden couple, you see. We were the people everyone else wanted to be, okay, we couldn't have children but that had stopped mattering to us, we had this little kind of bubble of happiness around us. And now I'm questioning how much of any of it was real, and until I know . . . well, I'm beginning to wonder how easy I am to fool, Kell, that's what it is. How much I can believe of what anyone says and how much is just gullibility on my part. Do you see what I mean?'

I gathered enough strength to look at his face. Wanted to see whether his expression showed understanding or merely evidence of a thwarted sex drive. It showed neither. He'd fallen asleep, his head resting on the back of the sofa, soft breathy exhalations puffing at the hair which had curled around his face, making it shiver. He looked peaceful. And, as though that peaceful expression was somehow catching, I felt my own eyelids start to drift closed, tucked my feet up underneath me and let myself fall asleep next to him.

Chapter Five

It was daylight when I woke up. I was disorientated for a second, lying diagonally along my sofa with my head resting on something firm. A warm cushion of fur was curled across my lap, as my eyes blearily opened I found myself pillowing my head against Kell's chest and Frodo spread-eagled along both of us. Kell had one arm around my shoulders and the top of my head was providing his cheek with a resting place. We must have looked like one of those Yin and Yang figurines, all coiled up together so it was hard to know where one ended and another started.

A car passed outside, tyres almost silent against a snowy surface, radio tuned to a station playing Christmas carols, and strains of 'God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen' wafted through the window.

'Oh Gods, I'm waking up in a Dickens novel.' Kell spoke without moving. 'Please tell me I haven't gone back in time, there are still flushing toilets and *Star Trek*?'

At the sound of his voice, Frodo wagged his tail, wafting me with its plumed end. 'What time is it?' I asked.

Kell finally seemed to register that I was there, face embedded in his shirt, and my shoulders under his arm. 'Oh. Oh! Did we . . . how long have we been asleep?'

'Long enough for Frodo to come looking.' I sat away from him, blinking in the blue-ish light that was bouncing in from the snow. His arm slithered down behind me and he moved it carefully away as though he wasn't sure that I'd noticed it. I was fighting the urge to curl deeper into his chest and fall back to sleep again, there was a safety and comfort in the solidity of Kell that made me feel I could actually rest. 'I think it's about half past ten.'

We did a bit of 'stretching business', which served to cover our confusion at waking up next to each other, and to move us subtly apart without the need for any overt moving away. 'Well,' he said and scratched at his head. 'Well.' Then he stared down at his feet, at his toes protruding and barely covered with holey fabric, like orphans in a workhouse bed. 'That's the first time I've slept with a woman and kept my socks on.'

'I should hope it's the first time you've slept with a woman and your dog has joined in too.' I looked at the furry curled shape that was Frodo trying to

ignore our ‘getting up’ movements. He’d wriggled over to the remaining spare sofa cushion but showed no sign of being keen to leave, his tail covered his nose and eyes like a black-out curtain.

‘Definitely. Shall I make some tea?’

How long since someone made me tea? Oh, there were a lot of people eager to help out just after Jonno died, but they all drifted away, seeming almost intimidated by my relentless sorrow. ‘Mmm, please.’

‘And then I think we should go and find Daisy.’ He spoke without looking at me, without turning around from the doorway.

‘But . . . isn’t it Christmas Eve? It had better be somewhere around that anyway, because otherwise I am going to find and torture those people in that car that woke us up. Christmas songs should be banned at that volume until seasonal goodwill kicks in.’

Now Kell did turn round. There was something slightly familiar in the way he stood with his head tilted, framed by the doorway like a panel from Corinthia, and I realised that he reminded me of the bearer of the bad news she had received about her partner, the rakish man, although the buckle-sided boots were still wet and under my kitchen table. ‘Yep. But you need to know, Harriet. Before we—’ he cleared his throat, ‘—before you can be free, you need to know about Jonno and Daisy.’

I tipped my head back against the sofa. ‘Yes,’ I said softly, agreeing to both statements, the said and the only half-said. ‘I do.’

‘Okay.’ And now the shadowed other presence was gone from where it had overlaid him; he was just Kell, just the attractive graphic novel salesman who’d walked through the snowy night to bring me the information I needed. ‘Toast as well? Although I have to say that Frodo can eat his own bodyweight in bread products, so if you haven’t got a large loaf in maybe we should stick to the tea.’

‘There’s more in the freezer.’ I let myself slump back against the cushions, listening to him bustling about in the kitchen, banging cupboard doors and muttering. Frodo stopped pretending to be asleep the second he heard the toaster slide down, and sat up next to me, alert and, it had to be said, slightly dribbly.

The freezer lid thumped and there was a slight pause, then Kell’s voice drifted through. ‘Blimey. Looks like you’re expecting Santa, the reindeer and all the cast of *It’s a Wonderful Life* to drop in — that is a hell of a lot of

mince pies, Hattie.'

Hattie. Jonno always called me Het. Or Harry. Hattie . . . I like it.

'I got a bit carried away.'

'Yeah.' He came back and leaned against the door frame. 'Look, tomorrow . . . we both seem to be at a bit of a loose end and I wondered . . . I mean . . . is it really presumptuous of me to ask you over to my place for Christmas Day?'

'Or you could come here . . .'

A shrug. 'Could do. But your freezer seems to be entirely occupied with mince pies, and while I'm as much a fan of the baked pastry goods as the next man, I also like a turn around the vegetables and a slice or two of turkey.' A smile. 'And I really don't want you to think that I'm latching on to you out of gratitude for Corinthia, or trying to worm my way in with a woman who's got a big house and a decent car. So . . . you know, come and look over my place and see that I am also solvent and respectable and definitely not in it for money or easy sex.'

'Um . . .' Beside me Frodo wagged.

'Although easy sex is a bonus, clearly, it is not the be all and end all.' Kell came into the room. Frodo jumped down off the sofa, wiped his nose up Kell's trousers, and left, presumably to go and dribble in the kitchen. 'So, how about it?'

'Christmas or the easy sex?' I stood up now.

'Oh, your choice.' He came over to me and I walked into his arms. The embrace was easy, gentle and non-intrusive, as was the kiss which brushed my lips. 'Although I'd have to say let's do the Christmas thing first and work our way up, yeah?'

Gentle was probably the definitive word for Kell, I thought, as his fingers cupped my face and his beautiful, complicated eyes smiled into mine. 'Well, I suppose—' I raised my mouth and touched his again, '—we could give it a shot.'

Desire had re-ignited inside me again, as though it hadn't, as I'd thought, been completely extinguished by Jonno's death, but had been quietly smouldering in a hidden corner. Not the red-heat of suddenly rising flames but a careful fanning into life of a little ember, giving rise to a promise of conflagration to come. Not quite there yet, but hovering . . .

'But first we find Daisy, yes?' Kell held me close, still so gently. 'Deal

with that before we go any further.’ From the kitchen there was a sudden click, followed by a slithering sound and a crunch. ‘Oh bugger, that’s Frodo getting the results from the toaster.’

‘Find Daisy and celebrate Christmas. Yes.’

‘Although, and I hate saying this because it makes me look like a hit-and-run tart, I do have to pop back to the flat first. Sort out some stuff, scrub the toilet, find the carpet, that kind of thing.’ His body shook with a kind of half-chuckle. ‘Make a good impression.’

‘That’s fine, I have a few things to get too. What does Frodo have on his Christmas list? Apart from chairs?’

He gave me the broad grin that dimpled his cheek and creased his eyes into that mischievous boyish slant. ‘Sprouts. Honestly, that dog has a handle on brassica-ingestion like you’ve never seen.’ He gave me another quick hug. ‘But first things first, we get into that kitchen and stop my dog from eating my carefully handcrafted toastular items. You go first, he’s probably covered the floor in drool and these socks can’t take much more.’

I was only now aware of the tension I’d been carrying for so long, because of its absence. My shoulders felt lighter, as though that invisible lead sweater I’d started wearing on the day that Jonno died had unravelled finally. It had been gradually loosening its hold on me over these past few months I knew, but now it seemed that my desire to reclaim Christmas, and the arrival of Kell, had drawn the weight off my mind. The knowledge that Corinthia could bring me enough money to escape the last of the memories had helped pull it completely free.

As I went into the kitchen, hearing the scuffle and furniture-shoving that sounded as though Frodo had claimed the toasted slices and taken them under the table, I passed the doorway to the office and caught Jonno’s eye. ‘I just need to know,’ I whispered inside my head to his half-smiling face. ‘Who she is. What you were to each other. Whether what we had was real.’

The smile said nothing. It could have been a smile of triumph at a successful double life or a smile of reassurance, but I didn’t really mind now. Like Corinthia, I just wanted to know.

Chapter Six

I eased my car carefully along the snow-carpeted streets, out through town and onto the much snowier rural roads. Beside me, Kell navigated and occasionally swore, but he relaxed when we got past the Christmas-crazed city traffic and out where the cars were sporadic and the people even more so. Behind us, Frodo sat upright and quivering on the back seat, like a cocked crossbow.

‘She might not be in.’ I persuaded the car around a bend, the back end kicking out on the icy surface and making Frodo shuffle his bottom to keep his balance.

‘Or she could have moved, or the place could have burned to the ground.’ Kell gripped the edge of his seat with both hands as we slid around another corner. ‘But let’s take some chances, eh?’

I let the car slide, waited until we gained some grip, then inched the wheel the other way. I’d never driven in snow before, Jonno had always driven in the less than perfect conditions, I was too reckless. I’d never learned the art of slowing down for the conditions, I’d just drive faster, to get where I was going before anything happened. But it felt almost as though a little of Corinthia’s attitude had seeped into me and I could practically feel her hands on the steering wheel instead of mine. Almost sense her confusion and desire for resolution hurrying us along what were almost undriveable roads. Although we didn’t have rearing horses and trees growing through the road surface to contend with, the six inches of compacted snow neatly finished off with a crusting of ice was as ruthless to travel over.

‘I’d say it’s pretty much “taking chances” from hereon in, wouldn’t you?’ I glanced at him, despite the lack of advisability of taking my eyes away from the treacherous surface, and the car drifted a few feet across the carriageway, which was, thankfully, deserted.

‘If not dicing with death.’

‘More like Monopoly with mortality I’d have said.’

‘Only if I get to be the boot.’ He flicked a glance at the back seat. ‘He’s got the dog thing tied up, but you can be the top hat if you want.’

He’s so unlike Jonno. Jonno was always so careful and considered, it had taken him six months to work out the right words to propose to me. I used

to catch him practising in the mirror. He'd said he was just 'talking to himself', but I'd known, and that knowledge had given me a happy little fizz in my stomach. Would Jonno have gone along with any of this? My desire to find out the truth? Or, if things had been different, would he have counselled a steady approach, a 'let's wait and see'? But had he been different with Daisy, had he been more of a spontaneous whirlwind? Was it just me that had made him behave sensibly and bring caution to everything?

I looked across at the booted figure sitting next to me, his big coat wound around his frame as though he was trying to weld it to his skin, and I smiled. Jonno had been good for me. He'd taught me to look before I leaped wildly into the dark beyond, and these past eighteen months had shown me that there was something to be said for a steady, steadfast existence. There was something soothing about routine, something I would miss if, as Corinthia had found, it was taken away from me.

But there was also a part of me that itched for the impetuosity of life again now and, meeting Kell's eye, I knew I was doing the right thing.

All the houses we passed threw welcoming light out onto the snow. No one seemed to want to draw their curtains against the fast-approaching night and trees twinkled in windows, fairy lights and illuminated plastic icicles draped gables and mock Santas hung from chimneys. A few family groups were constructing snowmen in gardens, eager-faced children waving to the car as we bumped slowly past, and atmospheric cattle blew steam-breath from their huddles under holly bushes.

'Left here,' Kell said, and we slithered to a halt outside a little cottage, where a lantern beckoned from a downstairs window but the rest of the place was in shadow. 'Number seventeen, this is it.'

My heart thumped hard enough to make me feel sick. This was it, this was where I found out what Jonno had been up to. There was a trail of footprints in the snow leading away from the cottage, and wheelmarks scoring along the edge of the pavement. 'Looks like no one's home.'

Kell flicked his head at me. 'You want to go back?'

And all I could think of was Corinthia's face; that awful, set expression as she rode north, running from the knowledge of her betrayal. 'No.' I opened the car door. 'Frodo, you stay here, it will give us a reason to get in and get out fast. Kell, you make the introductions.'

'Okay.' But once out of the car he turned towards me, using his body to

block the sight of the little house, so homely amid the snow. ‘You don’t have to do this, Hattie, you know that. Like you said, Jonno will still be dead, whatever.’

I raised a hand and laid it against his cheek. ‘I need to know. Whether I was right about him, whether I was right to love him, otherwise how can I know whether I’m right to be moving on?’

He put his hand over mine and clasped it. ‘You think you’re ready?’ His eyes were serious, dark against the relentless white backdrop. A small frown line appeared between them and his cheeks sunk in a little, as though he was preparing himself for bad news.

‘I think I am,’ I said quietly. ‘When I know. Because if my whole relationship with Jonno was built on a lie, then I have to grieve for it again, in a different way. I have to realise that I was that easy to fool. I have to know I can trust myself and my opinions before I start trusting you.’

In the car, Frodo let out one of his singing howls.

‘Come on then.’ Still holding my hand, and with a small smile lightening his eyes, Kell led the way, following the trodden-footstep path up to the front door of the cottage.

Kell knocked, firmly, his fingers wound through mine in a reassuring hold as we shuffled our feet on the snowy doorstep and tried to ignore the drips that fingered their way down our necks from the overhanging eaves. Just as I was about to resign myself to failure, lights came on in the hallway and a figure appeared at the front door, wearing a dressing gown and huge red furry slippers. ‘I *told* you I was going to have a bath, where’s your key?’ she was saying crossly as she opened the door. And then, ‘oh.’

‘Daisy?’ Kell stepped into the light so she could see him properly, but stayed carefully beyond the ‘personal space’ perimeter. ‘Kell Foxton.’

She looked even younger than I had imagined she would. Tiny-framed, like a fairy, with blonde hair knotted carelessly up on her head and the fleecy dressing gown doubled up around her front as though it belonged to someone much bigger. My mouth was full of a bitter taste, not bile, more a jealousy. I’d never been tiny, never had that fragile ‘take care of me’ look in my eyes.

‘From the comic book store!’ Daisy visibly relaxed as she recognised him. ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ Then a frown. ‘I didn’t forget to pay you or something, did I?’ Now her gaze travelled to me, slid assessingly over my carefully chosen outfit of best jeans and those flat black boots. ‘Hi.’

‘It’s a bit . . . difficult.’ Kell sounded much more assured than I would have done in his place. ‘This is Harriet.’ Then, dropping the bombshell amid the wind-driven snowflakes that coiled lazily down. ‘She’s Jonno Tennyson’s wife.’

The sudden step back told me all I thought I needed to know. A more protective tucking of the dressing gown, a long, pale arm wrapping around her torso as though she could keep the truth away. ‘I . . . I recognise your face.’

My heart felt like one of the frozen stones that outlined the path, cushioned by their covering of snow but hard rock underneath. ‘I just need to know, Daisy,’ I said, taking the half step forward that matched her retreat. ‘It won’t bring him back, but I just need to know.’

She’d cupped a hand over her mouth, in thought more than in horror; her eyes didn’t have the expression I’d expected, of guilt and a need to hide. It was more of a weighing-up, a moment of decision. ‘I suppose you do,’ she said. The door opened a little wider. ‘You should come in.’

The hallway was narrow, rush-matted, but gave me sudden double-vision as I overlaid it with my own house as I’d first seen it. There were small boots lined up near the door, a scattering of push-along toys racked against the stairs and a warm smell of cooking sliding through from a door at the end. We shuffled after Daisy into a living room crowded with decorations, a real tree stood impressively preventing access to an entire half of the room, hung with a comfortably random selection of decorations and under it a gift-wrapped item, obviously a small bicycle, was surrounded by other presents. The rest of the room was untidy heaps of magazines, cups and wine glasses, and the walls were hung with photographs and sketches of a small child at various stages of development.

I stared at them. Searching for traces of Jonno in those round, blue eyes, in that misbehaving flop of blond fringe.

‘Our son,’ Daisy said. ‘Nathan. He’ll be two in February.’

If it hadn’t been for the press of Kell’s fingers around mine, I would have stumbled. Would have fallen onto the throw-draped couch that took up much of the remainder of that little room, and curled into a ball. Not from the pain of betrayal, I’d already dealt with the possibility of that, but from the agony of knowing that Jonno hadn’t been able to cope with our lack of children. That he’d found a way . . .

‘I’m sorry,’ Kell said, pulling me in so that his arm could surround me, ‘ours?’

Daisy looked a little taken aback. ‘Mine and my partner’s,’ she said, as though there could have been any doubt. And then another ‘oh’ as implications reached her. ‘Oh. This is weird.’

Now Kell was staring at another picture on the wall. This was a hand-drawn sketch of the same child, casual black lines that somehow managed to depict the whole ‘toddlerness’ of first steps; a little boy balanced between being a baby and being a child. ‘Isn’t that . . . ?’ he began, and then we were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

‘Give us a hand with the buggy,’ a woman’s voice came through from the hallway. ‘It’s a buggie in the snow. Vicar says to be at the church for half eleven, so his Lordship had better have a nap now or he’ll be . . .’

Daisy stepped across, but before she reached the doorway she was hit by a running mass of child, who clasped her around the knees and yelled, ‘Mummmmmmmmmmm!’ A second later he was followed by a woman slightly older than Daisy, wearing a padded coat that nearly reached the floor and made her look like an animated duvet.

‘Hey, visitors!’ she said, enthusiastically. ‘Great. An excuse to break out that sherry. I knew it would come in handy one day.’ A divesting of coats, both hers and the small boy’s, took place, and then she swung the little boy up onto her hip. ‘So. To what do we owe the honour of a Christmas Eve visit? You’re not Santa in a really good disguise, are you?’

Daisy looked from Kell to me and then to the newcomer. ‘This is Kell, Katie. And . . . Harriet.’ A breath. ‘This is Kate, my partner.’

I sat down suddenly on the sofa and some rubber sorting shapes plopped to the floor. Kell let go of my hand and rubbed his fingers through his hair. ‘I think sherry might be quite a good idea right about now,’ he said.

Kate, clearly a bit baffled, passed the little boy over to Daisy. He put his thumb in his mouth and laid his head on her shoulder and I couldn’t take my eyes off his face now. Rounded with childishness, his lips formed into a circle around the sucking motion . . . did he look like Jonno? I tried to call to mind the baby pictures that Jonno’s mum had shown me when we’d first got together, was there any trace of similarity there?

‘So, who’s going to give in first and tell me what the hell is going on?’ Kate said, looking to Daisy and then me, ‘because this does so not look like a

present exchange.'

Daisy opened a cupboard to reveal the sherry. 'Harriet is Jonno's wife,' she said.

Kate opened her mouth and looked to be about to say something, but I channelled Corinthia now. Let her help me to break out of that shell of passivity, as holding her image in my head had helped me to drive here through the snow. 'Was my husband Nathan's father?' I sat upright now, braced against the sofa's softness, meeting Kell's eyes and knowing I could take the answer.

Which surprised me by being laughter. Kate first, giving a snorted giggle, and then Daisy chuckling so much that the little boy raised his head in surprise, before laying it back down on her shoulder again. 'Sorry,' Daisy said, her expression now much softer, or was that just my perception? 'I'm really sorry. It must have been awful for you, driving over here on a night like this, suspecting that . . .' Another giggle. 'No.' Now she sat beside me, carefully adjusting her weight so that Nathan didn't get squashed. 'Harriet. Jonno is not Nathan's dad.' A quick look at her sherry-pouring partner. 'We used a donor.'

'Then . . . ?' I started, but Kell talked over the top of me.

'And why do you have an original Joss Kerry sketch on your wall?'

Kate handed around glasses filled with a pungent, raisin-scented sherry. I took a mouthful, hoping for some steadying effects. My hand was shaking slightly, but there was a feeling of warmth in my stomach that owed nothing to the alcohol. 'Jonno sorted out our computer when we moved in here,' she said. 'We just rang the first company that came up on Yell, and he came over to . . . I dunno, those bloody things are sent from Hell as far as I'm concerned, but he did something with something else, all sounded really technical. Daisy was just pregnant at that point, setting up her business from home . . .'

'I design silk-weave rugs,' Daisy added.

' . . . and she and Jonno really hit it off. I was using the car at that point for work, we hadn't got round to getting another one and she felt . . . it was a bit isolating for you, love, wasn't it?' Kate gave a rueful smile. 'This place is lovely, perfect for Nathan and everything, but, bloody hell, is a bus route too much to ask for? We hadn't realised when we bought . . . anyway. Jonno took pity on us a bit and he used to give Daisy lifts into town, help with the

shopping, that kind of thing.'

Yes, that had been the Jonno I had known. Kind, helpful. He'd have hated to see someone stuck, isolated . . . yes. So Jonno.

'I think . . .'

Daisy stood up, Nathan's head snuggled into her neck. 'There's something I need to show you.' She wiggled her way through the chicane of furniture, dropped toys and laundry and then there were sounds of a cupboard being opened and stuff being displaced, interspersed with mutterings of 'what doin' Mummy?' A few moments later she was back in the room holding a rolled-up piece of thick paper under one arm and with the little boy sucking his thumb quite furiously still clamped to her hip. 'Just . . . this. Here'.

Kell and I looked at one another.

'It's not explosives,' Kate said, helpfully, at last. 'At least, probably not. Bit hard to tell in this house.'

Cautiously I took the paper from Daisy and, swallowing furiously, I unrolled it.

'Wow,' said Kell, and his eyes were huge.

It was a drawing. Done in charcoal of various thicknesses, a beautiful portrait sketch of a woman with huge eyes and a soft smile, sitting on a floor with her knees pulled up, gazing at something that was only portrayed in a few lines. A fireplace or something similar.

'Knocks mine out of warp drive,' Kell took the picture from me and turned it. 'It's fabulous'.

'It's me,' I said, feebly.

'Er, yeah.' Daisy passed me a small brown envelope. 'From these.'

The envelope was full of photographs of me. Some I recognised. 'Jonno took these! Just mucking about with his new phone, checking out how good the camera was. And I got annoyed with him . . .'

my eyes prickled, but now was not the time. 'How did you get them?' I looked up at the three of them. Kell was still turning the drawing over in his hands admiringly. Kate had drained her sherry.

'From Jonno, of course,' she said. 'Sorry, didn't we say? When he came out to fix the computer, he saw some of Dais's artwork on the walls. Taken most of it down now, but,' she pointed to a small sketch of a newborn baby, 'that's one of hers. Oh, and that one.'

'I used to be an artist. But there's more money in the silk weaving,'

Daisy said, gently rocking the little boy on her hip. He looked quite sleep-resistant.

‘He asked her to do a portrait of his wife. Of you.’ Kate waved the empty sherry glass at me. ‘Course, he had to bring photos, so he started coming over, checking up on progress, and that’s when he used to take you out shopping, didn’t he, love?’

‘He was a good friend.’ Daisy dropped a thoughtful kiss on the soft head now bouncing into sleep against her. ‘We miss him. And I am so, so sorry for your loss. We’d have come to the funeral only Nathe was only three months’ old and it didn’t really seem the place for a baby, even with him being Jonno’s godson.’

I jolted and a small splash of sherry made an amber bead pattern on my wrist. ‘His godson?’ And then the memory flooding in, Jonno in his best suit, heading out to a ‘work conference’ on a Sunday, ridiculously hot in an unseasonal Easter sun. ‘He could have told me . . .’

Kate leaned over and touched my shoulder. ‘We knew about your . . . about the baby, Harriet. He was worried you’d take it the wrong way, that you’d feel . . .’ A shake of her head. ‘He cared so much about you. He never wanted you to be hurt or to think that Nathan was a replacement for the children he couldn’t have. He was going to have the picture framed and give it to you for Christmas.’

‘And if he hadn’t . . . if he’d still been here, he would have brought you over by now, I’m sure of it.’ Daisy laid the now-sleeping child down on the sofa and stood up. ‘He just wanted the picture to be a huge surprise, so he was keeping quiet about knowing me in case you worked it out. If he’d brought you over and you’d seen my pictures, well. He said you were really good at knowing when he was up to something. And then Nathe was on the way and he said . . . he said you could be a bit sensitive around pregnant women, so . . .’ she trailed off. ‘You were so happy, he said, he didn’t want you to feel . . . He just wanted to bring it up at the right time. Oh, Harriet, he loved you so much!’

‘Oy, less of the jealousy,’ Kate said mildly. ‘You’re not exactly chopped liver yourself, love.’

Daisy gave her a bright grin and stuck her tongue out.

‘Right, great, now, can we go back to why you’ve got an original Joss Kerry picture on your wall?’ Kell nodded towards the largest drawing

hanging amidst a host of black and white photographs, the sketch of the toddler done in a few, economical lines, and then glanced down at the picture of me again. His eyes held a dark, waiting look as though he suspected that there were more pictures just waiting to leap out at him.

‘Oh, that.’ Daisy pulled the pencil drawing down off the wall. ‘Joss is my brother. He did that one last Christmas, when he was over from the States, Nathe had just started to walk and Joss thought it was brilliant, watching him falling all over the place. Mind you, after a couple of glasses of Katie’s damson wine, Joss was pretty much falling all over the place too.’

‘Your *brother*?’

‘Mmm.’

Kell boggled. ‘Can we go back over this again — Joss Kerry is your *brother*?’

Daisy rolled her eyes. ‘Yes. I’m sorry, is that a problem?’

‘Did he . . . did you . . .’ My hand had, without my being aware, found the softness of a child’s arm against my leg and was stroking the moist, plump flesh, ‘did you give Corinthia to Jonno?’ My eyes were likewise drawn down to where Nathan sprawled, eyes screwed closed and his mouth slightly open as he breathed gently through it. He was wearing a pair of pale blue dungarees and a Winnie the Pooh shirt, the sleeve had rolled to his elbow and the revealed skin was where my fingers rested. I was slightly surprised at the lack of pain I felt, the lack of longing. He was sweet and cute but he didn’t fill me with the agony that motherhood would never be mine that I had been afraid of.

‘Oh, that. Yes. Mum had them in the back bedroom, she wanted rid so she gave them to me. We’d just moved here and with Nathe on the way there wasn’t really room here either, and Jonno was so keen . . .’

I found myself smiling. Again. Finally, properly. ‘But they’re worth a fortune!’

Daisy shrugged. ‘Maybe, but Jossie’s got plenty of money, and we—’ A gentle smile up at Kate, ‘—we’re fine. Besides, selling my brother’s artwork always makes me feel funny — we did sell a couple of portraits he did when he was younger to help buy this place, and it’s weird, it’s like selling a member of the family.’

‘Oh, if only we could sell your mother,’ Kate said, on a sigh. ‘Pound per pound would be good.’

‘Shut up, you.’

‘Your husband was a lovely, kind man.’ Kate said gently. ‘I’m very sorry if anything we did led you to believe differently. He talked about you all the time — I think he may have needed to offload, to be honest, he was so afraid of hurting you, or saying the wrong thing about babies or children. He’d dealt with it, you should know that. He knew you’d never have children together and he’d come to terms with it and he just wished you could stop feeling guilty about it. The picture was . . . well, he said the picture was to show you how he saw you. Strong. Beautiful.’

‘He was right,’ Kell said. He looked from my face to my portrait. ‘He was right.’

I looked up and out of the window. The warmth and light in this room made the dark outside deeper and the snow that rimmed the window look twice as chilly, but there was a new feeling inside me that stopped any of that being a problem now. ‘We’d better go back,’ I said. ‘Frodo won’t wait forever.’

As if in answer, we heard the sound of the dog’s voice raised in a warble of discontent and Kell shook his head as though waking from a dream. ‘Does he . . . I mean, does your brother often visit?’

‘Yeah, sometimes.’ Daisy walked us through to the door. ‘Do you want to meet him? I should warn you he’s a complete tosspot. Well, he is to me, but then I’m his little sister, so he’s probably not the same to everyone else. I’ll give you a call next time he’s due over.’ Then she turned to me. ‘And we’d really like to see you again. If you’d like, of course, but I think . . . you know, Jonno would have liked you to get to know Nathan . . . And the picture is yours.’ She glanced down at the sketch, now re-rolled, in Kell’s hand. ‘He’d paid for it already. It was making me feel a bit guilty, to be honest, not being able to give it to you, which was why it was in the cupboard.’

In the snow-darkened wildness outside I could almost see Jonno’s outline, a rough blackness between frost-beaded rose bushes and branches iced like Christmas cakes. *Jonno would want this. For Nathan, for Daisy and Kate . . . and for me.* ‘I’d love that,’ I said and my voice sounded warm. ‘Thank you.’

‘Let’s just get this Christmas effort out of the way first,’ Kate’s voice drifted through to us. ‘And let the snow melt. We’ll be having a party for Nathe’s birthday, I’ll send you an invitation, although I should warn you

now, come in machine washable clothing.'

I looked out towards the car, in which Frodo could be seen bobbing about anxiously and huffing breath on each window in turn. 'That will be lovely.'

'Dunno about lovely. Sticky, probably.' Kate said, and we heard her start crooning a lullaby to the sleeping child, as Daisy ushered us out into the snowy night and closed the door gently.

Chapter Seven

The last of that heavy weight dispelled completely on Christmas Day. Kell had been right, it *was* better spending it at his place — I didn't have to worry about comparisons with 'the last time', nor did the ghost of Jonno lie around unsuspected corners, although I could almost feel his approving presence admiring Kell's work hung on the walls, the big tree in the living room and the appetising smells from the kitchen.

I felt a little bit shy at first, turning up on the doorstep with a hastily-wrapped sketch pad, even more hastily bought from the only art shop in York that hadn't closed on the dot of Christmas Eve lunchtime. But 'shy' and 'Kell and Frodo' didn't stand a chance, I was greeted at the door by an overexcited dog in a Father Christmas hat and reindeer antlers, and Kell, looking surprisingly buff in a white shirt and jeans.

The day was so unlike any Christmas that Jonno and I had ever spent that I couldn't make comparisons there either and, from Kell's expression it wiped any trace of residual loss from his life too, as we played Twister in a fashion that almost caused regurgitated sprouts. Different. New. But not in a 'deliberately casting off old traditions' way, not self-consciously trying everything possible not to be the same. More organically finding ourselves and each other amid cracker jokes and second helpings of pudding. I fell asleep during the *Doctor Who* Christmas special, and woke to Kell gently stroking my hair.

'Hey.'

I stretched and felt the last molecules of sadness dissipate, lost in the smell of old gravy and the robust aroma of a dog that's eaten too many sprouts. 'Sorry, I'm just so full I couldn't keep my eyes open.'

Kell smiled. The artistically-hung fairy lights shone little reflected pinpoints in his eyes, turning them into universes. 'It's okay.'

There was a moment on which everything pivoted, and then I knelt up on the sofa and kissed him, curling my hands into his hair, feeling him kiss back with a weight of longing that almost submerged me for a second. Then he drew back. 'Are you sure this is what you want, Hattie?' he said. 'Me, Frodo, the girls and Nathan? Because this is where you can stop and walk away . . .'

But I already knew. Knew how this ended. Last night, after Kell had left,

after I'd wrapped the sketch pad, I'd gone up into the attic. I'd pulled down the remaining copies of Corinthia and the Bear and found the last issue. Flipped through the pages to the last panel of the last page and seen my future there in black and white, Corinthia, riding off on The Bear, her normally stark face lightened by a subtle smile, huge coat flapping with the speed. And, on the back, with his arms coiled around her waist, rode the rakish man with the buckled boots.

THE END

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BOOK 2: THE BOYS OF CHRISTMAS

An emotional and uplifting festive love story

JANE LOVERING



*I love Christmas. So this book is dedicated to my family, without who
Christmas just wouldn't be the same — and Brussel sprouts, because ditto.*

Chapter One

‘Parcel for you.’ There was a clunk and then a heavy weight on my midriff.

‘Oh! Sorry, I just closed my eyes for a minute, I wasn’t asleep . . . Toby? Why are you here?’ I opened my eyes and tried to make it look as though I’d just been thinking deeply, rather than sleeping deeply.

‘Father Christmas is off duty, the Milk Tray man couldn’t make it and this is my flat and you’re on my sofa. Who were you expecting, Daniel Craig?’

Gradually my vision cleared away the blurry dream-memories, and I could see my best friend standing in front of me, wearing a multi-coloured suit, which had juggling balls sewn all over it. ‘Well I wasn’t expecting Mister Tumble . . . what the hell are you wearing?’

‘I’ve got a kids’ party in half an hour. Are you going to open that parcel, or what?’ Toby adjusted the most troublesome of his balls, which were hanging from his chest like oversized nipples. ‘Better get these tightened up. Nothing like a bunch of four-year-olds tugging on your décor to make you wish you’d stuck it out auditioning for the Royal Shakespeare Company.’

I stared at the parcel he’d dropped on me. It was a small, square box shape, wrapped in brown paper and addressed with a printed label. ‘What do you think it is?’

‘Cheap nylon thread,’ he replied, still pulling disconsolately at two of the balls. ‘If I could work some kind of arrangement where, if the little darlings try to get them off they get a face full of tear gas . . .’

‘I don’t really think you’re cut out to be a children’s entertainer.’ Poor Toby. He’d had such high hopes after he finished his Drama degree, and so far he’d got two voice-overs and the psychotically cheerful persona of Professor Pat-a-Cake. ‘Maybe you should open it.’

He looked at me sharply. Or as sharply as one can be looked at by a man wearing clashing colours and a set of pom-poms. ‘Mattie, you should do this. It’s addressed to you, look.’ He picked up the package and waggled it under my nose. ‘It’s fine. You’re here, you’re free. You’re allowed.’

‘But.’ I swallowed and felt sourness at the back of my throat. Months of terror and conditioning, rising up to make my hands weak. ‘What if it’s from — you know, *him*?’

Toby sighed and sat on my feet, like a spaniel. ‘Matz, he doesn’t know you’re here, I promise. Come on, look, I’ll help.’ He pulled at a corner of the brown paper wrapping and revealed corrugated cardboard inside. ‘Maybe it’s an early Christmas present?’

‘Who from?’ I kept my hands away from the parcel, just in case, and let him keep dragging at the paper until the contents were revealed. ‘It’s just a box.’

‘And a letter.’ Toby pulled a much folded and unnaturally heavy piece of paper out from under the brown wooden box, and my hands were suddenly shaky and sweaty. *He’s found me. He knows I’m here . . .* Two emotions rose up and fought it out in the region of my heart — one was the urge to phone him, tell him I was wrong, of course I was, he’d been right all along, I couldn’t manage without him. I was too stupid and plain, too bad with money, too lacking in style to make it alone in the world, and I was so sorry I’d even thought about leaving him.

The other urge was to run. Although where I’d run *to*, given that Toby was pretty much the only friend I had who’d stuck with me throughout my relationship and I was already cluttering his living room, was a question I didn’t want to think about.

Toby nudged my elbow. ‘Hey,’ he said gently. ‘You’re safe. You’re out. Now, open this letter and let’s find out who is sending you what looks like a tiny pair of shoes.’ He nodded towards the box which, yes, did look like a small shoe box, only one made of black polished wood. ‘Come on, there’s only so much suspense I can take in this suit before I start to look like a rainbow that’s exploded.’

Slowly and cautiously I unfolded the sheet of paper. It was, in fact, two sheets, one folded inside the other, and the first was a headed sheet from a solicitor somewhere in Dorset.

Dear Ms Arden,

Your late great aunt bequeathed the contents of this package to you in her recent will. If you have any further questions about the bequest, please do not hesitate to be in touch.

*Yours sincerely,
D A H Weldenfield*

Solicitor

I stared up at Toby, whose suit was beginning to make my vision flicker at the edges. ‘How did he know I was here?’

‘Now now, don’t be sexist, Matz. D Weldenfield might be a woman. Deborah, I think. Tall and willowy and wears suits from Marks and Spencer’s and very practical shoes.’ Toby pulled off the jester’s cap and ran a hand through his over-long, blond curls.

I knew displacement activity when I saw it. ‘Who did you tell I was here?’ I jumped up off the sofa with a considerable amount of static electricity accompanying my fleecy pyjamas. I could have illuminated a small city. ‘Toby? *Who?*’

‘It’s fine. Honestly. Just your parents, that’s all. They’ll have passed it on to good old D A H if you were named in the will, but they won’t tell anyone else.’ He pushed at my shoulders until I sat down, limp and defeated.

‘You don’t know *him*. He’ll worm his way round my mum, he does this whole “flattery” thing, “Gosh, Amanda, you’re looking younger every time I see you! And so *slim* . . . how do you do it?”’ I put on a high-pitched sing-song voice. It was how he sounded now, in my head, whenever I dreamed of his voice. A kind of wheedling, Dickensian-miser type of tone. It helped. ‘“And I *really* need to know where Matilda is, just to return some of her things.”’ I turned my mouth down into ‘comic sad clown’. ‘“I know our relationship is over, it’s so sad, but if she wants to leave me it’s up to her . . .”’ I gave the last four words a sinister spin. And then I started to cry.

Toby moved closer on the sofa and put an arm around me. I tried not to flinch, but I know I did, I felt his hurt withdrawal and heard him pumping his voice full of unnatural cheeriness as he pulled the rest of the package out from where it was wedging itself between the cushions. ‘Okay, well, look, here’s the rest of it, have a look at this other note, see what that says!’ Actually, maybe he wasn’t so badly suited to children’s entertainment. His tone was so relentlessly jovial it could have raised a corpse.

Taped to the top of the other sheet of paper was a small Yale key. I unpeeled it and read the letter.

Dere Matilda

I am leeving my hows to you. All you mus do to get

*this is to scater my ashes over the boys of Christmas, in
memury of my lost love.*

Yors

Millicent Arden-Wynne

St Clere's

Christmas Steepleton

Dorset.

It meant nothing. I stared at the words until they bled into the paper, became grey smudges against the white of the Basildon Bond, the shaky handwriting and the weird spellings nothing more than spiders' footprints.

'What?' Toby said.

I shook my head. 'It's my Great Aunt Millie, I think. Dad's aunt. I only met her a couple of times, when we went on holiday to Cornwall when I was tiny, we stopped over . . .' I tailed off, memory full of a wispy figure of a woman, white hair, nylon trousers and a robust smell of cat. 'And just the once about ten years ago when my cousin got married. She was lovely. Millie, I mean, not my cousin.'

'Slightly, er, erratic spelling.' Toby pulled a face over the note. 'Dyslexic?'

'Dad said she was just "different". Never allowed to go to school, her mother taught her to read and write and I think her mum might have been a bit, well, *phonetic* about it.'

'And she's left you a house.' He took the note from me and turned it over. There was nothing on the back, but the deep impression of the letters on the front. Great Aunt Millie had leaned quite hard on her pen to write this. 'In Dorset, of all places.'

'If I scatter her ashes . . .' It slowly dawned on me what must be in the box and I put it down, carefully, on the floor. 'Over the boys of Christmas? What the hell is she talking about, and is it even legal?'

Toby flicked a pompom out of the way. 'It beats lying around on my sofa. As a mission, I mean, obviously you're totally welcome to stay here as long as you need,' he added quickly, and looked at the floor. 'I mean, I'm not exactly throbbing with friendship groups and invites to parties, am I? Not that I want you here just for the company, Matz, or your shepherd's pie. Or to have someone to watch *Daredevil* with.'

I actually managed a smile. ‘You need a girlfriend. And you’re not going to get one with me slopping around on your FLOPBOT, or whatever IKEA named this thing.’ I slapped the cushion.

He kept his eyes on the floor, but a touch of colour tinted his cheekbones. It clashed appallingly with the puce and violet stripes in his suit. ‘Yeah,’ he said, indistinctly. ‘Maybe.’ Then he gave his head a shake, causing bauble-ripples across his shoulders. ‘Okay, when do we leave?’

I felt the panic hit my bloodstream. ‘Leave? What? Where am I going?’ Adrenaline sang in my ears for a moment — *I can’t go out there. What if he’s waiting? He’s got my money, my car keys, most of my things; he could have tracked me down . . .*

‘Matz.’ Toby’s voice was calm and steady, the perfect antidote to the fear rush. ‘It’s the twenty-first of December. Scatter those ashes — you could be in your new house by the New Year, two hundred miles from — well, from him. New Year, new start, new house, new . . . well, you need new everything, don’t you? So, I repeat, when do we leave? I’m presuming that these boys, whoever they are, live in Christmas Steepleton? So, we go there, find the boys, throw a box full of your great aunt at them, job’s a good ‘un. You get a house, I get my sofa back, everyone’s happy.’ He sighed. ‘But first, I have to go and twist balloons at eleven four-year-olds, okay?’

After he’d left, I sat, turning the key between my fingers, staring at the note, trying, and failing to remember any more about Great Aunt Millie. I hadn’t seen her for more than twenty years and the six-year-old me had been more into appearance than personality, so it was hardly surprising that she existed now as a sort of hook-shape topped with a grey perm and bottomed with trousers covered in tufts of fur. Presumably she’d kept cats, because the only other explanation was that she’d been a werewolf. In the end, and swallowing my nerves, I rang my mother.

‘Oh, *there* you are!’ she said, as though she could see me through my mobile. ‘Yes, Dad’s Aunt Millie. She was always very fond of you, and she didn’t really have many other people she could have left the place to. Your father wouldn’t thank her for it, I mean, *Dorset*, that’s practically in France, and he’d never get to work on time.’

Dad was a teacher in a school in Ealing, so she was right. In some ways. In others, of course, she was completely and utterly wrong, but she largely left infallibility to my father.

‘So.’ Her tone had gone very careful, so I knew what was coming next. ‘Have you spoken to Vane lately?’

‘Simon, mother. His name is Simon.’ He used his surname to introduce himself, because it made him sound more ‘exclusive’. Like Morrissey. I used to think it made him different to the other men I’d known, edgy, exciting. What it *actually* made him was a complete knob, with pretensions, and I’d been far too slow to grasp that for my own safety. ‘No, I don’t want to speak to *Simon*.’

‘He’s very worried about you.’ There was a note in my mother’s voice, just the tiniest hint of something, I wasn’t sure what but not of the censure I was expecting — she’d thought my moving in with Simon was a huge step up for me, with his fabulous London flat. She didn’t know what went on in that flat, when nobody was around. ‘He said he thought you’d had some kind of breakdown.’

I bit my lip. She didn’t know. How *could* she know, when both he and I had presented a face to the world of a devoted couple, happily in love and always together. *Always*. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You’re staying with Toby? Such a nice boy . . . always so, well, *flamboyant*, but lovely manners.’ Mother-code for ‘obviously gay.’

‘Yes. But Mum . . .’ I tailed off trying to frame the words properly. To put them in a way that she, married to Dad for thirty years with, as she put it ‘never a cross word’ — although I remembered quite a few very annoyed sentences — would understand. ‘Please, please don’t tell Simon where I am. I haven’t had a breakdown, I just can’t be with him any more.’ It occurred to me that Simon, sitting in that huge flat with my car keys and money, would know that I had to be at Toby’s or with my parents — where else would I have gone? And that he was just giving me a chance to ‘come to my senses’ before turning up at the front door, all forgiving smiles, open arms and those pointed little remarks designed to hurt whilst looking like concern. Dorset was a nice long way away from his brand of sane madness.

‘If you think that’s best, I’m sure you’re right.’ Exactly what she always said to Dad when she thought he was being ‘highly-strung’, although anyone less highly-strung than my father would be clinically dead. ‘Anyway, I’d better go, let me know how you get on.’ And she was gone. Taking with her that tone of voice that had almost, *almost* sounded like sympathy. Maybe Simon had slipped up somewhere? Let just a hint of the real man slip through

that façade of urbane, successful property developer, and shown the hideous reality that lay underneath? It wouldn't be totally out of character for him to have lost his temper when he couldn't find me, to have started off all reasonable and 'I'm so afraid that Matilda might harm herself, she's not stable, not functioning very well' and ended up as the spittle-flecked, puce-faced rager that I had become used to seeing more and more often.

I really hoped he'd let it slip in front of my mother. If memories of my teenage years were anything to go by, she was very efficient in dealing with out-of-control temper tantrums. She might even have set her small but incredibly barky terrier on him and the thought of Simon running with a dog nipping at his trouser legs while he tried to keep his image intact, made me laugh properly for the first time in a while.

Chapter Two

We drove down to Dorset the next day. The weather in London had been grey and depressing when we left, the streets shiny with showers, and the decorated trees in lighted windows looking strangely unseasonal. Unilluminated lanterns and enormous plastic Santas swayed over our heads in the gusty wind in every town we drove through, but there was no ‘feeling’ of Christmas in the air. It was too damp and dreary.

I used to love Christmas, when I’d lived at home. Being an only child meant that I’d had far more time, attention and money poured all over me than was really concomitant with being a balanced human being. It had meant that I’d almost come to *expect* a degree of feeling that the universe revolved around me, and a sudden chill pricked down my spine as I stared out of the window at a small Hampshire town. *I’d been easy pickings for someone like Simon. Taken in by his love-bombing at the start of our relationship, because I’d believed, somewhere in my core, that it was just what I deserved.* We’d met at a designer’s exhibition, I was there trawling for ideas and he was there because . . . actually, I had no idea why Simon had gone. To be seen, maybe. We’d got talking over a large texture piece, sat and drank champagne and he’d been — oh, he’d been everything I thought I wanted. Charming, handsome, funny, clever. And cruel. I’d thought his sharp remarks and sarcastic comments were just showing off at first. As though he wanted to make an impression on me. Last Christmas had been our first together, and he’d bought me diamonds. The chill intensified as I remembered the New Year party that had followed, and the slow revelation of Simon’s true character.

‘Why aren’t you wearing that necklace I bought you?’

‘Well, it’s a bit posh for a drinks party, isn’t it? What if I lose it?’

A tightening of the mouth. An expression on that beautiful, sculpted face that I’d never seen before. ‘Wear it.’

‘Simon, I’m afraid that it might get broken . . .’

‘WEAR IT!’

And then I’d gradually started to realise that the cruelty had been what Simon was really like, underneath. That the gloss and the charm were the disguise he wore to hide the ugly truth about the person he was inside. But

sometimes, just *sometimes* the funny, clever Simon would manifest, and everything would be like it had been at the beginning; I'd feel so *loved*. And if only I could keep him happy all the time, not upset him, then he'd always be the Simon I'd first met, the man who'd swept me off my feet and promised me the world. Or, at least, that small part of it that he could control . . .

'You okay, Matz? I can turn the heating up a bit if you want.' Toby wasn't even looking at me, he was concentrating on the road, gilded with frost, that unspooled under our wheels. We were somewhere in the New Forest I thought, the dead brown hands of bracken snatching at the sides of the car as we passed. All these miles and Simon was still with me.

'I was just . . . thinking.'

'Yeah, I could see you "thinking". It's over, you know that. You saw him for what he was and you got out.'

I shook my head and went back to looking at the view. Those sporadic trees looked pretty much as I felt inside, endlessly reaching out for nothing, a superficial gloss of passing cold making them look shiny, but underneath they were dull. Pretending to be alive. How could I ever make Toby understand? Yes, I'd got away from Simon, but now I was beginning to wonder how many of the things he'd said hadn't been motivated by his urge to control me, but had been *right*? I wasn't making much of my life. All that training, apprenticing myself to a leading interior designer . . . and where had it got me? Living on someone's sofa.

'So, what else do you remember about this place we're being sucked towards?' Toby flicked the steering wheel around a badger, marching its way along the side of the road like a disgruntled coffee table. 'You've got to admit, Matz, it's like being squeezed down a toothpaste tube, travelling these roads. By the time we get to Dorset, they're going to be two millimetres wide and we'll have to turn sideways.'

The vision of Simon in my head flickered and went out as though I'd turned him off. Real life and Simon weren't compatible. 'Not much, really. Big grey house, nice garden . . . lots of cats.'

'Wow. Retentive memory.'

'Shut up. I was more interested in my *Twinkle*.'

Toby started sniggering. 'And another entry for Euphemism Corner! What the hell, apart from the obvious, was your twinkle?'

I gave him a hard stare, but inside my teenage self was giggling filthily. It was a good feeling. ‘It was a girls’ comic, and should someone quite so euphemistically inclined really be allowed to be a children’s entertainer?’

‘Oh, come on, after ten rounds of Pass the Parcel and a veritable menagerie of balloon animals, you look for your fun where you can. I once got an hour of giggles out of a cake that was supposed to be a mushroom but looked exactly like a bum.’

My inner teenager was rolling around on the floor slapping her thigh and howling hysterically. My outer twenty-six-year-old had pursed her lips and was trying for a hard stare.

‘You’re laughing behind that po-face, aren’t you?’ Toby wiggled his eyebrows. ‘Come on, you’re allowed to laugh now, Mister “only smile at high-brow jokes about philosophers and quantum physics” isn’t here any more.’

I shrugged and Toby sighed. ‘One day. One day you’re going to go back to being the Mattie I know, and all that shit will just be a bad dream, you know that?’

‘I hope so.’ *Trees. Dead inside but pretending to be alive. Everything brown and grey and little flecks of ice.*

‘Yeah.’ His voice sounded a little less determined now. ‘So do I.’ Then an elbow nudged me. ‘So go on. Give us a smile.’

I bared my lips in a pretend grin.

‘Good grief. I’ve known five-year-olds be more convincing, and, let me tell you, a room full of unentertained five-year-olds is coming a bleak, and yet not-that-distant, second to being in this car with you.’

My stomach sideways-swooped. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll try to cheer up, honestly, I’m not unhappy I’m just . . . thinking.’

‘For God’s sake!’

I jumped and flinched in one movement, and found myself half-cowering against the door, as far from him as I could get in the confines of the Fiat. ‘I’m sorry! I’m happy really, look, I’ve just inherited a house, why wouldn’t I be happy?’

The car slid a little as Toby steered it into a muddy gateway and bumped it to a standstill over a frozen rutted verge. ‘Matz . . .’ His voice was gentle now, although he was taking such deep breaths that I could see the fur on the hood of his jacket moving in little ripples. ‘You are entitled to be as sad,

happy, upset or downright miserable as you like. I know you've . . . I know that he has tried to beat all the joy and spontaneity out of you, and it's looking like he's done a good job. I'm sorry if I'm coming over as some kind of CBBC presenter on a truly heroic amount of drugs, but I'm trying, in my feeble and rather toddler-orientated way, to get back the Matz I used to know. I know I'm clumsy and dealing with someone who's been through what you have isn't really my forte, because you're over four feet tall and you don't laugh like a drain when I mention farts . . .' He spread his hands on the steering wheel. 'I just want you to feel better,' he finished, staring out of the windscreen.

'Me too,' I muttered.

Beyond my window, the outline of that very determined badger wavered into view and clarified, as the single-minded creature caught up with us and, without a single glance our way, veered around us and then continued its trot down the verge. We both watched its progress in silence.

'Sorry I've been *badgering* you,' Toby said. It sounded like the reflexive sort of joke that someone who's spent more time than anyone in the company of small children would make.

'Stoatally all right,' I replied. It took a second, but then he exploded in giggles.

'Knew you were in there somewhere,' he grinned. 'The Mattie I know and . . . well, yeah, knew you hadn't lost it.'

'Lost what? The ability to make really crap jokes is something I'd quite like to lose, really, in favour of sophistication and cocktail dresses.' I kept looking out of the window as he restarted the engine and the car slithered back out of the mud, clods clattering and clacking off the bodywork as we drove onto the road. My expression, reflected back at me, looked a little softer, backed now by rolling fields and frosty fenced acres.

'I've known you a lot longer than him, don't forget,' Toby said. 'I know the *real* Matilda Arden, the you that you are underneath. And I . . . well, I like *that* you far more than the version he tried to turn you into, y'know? The Matz that I had the epic snowball fight with, the one that fell asleep during horror film night after eating all my popcorn . . .' He turned his head to look at me quickly. 'Before you got your hair all . . .' a jittery hand indicated the glossy, hard-to-care-for curls that Simon had insisted looked better on me than my previous, slightly wayward style. 'When you could still laugh.'

We drove through another small town. Here there was less wind and the hanging decorations looked more fitting to the season now that they weren't spiralling about above the streets, but were wreathed in frost in a far more Christmassy way. A large conifer stood in a cobbled square, dotted with lights and surrounded by the stalls of a Christmas market, crowded with people wearing thick coats and ornamented with knitwear. It almost felt as though Christmas was creeping up on us with every mile we drove.

We saw the first sign for Christmas Steepleton as we passed through Bridport, and we followed the satnav directions down roads that got narrower and hills that got steeper, under tunnels of bare branches that joined over the roof of the car. I'd forgotten just how far from main-street civilisation the village was. Or maybe I'd never noticed, sitting there on the back seat of the car, surrounded by boiled sweets and comics and looking forward to our family holiday in Cornwall. The stop-off to visit an aged relative hardly registered, apart from the fact that Mum and Dad would always break into a whispered argument in the front about whether we should have turned off half a mile back. But we always got there, and the sun had always been shining, and I'd never appreciated that the village was little more than a marker for how much land had slumped into the sea recently.

We crested a final hill, and I pointed. 'That's Christmas Steepleton.'

In the rapidly gathering dark the place was visible only as a series of lights, which seemed to have been stuck onto a cliff face overlooking a blackness of sea.

'Any blue plaques to H. P. Lovecraft?'

'What?'

'It's a bit . . . isolated isn't it? The sort of place where creatures from the deep creep into town at night and take all the virgins?'

I gave him a stern look. 'The average age in Christmas Steepleton is about eighty. Any "creatures from the deep" would be battered and served with chips before they knew what hit them. Anyway. Turn down here, I think.' Vague memories from childhood were surfacing, of the narrow lane that curved gently downhill towards the lights, familiarity gradually seeping in. We passed first one house, then another, lights glowing gently through uncurtained windows into the early dusk. 'This is it.'

Toby stopped the car. '*This* is your aunt's house?' He wound down the window, letting in a sharp gasp of winter air, and stared.

‘What were you expecting?’ I took in the complete view, a detached house above us set back slightly from the road up a precipitous and complicated series of steps. The walls shone rain-polished and the low gables made the place look as though it was frowning. ‘Herds of wildebeest?’ Below us stretched the steep, dark, slippery-shiny street, empty of people, which led towards the little cove where I remembered buying ice creams and paddling among rock pools. Behind the house, an expanse of garden ran up to the chalk hills, which loomed bulkily above the small town like gym muscles out of a too-tight shirt.

‘Something more homely for a start.’ Toby adjusted the heater. ‘This is like a horror film set. I can practically hear the organ music.’

‘Well, it’s now *my* horror film set, so we should go in.’ I hesitated a moment. ‘I mean, if you want to.’

Toby sighed. ‘You’re doing it again, Matz. I’m not him. You don’t have to ask my permission, you know. If I don’t want to do something then I’ll tell you and we can work it out, not . . . well, whatever it was he did.’

I hesitated with the car door half open. ‘He wouldn’t speak to me,’ I said, voice low, almost as though Simon was hunching down in the back seat about to leap up and contradict me. ‘He’d pretend I didn’t exist until I apologised and then did what he wanted.’

‘Matz.’

‘And you know something? He thought he was pretty great because he didn’t *actually* hit me. I deserved it, he’d tell me that, all the time, if he’d been a different kind of bloke I’d be all bruises and cigarette burns because I was so crap and so disloyal and so shit at being a girlfriend, but because he was *such a nice man* he was correcting me without hurting me.’ The words stopped, although the thoughts and memories that ran them kept going inside my head, overwound clockwork that wouldn’t — *couldn’t* — stop.

‘Yes.’

Toby’s agreement jolted me. A smatter of rain that was half-water, half-ice sluiced through the partly open door and stung my skin. ‘What do you mean?’

He shook his head for a moment, the car’s interior light giving his fair hair a tinge of yellow, almost as though he was still in costume. ‘I mean, yes. Yes, you need to tell me all this, you need to get it out in the open. Your relationship with him was like some kind of infection, Matz, if you keep all

the poison inside you it will kill you. You have nothing to feel ashamed of. And . . .’ He stopped, coughed, fiddled with the car keys and wound up the window, appearing almost guilty, then finally looked at me. His eyes were too dark to read in that weak light. ‘And I’m glad you feel you can say it to me.’

‘We need to go in. It’s cold out here.’

Without another word, he got out of the car and locked it. ‘Right. Better get on with it then. You go first, if there’s a bloody great tentacled thing in there it’s your responsibility.’

We climbed the steps, which were slightly too high for comfort and too steep for safety, and arrived at the forbiddingly dark front door. ‘I think my aunt was more cats than Cthulhu,’ I said, weakly, hauling the little Yale key out of my pocket. ‘And the house is only mine if I can scatter those ashes in the right place. I don’t know what happens if I don’t.’

‘Maybe it goes to the cats’ home.’ Toby followed me inside, sniffing slightly. ‘Although, it smells like it might already have gone.’

The cavernous hallway, with its dark wooden floor, brown painted walls and closed doors leading off it, did have a distinct whiff of territorial tom cat. ‘I’m guessing it looks better by daylight.’ I’d instinctively lowered my voice. ‘It’s bigger than I remember, but we usually stayed out in the garden when we visited.’

‘Camping?’ Toby was cautiously preceding me into the house, keeping one hand against a wall as though he expected them to start closing in around us at any second. ‘Or self-protection?’

‘We only stopped off to say hello, we never stayed over.’

‘Very wise.’ His words echoed back to me as he vanished into the gloom, there was a sudden click and a light flickered on, illuminating the point at which the hallway opened out into an impressive staircase. ‘That’s . . . well, I was going to say “better”, but it really isn’t, is it? I’m half expecting maniacal laughter from upstairs any moment now.’

We both listened for a second, but there was no sound other than that of another sleety shower hitting glass behind one of the closed doors. ‘It’s just a house,’ I said firmly. ‘All houses feel weird when no one has lived in them for a while.’

There was an increase in the sound of ice pellets on a window, the light above us flickered and went out, and I let out a squeak. ‘It’s not the *living* in

that worries me.’ Toby pulled out his car keys, which apparently had one of those tiny torches attached, because a pathetic beam of light resulted. ‘It’s more the *dying* thing.’

I pushed at one of the doors and it opened surprisingly easily, showing the outlines of hibernating furniture under dust sheets. ‘Even if my great aunt did die in the house, she’s not still going to be here,’ I said, more sternly than I felt. ‘It’s against the law. Anyway, I know they buried her because Mum and Dad went to the funeral. I wasn’t allowed to go, Simon said . . .’ I stopped.

Toby let the needle of light play over the shrouded chairs without comment. Eventually he said, ‘if a talking dog comes through that door, I am leaving. This is a spooky janitor situation if ever I saw one.’

‘Shut up.’ I nudged him and the light swung around, randomly illuminating more dark walls with pictures on, and a lampshade hanging from the ceiling with an outline that made it look as though a flamingo had landed upside down. ‘I can’t get used to there not being any cats. If I live here, I’d like to have a cat.’

‘It needs something to fill the space out a bit.’ We closed the door to that room and I followed Toby down the long hallway to a kitchen, which lay at the back of the house behind the staircase. ‘Plus, early warning system for ghosts. I didn’t know you liked cats, Matz. And that sounds like the beginning of a Doctor Seuss book, sorry.’

We stood in the high-ceilinged room, all the kitchen fittings were just looming shapes crouched around the walls in the needle-thin torch beam. ‘I always wanted a pet. But Simon said . . .’ I stopped. ‘Is that an old-fashioned range?’

‘That or a coffin.’ Toby approached the huge black object that lay against the far wall. ‘Anyway, in here it isn’t “old-fashioned”, it’s practically cutting edge compared to the rest of the room and the term “cutting edge” probably meant flint tools when this was built. This place gives spooky old houses a bad name.’

We stood in silence for a moment. The quiet was absolute. No traffic passed, not even an atmospheric owl hooted, and the cold was almost solid. ‘We’d better find bedrooms.’

Cautiously we crept up the staircase, further into the darkness. A carpet muffled our footsteps and let out a smell of cat and dust as we made it up to

the dark corridor of the landing, more closed doors leading off. I opened the first one to reveal a double room with a large iron bedstead, devoid of mattress, and an isolated bookcase. The thin light of Toby's key-ring torch showed that Aunt M had been a devoted follower of Dan Brown and Catherine Cookson and a rabid collector of cat ornaments.

The next room had two single beds, with mattresses and covers. 'Okay, I'll have this one, you have the double?' Toby said, turning the torch to reveal the swirling pattern of the carpet in fragments, like some terrible hallucinogenic nightmare.

'That sounds . . .' The door to the double room slammed suddenly in an unfelt draught and I jumped so hard that I nearly knocked him over. 'Actually . . .'

We looked at each other for a moment through the darkness. 'Don't take this the wrong way,' he said at last, 'but I'd feel a lot better if we shared. Just for tonight. And then, supposing all my prayers are answered, tomorrow we can get those ashes scattered and then the place is all your problem.'

I cleared my throat. 'I think that sounds very sensible, actually. I mean . . .'

' . . . strange house, might get up in the night and fall down the stairs . . .'

' . . . so it would be good to have company.'

Moving together, as though we'd been joined by the ankles, but really joined by the terror of being left alone in the big, dark house, we went out to the car and fetched in the sleeping bags, spreading them on the two single beds, then lay side by side in the thick darkness, with the cold scratching at us.

'This isn't what I imagined, you know.' Toby's voice drifted through the night to me. 'I thought, you know, Dorset, rolling hills and beaches, little cottages. And reliable electricity supplies, wireless connections, heating, all that stuff.'

I pulled my sleeping bag further up towards my nose. The cold had a kind of damp quality to it, and the word 'seeping' kept creeping into my mind. 'It's December. Nowhere looks its best in December.'

Another pause. Then I heard him turn to face me, although I didn't know why, it was so dark that I could barely see him as an outline, backlit by the faintly grey sky visible outside the window. 'Have you ever wondered,' he began, his voice as carefully blank as the glass, 'why Simon let you stay in

touch with me? When he stopped you even going to see your parents unless he went too?’

My eyes focused firmly on the ceiling. A pattern of cracks networked across it, as though the roof had been in on the planning of the London Underground. ‘I . . . well . . .’

‘I mean, I know he wouldn’t let you come to the flat, but he’d let you meet me for coffee . . .’ Toby’s voice trailed off into a moment of silence that the cold claimed as its own. Bedsprings jangled. ‘He didn’t, did he?’ There was a new note in his words now. ‘You met up with me without him knowing, didn’t you, Matz?’

How did I explain? How could I make him see? ‘I’ve known you for so long, I *know* you weren’t any of the things he tried to make me think you were, I *know* you’d never try to poison my mind against him or force me to leave him . . . he said I didn’t need any of my so-called friends, that they were all laughing about me behind my back because they were *jealous*, but I *knew* you’d never be like that! So I . . .’ I gave a shrug that let a slice of cold air slip between me and the sleeping bag, as though the idea of Simon had come along with my speaking about him.

‘And that’s why you never came to the flat? Why we always had to meet in public places?’ Toby’s voice sounded surprisingly serious for a man who rarely went two minutes without a pun or a joke. It sounded deeper too, almost as if the weight of darkness was pressing on it and squeezing the ‘light-hearted entertainer’ out of him.

‘I wanted to be able to tell Simon we’d met by accident. In case . . . if he’d followed me.’

‘And did he?’ Now there was an unmistakable hardness to his tone. The words had been knapped like stone to have sharp edges.

I breathed. *It’s Toby. He’s not angry with you, he’s never been angry with YOU . . .* ‘Once or twice. But never when I met you, only when I went shopping, once when I had to go to the doctor’s.’

‘He followed you to the doctor’s.’ A flat statement.

‘I’d hurt my leg. Thought I might have broken my ankle at one point, it was stupid, I’d been painting a shelf and I fell . . .’

‘And he not only made you go to the doctor alone, but he *followed you to make sure that’s where you were going?*’

I could almost see the ripples in the darkness, as those heavy words hit it.

Words that felt as though they'd been snapped off a much longer conversation.

'Don't be angry with me, Toby, please. I know it was wrong, I knew then it was wrong, I just . . .'

'It's still not you I'm angry with.' Then he gave a long sigh. 'I wish you could see yourself as I see you,' he said, enigmatically, and lapsed into silence. I bounced around a bit, trying to get comfortable, as another splatter of sleet hit the window, and the closed door rattled on its old-fashioned latch in the gusty breeze which was getting in somewhere and hurtling around the house like an under-exercised Jack Russell.

Toby and I had met at university, both of us creative and up for any challenge — him, as long as it didn't involve heights and me . . . well. That sense of being 'special', the centre of the universe had persisted much longer with me than it should have, and it had taken a good few terms and some serious mental and physical confrontations before I'd been able to accept that there was nothing out of the ordinary about me. I'd just had parents who'd wanted to believe that there was. And so I'd gone to see Toby in all his productions and he'd come to see my end-of-year collection and we'd gone our separate ways but stayed in touch.

Why had I stayed in touch with Toby? It was a tough question. Was it because I didn't believe he would ever be involved in all the mocking behind my back that Simon said my other friends were taking part in? Was it because I knew I could tell him anything and he wouldn't either assume I was making it up — attention-seeking, or, and almost worse in a way, start demanding that I leave Simon immediately? Because I knew Toby would quietly accept what I said and wait for me to reach my own decisions in my own time?

I finally fell asleep to the sound of the sleet turning into something softer, that blew against the dark windows like feathery kisses.

Chapter Three

When I woke up, Toby was already downstairs, fiddling about in the kitchen. I put on practically all the clothes I had brought with me, because the house was nose-bitingly cold, and searched him out. The electricity had come back on and he was attempting to boil water in a kettle that looked as though someone had gone half-way to making a cauldron and then chickened out.

‘The 1950s called and they want their kitchen back,’ he said, waving an arm to indicate an interior that didn’t look as though anyone had touched it with a paintbrush since rationing was abolished. ‘Actually, make that the 1550’s. I brought tea bags and milk with me. I think there are mugs in that cupboard over there.’ He nodded towards the pantry. ‘I was going to get them but . . . spiders.’ A shudder which wasn’t over-dramatised. Toby really did have a spider phobia; he hadn’t seen *Lord of the Rings* past Shelob’s entrance yet. Poor Toby. I watched him as he dug into his holdall for the promised drinks, lots of theatrical elbows and dramatic sighs all topped with a vast hoodie and blond hair which had formed overnight into tufts and curls. His hatred of creepy-crawlies and his terror of heights combined with his slender frame and gentleness had seen him ‘friend-zoned’ out of relationships with an almost metronomic regularity. We’d had many a long, late-night discussion about why he couldn’t find a girlfriend, during which I had regularly reassured him that lots of women like beta-males who might not want to abseil off the Clifton Suspension Bridge or wrestle tarantulas but who were kind, gave ace back rubs and knew the importance of ice cream and chocolate in any balanced diet.

I turned away with a shudder when I realised just how much of a betrayal of all those words my dating Simon had been.

‘Okay, mugs, and for your information, no arachnids. Just a load of webs and a collection of dust that would have impressed Quentin Crisp.’ I put my head around the pantry door. ‘And it’s even colder in there, no wonder Aunt Millie didn’t bother with a fridge.’

‘Plus, you know, big enough for all those bodies, honestly, you could take the doors off this place and use it as a morgue. Perhaps they did. And, even more possibly, still are. Have you checked out all the rooms yet, in case Boris Karloff is lurching around anywhere? It’s like Blair Witch meets *The*

Ring, fights it, and comes up with something even more terrifying. It doesn't even get light!'

I went over to the window and rubbed the glass with the tip of my finger. It was desperately cold. 'That's because it snowed in the night. The snow is all piled up on the window-ledge, look.' I lifted the sash and the window grunted up a grudging half an inch, with a resultant tiny avalanche that cascaded in and covered my socked feet. 'Bugger.'

'Oh, great.' Toby disappeared behind a steam curtain as he poured water on the teabags. 'We get snowed up in the House on the Hill and spend Christmas fending off the army of the undead. I think I saw that film — heads up, it didn't end well for the inhabitants.'

'Don't be stupid.' I tried to brush the snow off my feet. The house was so cold inside that it just sat in little heaps on the tiled kitchen floor, only melting where it was in contact with my skin. 'This is Dorset. You don't get snowed in in Dorset, you're thinking of Dumfries. This is the South West, all English Rivas and palm trees and . . .' I wrenched open the big wooden door to the outside, which eventually moved, following a gouged line in the tiling that showed it had always been an effort to open '. . . Alaskan weather conditions.' Outside, where I knew there should have been a garden riding the rising slope to where bracken and heather took over to the crest of the hill, there was a smooth blanket of snow. The hill itself looked like the nubble of an elbow under a white shirt, jutting into the greyish yellow of the sky. Beyond it, I could see the faint line of hedge that marked the road into Christmas Steepleton, the road itself was invisible under the snow, which looked, even from here, to be too deep to drive through, particularly with the gradient. 'Ah.'

'Well, look on the bright side.' Toby came and stood next to me, surveying the bleak snowscape. 'Oh no, wait, there isn't one. We're trapped in *The Village of the Damned*. They'll be able to put us on ice when they've finished with us and keep us til July.'

I snorted a laugh. 'Stop being so overdramatic, Toby.'

He waved an overemphatic arm. 'I can't! I literally can't! All those children's parties and musical games and primary-coloured clothes have turned me into John Hurt! If the monsters don't get us, I shall emote myself to death.' A comfortable arm rested across my well-padded shoulders. 'Okay, and in other news, what's the plan?'

‘Drink tea, dig our way out, find boys of Christmas, scatter ashes, wait for snow to melt and get the hell out of Dodge?’

‘Succinct.’ The arm gave me a quick hug-that-I-wasn’t-sure-was-a-hug-or-just-movement, and Toby went back to the mugs. ‘I like it. And what about this house? Put it on the market, in case Hammer Films fancy remaking *The Zombie?*’

I shuffled my socked feet around, taking in the old-fashioned, free-standing kitchen furniture, the dark brown wood of the doors, the collection of flowered china jugs hanging from hooks along the beam above the range. The cold tinged everything, the air tasted of it, everything I touched felt slick and dead. ‘I want to do it up,’ I said, surprising myself. ‘Turn it back into a proper home.’

Toby curled a lip at me over the edge of his mug. ‘With what? Simon took control of your money, didn’t he? Shouldn’t think there’ll be much left, by the time he’s finished.’

‘I can work, set up a design studio here. It’ll be great, actually, I bet loads of these cottages are owned as second homes, people will be lining up to get them made over, come the summer. And I remember how to do interiors on a budget, it’s pretty much what I spent my degree doing, after all.’ I looked around, imagining the cupboards painted pale grey, the range restored and newly blacked, the tiles polished and gleaming. ‘It’s a lovely house really.’

‘If, as previously stated, you are Boris Karloff.’ Toby shivered, theatrically. ‘And have the body fat distribution of a yak.’ He glanced at the windows. ‘It might take ages before we get out of here, this place looks like it hasn’t seen the sun since 1977. And aren’t your parents going to be missing you if you’re not back by Christmas?’

I shrugged. ‘They’re going to Pamela’s, mum’s friend. Vane . . . I mean, Simon and I were supposed to be going on a cruise. He’ll probably go without me.’ A tiny pang dug into my chest, not regret, no, never that, but . . . just a twinge for that part of the life I had given up that had been good. A Christmas cruise to see the northern lights, something I’d always wanted to do. Okay, I would have had to put up with Simon criticising my choice in clothes, my manners, my inability to drink more than two glasses of wine without having to go and lie down afterwards; his silent rages if I spoke up for myself, the two weeks of sulks if I dared go against him . . . I looked around the cold, bleak walls of the old-fashioned kitchen and that twinge died

as I thought how much he would hate this place. *Mine*. The northern lights would wait for me. Simon, hopefully, wouldn't.

'Right. If we're going to be here for any length of time we're going to need more teabags.' Toby looked into his cup. 'So if you get out there and start hunting down those boys, I'll make a foray into the local shops, always supposing there *are* shops and not some sort of bartering collective, because I don't think my winning ways with balloon animals are going to get us much more than a ham sandwich.' A pause. 'And now I come to think about it, *that* combination of words is probably never going to come out of my mouth again.'

I changed into some clothing more suitable for venturing outdoors, although, given the temperature, that really just involved putting a coat over the top of what I was already wearing and pulling a woolly hat around my ears and, with Toby making 'shooing' motions as he pushed me out of the front door, I set off out into the snow-covered streets of Christmas Steepleton, with the box of my aunt's ashes deep in my pocket. After all, I never knew when some boys might present themselves, and I might as well be ready.

The steps down to the road were icy and I had to hold on to the bushes in order not to slither down the whole lot. The road itself wasn't much better. It led steeply down to the distant cove and harbour and was currently filled with snow and lined with houses, like someone had domesticated the Cresta Run. Any cars that were about had clearly been parked since last night, judging by the snow heaped on the roofs and the lack of any tyre tracks.

The sea lay at the bottom, like a dirty blanket, grey and creased with waves, washing against the cliff edge with an impatient hushing sound, overlaid by the petulant cries of gulls. To my left lay the little harbour, where a few fishing boats toddled about, sheltered from the worst of the wave action by a long wall which curved out into the sea and against which it broke in half-arsed curls of spray. To my right was the tiny beach where I'd played while Mum and Dad had sat with Aunt Millie in the beach hut, reading the paper and performing other, boring adult tasks. The beach huts were gone now, I could see. Where the colourful boxes had once stood was now an expanse of slumped earthy cliff, overgrown with bleached adolescent trees.

I inched my way down the slope, zigging and zagging to avoid picking up speed and schussing embarrassingly past the village and down into the

sea. To my surprise, despite the debilitating snowfall, most of the shops that occupied the street, which branched off the hill and ran parallel to the sea, were open. Their lights were a welcome antidote to the bleak snowscape and the scary dark of Aunt Millie's house, and I went into the first shop in the row, which looked as though it had been converted from either a lifeboat station or a particularly militant shed.

It was warm inside. Little lanterns hung from a beamed ceiling, shelving was covered in fairy lights and a Christmas tree stood against one wall. There were posters stuck up everywhere and items which looked handmade scattered across all surfaces. A girl sat behind a sort of counter, knitting, and she looked up, startled, when I came in.

'Thought the road was closed,' she said. 'Did you walk over the cliffs?'

'No, we came down last night. We're staying in Millicent Wynne's house up on the hill.'

The girl looked back down at her knitting. 'Oh, ah. I heard she'd left that place to some niece or something?' She had multi-coloured dreadlocks and was wearing a kind of artistic smock thing that seemed to be mostly pocket, on each fingernail the varnish was a different colour. My eyes ached at the result, but that was partly the shock. After a night in Millie's sepia-toned house, I would have found a copy of *The Times* a bit too colourful.

'Yes, that's me. I'm Mattie Arden.'

The girl lay the knitting down on the counter. 'Oh yes, I remember you,' she said. As she was at least five years younger than me and would have been an infant the last time I visited, this made me frown.

'Really?'

She sighed. 'No. But that's the sort of thing people expect round here. I was going to bluff it. So, what can I do for you?' She stood up and I saw she was wearing a name badge that said 'Thea', multi-striped leggings and Doc Marten boots that laced up to her knees. 'There aren't many people who come in on days like these, hence this.' She picked up the knitting. 'By spring I should have a bedspread done.'

I looked around. 'This is nice.' By which I really meant 'this is a pleasant contrast to a house with no heating and intermittent electricity'. The shop was a little bit 'cutesy' for my taste, self-consciously 'seaside holiday gifts' like pastel water-colour paintings of Christmas Steepleton and stones with little homilies like 'Be Peaceful' carved into them.

Thea shrugged. ‘Does well in summer. But . . .’ she picked up a hand-painted lighthouse, which was about ten centimetres tall and a carved wooden gull at least twenty-five centimetres high, ‘. . . scale, people. I have nightmares of being attacked by twenty-foot black-backs. Anyway. What can I do for you?’

It felt a bit weird, launching into my tale of ashes and house bequests, so I wandered around for a minute, looking at the displays. Amid the seaside items were occasional knitted creations, a seascape half woven and half crochet, which was very effective, and some cushions in muted colours which somehow managed to conjure images of sunsets over sea and moonlight on water. ‘Did you do these?’

Thea shrugged. ‘Yeah, well.’ Her attitude was a mixture of resignation and pride and I picked up one of the cushions, admiring the quality of the stitching and the blending of the colours.

‘They’re lovely.’ Under the cushion I found a knitted octopus, with each leg a different colour, and a big smiley face. Impulsively I picked him up. ‘I’ll take him. He’ll make a great Christmas present for my friend.’ Toby could call him Cthulhu. He was probably a bit light on the tentacle front, and way too cheerful to be a demon, but still. ‘But please can you gift-wrap him? I didn’t bring any paper or anything . . . we only came for a couple of days but it looks as though we’re going to be stuck here for Christmas.’

Thea took the octopus and went to the counter. ‘We’re usually swamped out at Christmas,’ she said. ‘You’d be amazed how many people want to come to Christmas for Christmas, it’s only the weather that’s put them off this year, the forecast is bad for the next week or so, and nobody in their right mind wants to get snowed in here. This is a place it’s all right to visit, got a naff name that looks cute on postcards, that’s all. We’ve not even got a Sainsbury’s.’ She carefully didn’t look up from cutting paper.

‘We never thought to check the forecast,’ I said, a bit chastened by her assumption.

‘You’re from . . . London?’ I nodded. ‘Shouldn’t think weather forecasts mean much to you up there. Bit of wind, bit of rain . . .’ She gave a nod towards the high hills. ‘Up there, for the farmers, it can be life or death, so we take notice. Plus, you know, bulk buying fish fingers and everything, cos they don’t send the helicopter in until day three.’ She stuck down a final piece of tape and handed me the squishy parcel. ‘Right. Anything else?’

‘Does the phrase, “the boys of Christmas Steepleton” mean anything to you?’ I dropped Cthulhu in my pocket.

She laughed. ‘Er, no. Dating potential round here, precisely zero. There’s one young guy who does the ice cream stall, but he’s like seventeen so practically a baby. Zac and Jed up on the cliff there.’ A jerk of the head to indicate the road down which I’d come, ‘but you’d be wasting your time there, they’ve been a couple forever, they are so kidding themselves if they think nobody knows. That’s pretty much it for men under fifty.’ She bit a fingernail, the turquoise one, thoughtfully. ‘There’s a boys’ school up on the hill, some of the teachers are blokes. I suppose you could give that a go. And some archaeology types digging around on the top of the cliff sometimes.’ She looked me up and down. ‘If you’re desperate.’

I drew myself up, about to take offence, but then I looked down at myself, bulked out in lots of clothing and topped with an old coat and the washed-out feeling that running away from Simon had left me with. ‘No, thanks. I’m off men at the moment. But I need to find the boys to scatter my aunt’s ashes.’ And I told Thea the details of my bequest, while she chewed another nail and then laughed.

‘Mad old bat.’ But it was said affectionately, and besides, the smell of cat and the house décor didn’t really contradict that impression. ‘Used to see her wandering up her garden, up to her ankles in cats, but I don’t know about any “boys”. Could ask my gran, I suppose, she knew your Aunt Millie.’

‘Oh, could you? That would be great.’ Visions of two old ladies chatting over tea about long-past lovers, hunched under shawls in rocking chairs were dashed when Thea said, ‘Yeah, but I’ll have to wait til tonight to ring her — she’s in Australia, gone on an adventure holiday.’

I left Thea settling back with her knitting and went out into the street again. In contrast to the warmth and light of the shop, it seemed dark. The sky was a threatening grey, reflected by the sea’s pewter shade. The creamy white breakers that rolled in up over the rocky beach to lie in lacy tatters on the strip of sand, showed up bright in the greyness on one side, and on the other side the lights from the shops shone out onto the snow. The railings that separated the road from the drop down to the beach were woven with Christmas lights and I found myself wondering how they fared when the spray from a rough sea splashed over them. Surely it was irresponsible to have mains-powered lighting somewhere that water could get in?

And then I stopped. Pulled up short by the thought that it wasn't my kind of thinking. That was a very *Simon* sort of thought. I just liked the fact that someone had taken the trouble to tangle coloured lights around a rail, someone cared enough about the appearance of the village and the season to try to brighten things up with lanterns. Maybe they were battery-powered anyway. And Health and Safety wouldn't let anyone do anything that would be dangerous, would they?

Get out of my head, Simon. I'm tired of thinking what you want me to think. Wearing what you want me to wear, being the person you want me to be. Or allowing myself to be moulded into the sort of person you think you deserve to be with — compliant, quiet, intelligent but not too intelligent. Nothing to challenge your view of the world as conspiring to keep you from making those millions you deserve. The silent, pretty woman in the background, wearing the clothes and jewellery that say nothing about who she is, but are all about how you want to be perceived . . .

I found myself gripping the railings with both hands, as though to stop myself from climbing over and letting myself drop the twenty or so feet down the slowly crumbling cliff that separated the road from the sea. Simon was gone. I'd left, we were over.

I just knew that he wasn't the type to let me go that easily.

'Hello.' Toby appeared beside me. 'Sea still there then.' An elbow nudged at me. 'Any luck with the boys? Good grief, this whole experience is giving me a set of phrases that I am absolutely *never* going to use again.' He had a bag swinging from his wrist, his hands being deep in the pockets of the fur-hooded duffle coat that made him look like an overgrown five-year-old.

'There's a boys' school further up there.' I pointed towards the top of the hills above the village. 'Apparently. Other than that, and a teenager and two gay blokes, nothing that I can think would remind Aunt Millie of her long lost love.'

'Aha!' Toby reached into the bag. 'There is also . . . this.' He produced a pamphlet. 'In my search for comestibles with which to create some kind of Christmas feast — no real luck, they don't have proper shops here and we were only half an hour away from Christmas dinner being two choc ices and a stick of rock — I found the Tourist Information Office!'

I stared, first at him, where his hair was being pulled from under his hood by the sea wind, teased into a fusilli of spirals and then blown back against

his forehead, and then at the pamphlet in his hand. ‘They have a Tourist Information in Christmas Steepleton? Who for, a bunch of seagulls down from Hull?’

‘Come on, you know it’s not always like this! Dorset in summer is heaving with people. This is part of the Jurassic Coast . . . fossils and . . . well, mostly fossils, but fossils are popular. Plus, sea, sand, ice creams, all that.’ We looked out for a moment across the heaving sea with its doilies of foam. ‘Okay, hard to imagine at the moment, but, yeah. Tourists. So . . .’ He tried to unfold the paper, but it blew and danced and formed new creases and he ended up having to bend it around to show me the relevant part. ‘Look.’

It was a small picture of a hillside. Faint lines showed white in the chalk, but that was all I could make out. ‘And this is . . . what?’ I looked at his face. His greenish-brown eyes were lit up from inside, like the shop windows and there was a little half-grin that kept bursting out on his face.

‘This, my dear Matz,’ and he put his arm around me again, bundling in close to stop the paper being whipped out of his hand by the nervous little wind that was skirling around us, ‘is a picture of an excavation which is going on as we speak, up there.’ He pointed with the arm not hugging me, and the pamphlet scrunched itself into a ball around his wrist. ‘All right, probably not *literally* as we speak because of the four feet of snow and the minus several million of centigrade, but it’s a current excavation. This says . . .’ and he let me go to flatten out the paper against a nearby bin, ‘that “faint chalk marks indicate that figures were once cut into the hillside” . . . blah blah something historical . . . “appearing to be two small male shapes, currently known as . . .” wait for it . . . the boys of Christmas!’ With a ‘ta-da!’ sort of motion, he flipped the paper into a smaller shape and tucked it back into his pocket. ‘Your underwhelment leads me to believe you are less than impressed, Matz,’ he said. ‘And it’s far too close to Christmas — the time of year, not the place although, yes, the place as well — for that kind of expression. Come on, there are boys everywhere!’ A moment. ‘And, yes, I realise that I should probably be saying that with a *bit* less emphasis.’

Under my feet the snow squeaked and crunched as I stomped my boots to try to get some feeling into my toes. ‘I thought this was going to be easy,’ I said.

‘Nothing is worth having if it’s too easy,’ Toby said, hunching his shoulders against a new wind. This one came off the sea and held salt and the

smell of seaweed, like the waves were breathing out. ‘Are you done here? Shall we go back to what I am going to have to call “the house”, purely because it’s got walls and a roof and therefore cannot be described as “the graveyard”?’

I pressed my hands deep into my pockets, feeling the crunch of paper and the soft ball that was the little knitted octopus, and managed a little smile. ‘I suppose so. I can come back tomorrow to find out if Thea managed to talk to her gran in Australia.’

‘Thea?’ Toby began to walk beside me, our feet cracking the snowy surface in a pleasing kind of unison as we picked our way back along the seafront towards the hill leading up to the house. A few, very bundled-looking people were walking about now, none of them looked particularly pleased to be outside, but it stopped the streets from looking quite so *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* . . . damn it, now Toby had got me at it, thinking of Christmas Steepleton as some creepy film location.

‘She works in there.’ I gestured at the little gift shop as we passed. Thea was standing in the window, gazing out across at the sea. She saw us and gave a regal sort of wave, then turned back to her knitting. ‘That’s Thea.’

‘Wow.’ Toby stopped walking and turned sideways. ‘She looks amazing. What’s she like?’

Of course. Of course Toby, with his drama school background and his love of brightly-coloured things, would get on with someone like Thea. Of course he would. I should take him into the shop, introduce him. Walk back to the house alone and leave the two of them to get to know one another, who knew where it might lead?

But I kept walking. ‘Didn’t really talk long enough to find out. Nice, I think. Her gran knew Aunt Millie.’

He tore himself away from the window and extended his stride to catch up with me, snow flurrying around his legs and making dark splashes up his jeans. ‘Okay.’ A moment of breathless escalation and then, ‘Can we slow down a bit? Only I’m beginning to feel a bit Sherpa.’ He held up the carrier bag. ‘This is surprisingly heavy for two tins of soup and a loaf of bread.’

His hood had come down, or he’d lowered it to get a better look at Thea, and his hair was flat against his head, which made his eyes look huge. A couple of days’ growth of stubble was ornamenting his jaw with blonde spikes. ‘You’re more yeti than Sherpa, I’d have said.’ But I stopped anyway.

‘Two tins of soup and a load of bread? Is that our Christmas dinner, then?’

He leaned forward, getting his breath back. ‘No, it’s lunch for today. The shop, surprise surprise, does deliveries. The rest of the food is coming later.’

‘By husky?’ I looked up at the sky. It had taken on a yellowish tinge, the lumps of cloud that hung over the village had feathery edges as though the weather was being airbrushed in. ‘I think it’s going to snow again.’

‘We’re not exactly a polar exploration team,’ he said. ‘I should think they can manage to carry it a few hundred metres up to the house, even if a bit more snow should happen. Anyhow, I think we should get back, light a fire, preferably with all the furniture, and pool our findings. FYI, I also ordered a Christmas tree, so get up in that attic and see if there are any decorations to put on it, will you?’

‘Why should I go in the attic?’ We started walking again, leaning into the steepness of the hill and occasionally grabbing one another to stop ourselves sliding back down again.

‘Your house, your organ-playing-maniac-demon,’ he said. ‘And I refuse to let Christmas go uncelebrated, just because we are trapped in some Poe-Lovecraftian nightmare, so if your aunt left any baubles around the place, I want them dug out, stat. And if there are any mad old women up there . . .’

‘. . . you’ll invite them out for a drink,’ I finished.

‘Exactly. Because only mad old women fancy me these days.’

We reached the bottom of the steps and I looked up at the house in daylight — if you could call this grey snow-potential daylight — for the first time. ‘Is it just me, or does the house look . . . pleased to see us?’ Somehow, maybe it was the reflection of the snow, but the white stone trim around the windows looked brighter, the grey walls less forbidding and the slumped snow on the roof gave the place the look of a building wearing a particularly jaunty hat.

‘It’s just you.’ Toby went past me and started up the steps, dragging himself up with much recourse to bushes and shrubs. ‘It’s a house, not a Labrador.’

‘Maybe it’s just because we’ve opened it up a bit.’ There was less of that tang of cat when we opened the front door this time, and because we’d pulled a few curtains back, light spilled in and made the hall look bigger. Less brown. That feeling I’d had in the kitchen last night settled over me again. ‘I could do something with this place.’

‘Yep, set it on fire and collect the insurance.’ Toby went into the kitchen and I heard the definitive sound of soup cans dropped on the big pine table. ‘Lentil or pea and ham? Sorry, but it’s all they had left.’

‘No, I mean . . . do it up, turn it into . . . I don’t know, boutique B&B?’ I wandered after him and hitched myself up onto the table.

‘Er, Matz, you do know that every other building here is a B&B, don’t you?’ He emptied the two tins into saucepans and began hunting for a way to turn the gas on. ‘You’d have to do something really special to make it different, and I’m still voting for the blowtorch option.’

I stared past him, past the old-fashioned gas cooker and the inert range, out through the window that gave a view of the steep slope of garden. It was a white sheet, the occasional hummocks of perennial plants making it look like a giant scoop of ice cream, but I could see the potential there. A summer house, for guests to sit out on warm evenings, this room, repainted and modernised but with a lot of the old-fashioned features kept in. Flowered tea services and cake stands and full-length curtains. ‘. . . so I think that could be our next move. Matz?’

‘Sorry,’ I gasped out the apology before I remembered I didn’t need to do this any more. This was Toby, not Simon. Toby who knew me, who understood me, who didn’t expect instant obedience. ‘Sorry,’ I said again, but genuinely this time, not reflexively. ‘I was thinking about how this place could look.’

Toby left the saucepans on the stove and came over to look into my face. ‘You’re really caught up on this, aren’t you?’ he asked, quietly. ‘You sure it’s not just something to escape into? You know, occupy your mind now you’re not with Simon?’ There was an expression in his greeny-gold eyes that I couldn’t read. ‘Are you really that desperate to get away from London?’

‘I don’t know.’ I fiddled with the bevelled edge of the table. ‘Half of me thinks that I shouldn’t let him drive me away, but the rest just wants a new start. Somewhere different, somewhere I can make something for myself, a little business, without having to worry about Simon bloody Vane popping out of the woodwork every fortnight to remind me how pathetic I am and how little my life is amounting to without him in it.’

Toby followed my stare and started looking out of the window too. ‘More snow,’ he said. Huge, feathery flakes were falling, like an immense number of sky-ducks moulting at once. ‘I hope that shopping delivery turns

up otherwise it's all going to get a bit *Lord of the Flies* in here.' He took a breath. 'You do realise that it's only your self-belief he took, don't you? Nothing else. You're still as good at everything as you were before you met him, you're still the same person, Matz. *He* tried to make you into someone else, someone he could push around and mould to fit whatever it was he wanted from a girlfriend — but that was all *his* problem, not yours.' A wide arm thrown out to encompass the whole house. 'You can do anything you want! You always could! You want this to be the best B&B in Christmas Steepleton, then you go for it girl . . .' Now he was back in front of me. 'Make it happen,' he said, his voice suddenly lower and fiercer. 'Make it happen, Mattie.'

His faith in me was like the antidote to Simon's perpetual negativity. As I watched the steam curl up from the heating pans of soup, I could feel this new life solidifying around me. *This* house. *My* life. Nothing to do with what had gone before. I could do it. I felt a kind of rising joy inside me, anticipation and optimism mingled with a feeling of freedom that I didn't have to return to London, I could stay here in Christmas Steepleton forever.

Well. 'As long as I can get these ashes scattered over the boys. The house won't really be mine until I do that.'

'Who'd know? I'd tell everyone that those ashes got scattered good and proper.'

'The boys would know though, surely. Suppose the solicitor is in touch with them now, and they tell him?'

'Or her.'

'Thank you, or her, that I've not been anywhere near them? And besides, I'd feel all weird. Knowing that I hadn't done what Aunt Millie asked me to, I wouldn't feel that the house was properly *mine*, if you see what I mean.'

Toby sighed and scraped soup into bowls. 'Yes. Yes, I get where you're coming from. And, yes, it would be cheating to tip the ashes out in the garden or wherever. You need to find out about these boys, find out which ones have a connection to your aunt, and, presumably, if they mind having late auntie thrown all over them. *Then* you can start making plans. And I hope . . .' He stopped, suddenly, concentrating very hard on the lumps of pea and ham sliding into the bowl.

'Mmmm?' I broke off a crust from the bread.

'I hope . . . I hope you'll let me visit, now and again. I mean, I'm in on

the ground floor, as it were, so I'd like to see how you get on with the place.'

The thought that leaving London would mean leaving Toby hit me suddenly, somewhere the warmth of the soup couldn't reach. Loyal, overdramatic, colourful Toby, who'd never questioned me, never harried me, just been . . . well, Toby.

'I . . .' Not being able to just text him and meet up whenever life seemed to be getting a bit too serious would be . . . 'I mean, of course, you can come whenever you like! Maybe . . . maybe you could be the bloke who always has the attic room that nobody else is allowed to book. Like a 1950s film.'

He dropped his face so he was looking into his soup. 'I'll miss you,' he half-mumbled. It was dawning on me how much I would miss him too, but he swallowed the mouthful of pea and ham and changed the subject. 'How old was your aunt? When she died, I mean.'

I dipped bread in the soup. Simon would have ignored me for days if I'd done that in front of him. 'She was Grandad's sister, they were all born around the mid-twenties, so . . . about ninety something, I think.'

'So.' He scraped the bowl with his spoon to get the last of the soup up. 'We don't know when she wrote the letter leaving the house to you, do we? Anyone who might have been a boy when she wrote it could be an adult by now. I mean, even if she wrote it ten years ago, they'd still not be classed as a "boy", would they?'

'Oh, great.' I dipped more bread, enjoying the freedom to do it more than the resulting soggy mass. 'So you're saying we need to round up all the males in Christmas Steepleton and throw ashes at them? That's going to take some organising.'

'Not as much as you'd think. The lady in the food shop told me there's only about fifty permanent residents, and practically all of them either run shops or the B&Bs. You could say it's some kind of local Board of Trade meeting . . . And if half the inhabitants are female, you're only looking at about twenty, twenty-five people. You could practically hold it in a shed.' He looked around the kitchen. 'Or in here. Which is pretty much only not a shed because it's got curtains.'

'You're mad.'

'Hey, Professor Pat-a-Cake here only one juggling ball away from certification.' He ran water onto his bowl. 'Okay then, Buffy, what's your plan?'

‘Well, I was thinking I could ring the solicitor. Find out when the instructions were given, that would give us a time frame to work from, except, it’s Christmas week, and the solicitor will be at home, not in the office, so that’s not much use. But I’m thinking that Aunt Millie would have known that she could live quite a long life if she gave that letter to the solicitor any time between the last time I saw her, when I was about sixteen, at my cousin’s wedding, and she must have done it after that or she would have just given it straight to me or at least told me about it . . .’ Toby was watching me with his head on one side. ‘What?’

‘Nothing. It’s just nice to see you coming back.’ I gave him a stern frown and he leaned back against the sink, with a grin. ‘You’re losing him, Matz. Gradually, but it’s good to hear you with a bit of oomph about you again. Anyway. You were saying?’

‘So. Aunt Millie must have known that anyone who was a boy when she wrote that note wouldn’t be a boy by the time I got it. Which means . . .’

‘. . . that it’s something that is a permanent boy. We’re looking at those chalk figures then, up on the hillside?’

‘Got it in one, Sherlock.’

There was a knock on the door and Toby leapt into the hallway. ‘That’ll be the delivery. No, don’t come, I . . . there’s a Christmas present for you in there and I don’t want you to see it. Get up into that attic and wrestle the mad wife for possession of any tree decorations that might be up there, right? And don’t come down until I say.’

‘Bloody hell, what have you got me?’

‘A werewolf. I want to make sure he’s chained up before you come in.’ Toby shooed me up the staircase before he opened the front door to a white curtain of falling snow and a vague shape beyond.

On the upstairs landing I gazed upwards, failing to see the expected hatch in the ceiling, so I walked along opening doors in case it was in one of the bedrooms. Nothing in the double room, nothing in the room Toby and I had shared. The chilly little bathroom with the high-level cistern and the claw-footed bath had nothing more interesting than damp stains on the ceiling, and the other two rooms were completely empty, except for some dusty piles of books. At the end of the landing another door revealed a bare set of stairs leading up, and, only slightly daunted by Toby’s certainty that there was something spooky about the house, I left it open as I ascended.

I'd half hoped that the attic would be full of piles of letters, old diaries, clues as to what I was supposed to be doing, but although Aunt Millie clearly hadn't been keen on interior decorating, she'd been the queen of minimalism. The attic contained some more piles of books and a few cardboard boxes, all carefully labelled in Millie's slightly eccentric hand. 'Old Cloths', which, when opened, held dusty dresses, a few shabby looking coats and some battered shoes, the promisingly labelled 'Payprs', which proved to be nothing more than stacks of ancient newspaper, dusty and stacked into the box haphazardly. I picked one out, but it was ancient, yellow and blurry, obviously awaiting use as packing material or insulation. The final box bore the legend 'Decerashuns', and revealed that Millie had all the decorating style of a magpie that had seen one too many editions of *Kirsty's Handmade Christmas*.

I picked up the box and headed back downstairs. From the landing I called 'Is it safe yet?'

'Just chaining him up now.' Toby emerged from the front room. 'But I wouldn't go in there, if I were you.' He shut the door carefully behind him. 'I thought we'd put the tree up in the kitchen. That being practically the only room without the Addams Family vibe.' He led me into the kitchen, where a tree that must have stood three feet tall in its high heels, was propped against the table. 'Apparently this was the only one they had left. When the snow came in the entire village had to go to the local shop for Christmas supplies.'

The tree leaned among a pile of newly shed needles. To call it 'threadbare' was to do battered teddies everywhere a disservice, it looked as though it had been spat out by a hurricane. The contrast to last Christmas, the six-foot tree hung with crystal, the expensively wrapped gifts among the branches, the sense of luxury about it all . . . I laughed, and that, too, was a complete contrast to last Christmas. 'It looks like we should have it adopted.' I produced the box of 'decerashuns'. 'And here's what we have to hang on it.'

'Blimey, looks like a milkman crawled in there and died.' Toby produced something made of tinfoil bottle tops. 'And, in this house, that is not an unreasonable supposition.'

We propped the tree up in an old jug, held upright with bags of sugar and began festooning it with items from the box. These were mostly home-made; apart from the foil creations there were painted fir cones and some inexpertly

knitted things that might have been intended to be stocking-shaped but were twisted and holey so they looked more like worn-out socks. At the bottom of the box was another, smaller box. Pale cream, it looked as though it had never been opened. ‘What’s this . . . oh.’

I pulled open the flap lid with difficulty. Inside, amid a mass of soft tissue paper was the most exquisite little glass ball. I took it out and held it up. It was painted with old-fashioned lettering in gold and had a tiny Father Christmas near the base.

‘Baby’s first Christmas,’ I read the lettering. ‘Oh God.’

Chapter Four

Toby picked up the box and looked at it. ‘It’s old,’ he said. ‘Look. There’s a price on the bottom, seven shillings and sixpence. Pre-decimalisation, so before . . . what, 1970?’

‘And it was still sealed. I had to break the tape with my fingernail.’ I realised why the box had been so hard to open. ‘Oh, Toby, do you think . . .?’

It twisted from an untied loop. ‘This was never hung, so whatever happened, there was never a baby in this house.’ Toby reverently placed the bauble back in its box.

‘Well, technically there were, all my grandad’s family were born here. This was their family home, Great Aunt Millie was the last one left living in it.’

Toby didn’t make the obvious joke about there not being much living about this house. He just looked at the little white box sitting on the table. ‘I think your Great Aunt Millie thought there was going to be a baby,’ he said, softly.

We both looked at the box in silence for a moment, then I picked it up and put it away in the bigger box, with the spare decorations. There was a new chill in the kitchen now. The cold that comes with cheated expectations and thwarted wishes. ‘I wish I hadn’t seen that,’ I said at last. ‘It makes it all real. Up to now it was just inheriting a house from an old lady I hadn’t seen for ten years, now it’s . . . she was a real person. Her lost love . . .’ I choked off.

‘Okay.’ Toby took a deep breath. ‘Okay. We can’t unsee it — along with some other horrible sights, like the lampshade in the living room — so we use it, yes?’

‘How?’

‘Well, we know she was thinking about a baby, and they, contrary to what you might have been told, don’t get brought by storks. If she knew a baby was likely, or was even pregnant, then her “lost love” was someone she was sleeping with. We’re not dealing with some man she had a vague crush on from afar, it was a real relationship, so someone, somewhere in this place must know who he was. So, we can get corroboration that the “boys” she is

on about, really are those shapes up in the chalk.’ He gently took the big box and put it out of sight, under the table. ‘Because you don’t want to go off half-cocked, scatter the ashes up there and then discover that, actually, Millie had been having a fling with a teacher up at the school and wanted her mortal remains chucked around during an assembly, do you?’

‘You’re really quite a sensible person, aren’t you, Toby?’ I wiped the moisture that had collected in the corner of my eyes with a sleeve.

‘Yup. That multi-coloured costume of mine covers a body full of practicality and pragmatism.’ He indicated his chest, which was currently covered by an Aran sweater and a body-warmer. ‘Also not nearly full enough of food. Come and help me put away the stuff I got for Christmas dinner. Although, given how cold it is in here, we can probably just leave it on the side.’

‘We don’t want the werewolf to get at it though.’ I picked up some of the various bags of foodstuffs scattered around the counter. ‘And I hope you got sprouts.’

‘Oddly enough, there were lots of those left.’ Toby came to help. ‘Christmas dinner this year is mostly green.’

We pushed things into various cupboards and the pantry. I watched Toby, in his massively oversized sweater, competently sorting food into ‘meat, veg, fruit and — other stuff’. ‘So, what were your plans for Christmas this year?’

He didn’t even look up. ‘Try to barge in on another family having dinner, then sit at home watching the *Doctor Who* special with a couple of cans of cider.’

‘No, I was being serious. What were you supposed to be doing that you’ve had to cancel to sit it out here with me?’

He rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. ‘I was being serious, Matz,’ he said. ‘You were loved up with Simon the Vane, Mum lives in Portugal with some bloke whose name I can’t pronounce, my sister would spend the whole time telling me I should get a proper job — hey, heads up, Cassie, children’s entertaining *is* a proper job, okay, it’s not *EastEnders* but it pays — and that’s pretty much it. There’s a few friends I can go to for lunch but I’m not up for gatecrashing a full day, besides, I always end up minding the kids and it’s a bit of a busman’s holiday, to be honest.’ He looked around the kitchen, which now seemed a lot more homely, with the tree decorated and a couple

of bags of satsumas which we'd dropped into a bowl in the middle of the table. Snow flurried outside the windows, but somehow the room felt warmer — although that could have been the soup. 'This, and I hate to say it because it makes me look pretty pathetic, is an improvement.'

I went up to him and gave his shoulder a squeeze. 'Sorry,' I said softly. 'Sorry that I never even asked you to come to Christmas dinner.'

He snorted, and there was a hint of bitterness. 'What, and watch you do all the cooking and waiting on the table of our Lord Vane, like a cross between a housemaid and his own, private sex toy? Uh uh, Matz. I wouldn't have come if you'd asked me. Not to see you like that.' And then, with a more normal tone, 'Besides, he wouldn't have let you invite me, would he? He wanted you all to himself, so there was nobody to tell you how outrageously badly he was treating you.'

'You told me, though. Every time we met up, you told me he wasn't right.' My hand was still on his shoulder, although he was wearing so many clothes I would have had to perform a mining procedure to have reached Toby underneath.

'Yeah. And now I know that we were meeting furtively — ever wonder why he didn't want you to be around any of your friends?' He raised his eyebrows at me. 'Because he knew they'd always tell you the truth, that's why. He took you in, Matz, but the rest of us . . . we knew what he was like, we could see what he was doing to you.' The eyebrows furrowed. 'We could see the real him, the him you'd been blinded to.' And now his voice softened. 'The him that you would have thrown out of the house if he'd let you see. I'm an actor, Mattie. I know how it's done.'

More silence. More snow falling.

'So you don't think I'm stupid? For falling for it? Even though you could see what he was like and I couldn't?' My voice sounded very small. And those greenish-brown eyes were very big, shining, reflecting the snow, the gently rotating silver milk bottle tops hanging from the sad tree branches.

'You,' he said softly, 'couldn't be stupid with special exercises.'

The moment stretched into the silence as though time was a sheet of elastic around us, and we weren't staring at each other for ages but for a millisecond snipped out of a lifetime. Then there was a loud bump and crash from the front room, and Toby pulled away. 'Bloody werewolf must have slipped the restraints,' he said and went out, closing the door behind him.

I leaned back against the table, making the Christmas tree rock. *Toby*. Looking at me as though I mattered, as though I were special. Was that what he thought? Was *that* what it really was between us? I held my breath when I heard him come back in, but he was brisk now, that few seconds of something else had been flushed out by the draught of the open door. ‘Right. So. What? We . . . go up on the hill? Take a look at the “boys”?’

Suddenly I felt reluctant to leave the house. This sparse kitchen with the feeble tree felt as though it was the centre of something huge and if I went outside — well. The feeling might disperse, hit with snow and air and the reality of life. And then I told myself how idiotic that was, and if I didn’t make some kind of inroads into finding these boys, then the house wouldn’t be mine and I’d have to go back to real life anyway. ‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’ll just go and find a duvet to put on or something.’

‘It will be fine when we’re moving.’ It almost sounded as though *Toby* wanted to be out there, with fresh air and sanity. ‘At least, I’m hoping so. I can’t feel my fingers already, so it’s not like it can get much worse.’

‘That has to rank alongside “I’m going outside, I may be some time”, as snow-related understatements go.’ I began struggling back into my boots. Crusted snow still stood along the soles, very gradually melting into little rivulets on the tiled floor of the kitchen.

Booted and coated, we stood at the front door. The snow was falling more slowly, as though the clouds had got lazy now they’d driven everyone back indoors, and we tumbled our way down the steps to the road amid clearing visibility.

‘Why is it always bloody uphill in this place?’ *Toby* grumbled. ‘I feel like we should be roped together.’ The snow was deeper in pockets where it had blown and collected, against walls, against cars parked on the precarious slope, but in other places, it barely covered the road. By trying to keep to these patches of windswept tarmac we managed to haul ourselves up to where a Footpath sign pointed the way across a plain of whiteness towards a distant disturbance of the horizon. ‘That must be the archaeology dig thing that they’re doing. Shall we head for that?’

I caught my breath. ‘In the absence of any other landmarks, I’d say yes.’

We struggled our way along the top of the hill, through snow that reached past our knees. There was a faint, trodden path in the snow already, and paw-prints, where someone must have been along with a dog, but

otherwise it was as smooth as a high thread-count sheet on a new mattress. We plonked along in silence, the effort of walking keeping us warm as the snow burned our feet with the cold and the wind tried to take our noses off.

Eventually, we reached what turned out to be a couple of tents and a large marquee covering bare soil. 'Look at that view,' Toby said, almost wonderingly, his breath puffing out in little squiggles as he spoke. I turned to see the snowfield tufted by trees and hedge-tops stretching down to the outlying buildings of the village. Beyond the buildings we could see the curve of the harbour wall embracing the little cove, and the beach on the other side, on which silver waves were breaking gently, into unheard curls of surf. A string of coloured lights marked the railings between the shops and the sliding cliff edge and a rising row of cloud showed the horizon. 'Apart from the lack of heating, decent shops, access roads and mobile phone reception, who would want to live anywhere else?'

'Try us,' said a voice, and we turned to see a bundle of clothes climbing out of one of the tents.

'Sorry, we didn't think anyone would be here.' I clambered closer through the snow. 'We've come up from the village.'

Another face peered out through the tent flap. 'Well, we didn't think you'd parachuted in.'

'How many of you *are* there?' Toby asked curiously. 'Is that tent like a clown car or something?'

A deep sigh. 'It's just me and Patrick. The others had the sense to get out when the snow was forecast, we were going to wait it out and go in the morning.' There was a beard under the multi-layered hats and scarves. '*He* said it would blow through.'

'You're archaeologists, right?' I watched the second bearded figure clamber out of the tent. 'How long have you been up here?'

'Four million years,' said the one who wasn't Patrick. 'That's how it feels when you're in a tent in a snowstorm. You haven't got a flask or anything, have you? I'm gagging for a cup of tea.'

'There are boys *everywhere*,' Toby said, sounding happy, and the one that was Patrick coughed.

'Oi, you haven't even bought me dinner yet, don't jump to conclusions.'

I suggested that we all went back to the house, for the archaeologists to have a cup of something hot and, after having been in close proximity to

them for a few minutes, a wash, and possibly stay over until the snow cleared. 'It's okay, we've got loads of room.'

'How do we know you're not a pair of serial killers?' asked the one who wasn't Patrick, but was, in fact, called Kieran.

'Because *she* is an interior designer and *I* am a children's entertainer called Professor Pat-a-Cake, and any two people less likely to turn to serial killing you are not likely to find. Although, actually, after a particularly tricky party with a difficult crowd, I have been tempted to lay about me with a balloon poodle.' Toby led the way back, retracing our footsteps to try to limit the amount of snow falling into our boots.

'And I don't take criticism well,' I said. 'So, you know, opinions to yourselves, chaps.'

We trailed back to the house and clambered up the icy steps. When I opened the front door and Toby said 'By the way, nobody goes into that front room, right?' I sensed a certain hesitation on the archaeological front.

'You are absolutely *sure* you aren't serial killers?' Kieran stamped snow off his boots on the doorstep. I wanted to tell him it was a waste of time, but didn't like to. 'Only, I know martial arts, and Patrick has a devastating line in sarcastic put-downs, so I wouldn't tangle with us, if I were you.'

'But they are serial killers who are offering us cups of hot tea,' Patrick mitigated. 'So I say, let's go with it and take them down if they try anything, okay?'

We went through into the kitchen and I watched the archaeologists start taking their coats off, get a hint of the internal temperature of the room and decide against it. Kieran took one look at our Christmas tree and pulled a face. 'I take it back. Serial killers have style.'

'We might be trainee serial killers.' I put the kettle on, and the two lads focused on it in a way that told me it had been a long time since they'd had a hot drink. 'But we aren't. We really want to ask you about your dig.'

'Ah, ulterior motives coming out now.' Patrick peeled off his knitted hat, to reveal ginger hair. 'Okay, ask away.' He hoiked himself up onto one of the stools that dotted the kitchen like punctuation marks. 'Only, nothing too academic, we're only second-year students.'

I looked across at Toby. I couldn't think of anything to say, now I was confronted by a sort of reality. 'How long has the dig been going on?' he asked.

The lads looked at each other, as though for corroboration. ‘Four . . . five years? Something like that. Uni’s been sending student groups here for at least the last two years, we came last summer.’

‘And when did the figures start to show up?’

Kieran scratched his beard. ‘I know this one. There’s always been one figure up there, everyone called it the Man on the Hill. Then, one year, someone discovered that there was something else carved in the slope, there were crop marks. So they sent a team out and that dig established there had once been two figures, side by side. We’re looking for dating evidence, y’see. They seem to be stylised outlines, something like the Gemini figures in some Roman . . .’

‘So, people have only known there were *two* figures quite recently?’ Toby gave me a significant look.

‘Yeah, something like that. Doesn’t seem to have been a folk-memory in the village either.’ Patrick ran a hand through his hair. ‘Any chance of a bath?’

I poured mugs of tea whilst Toby hunted for a switch for the immersion heater that we’d already established stood concealed in the bathroom in a cupboard big enough to house a horse. When the men had gone upstairs to establish a base camp in one of the empty rooms and to unload their rucksacks, Toby slumped down on the edge of the table. ‘So. Maybe it’s not those boys then.’

‘Aren’t you enjoying this just a bit too much?’ I put the now empty tea cups in the sink and started to run hot water. The sudden scream from upstairs told me that this had caused some kind of sudden cold water influx into the bath.

‘It’s a bit like a detective story though, isn’t it? Come on, Matz, you can’t say that it isn’t interesting, can you? You stand to gain this whole house if we can solve the puzzle! And, let’s face it, your aunt must have intended it to be like this otherwise she’d just have told you exactly where to scatter her ashes, none of this “boys” thing.’

‘Unless . . .’ I said slowly, ‘it was some kind of shameful secret. Like she couldn’t even bring herself to write it down.’

‘You’re thinking of that decoration, aren’t you?’ Toby’s voice was quiet. Almost calm. ‘That baby that never was.’

I looked up. At the ceiling, with its faint tracery of lines, the pale,

institutional green walls, at the old furniture and ancient cupboards, the web-festooned pantry. ‘This house must hold so much history. So many memories,’ I said. The little Christmas tree wobbled slightly as I walked towards it, the uneven floorboards creaking. ‘And not all of them will be good.’

Outside the window the dark was gathering. Almost knocking against the glass, trying to get in but held at bay by a fifty-watt bulb. ‘So, what? We owe it to your aunt to find out what happened?’

‘It’s not just about the boys any more. I mean, yes, we still need to find out where to scatter those ashes, and the sooner the better because we can’t just camp out in this place forever, can we? You need to get back for work and I need . . . I need to sort out what I’m going to do with the rest of my life. But I want to know about . . . about what happened.’

Toby made a sort of ‘wrist shrugging’ motion, opening his hands. ‘You realise we might never find out,’ he said. ‘There’s already so many candidates, just for the ashes, almost like your aunt *wanted* it to be complicated.’

‘Maybe she didn’t though. Maybe, when she wrote that letter, there were no other candidates, maybe it was simple and straightforward *then*. Maybe it’s only just got complicated.’ And I looked at him when I said it, willing him to see down through the layers of words. *It’s complicated*.

‘But if it was simple, would it be worth anything?’ He had his eyebrows raised in a sort of ‘comedy rueful’ gesture. ‘Isn’t anything worth having worth a bit of complication?’

Another moment of silence, this time broken by the clamour of footsteps as a socked archaeologist burst into the room. ‘Bloody hell!’ It was Kieran. ‘I just realised, tomorrow is Christmas Eve! Anyone got a working mobile, I have to ring my fiancée or I am as bugged as a completely bugged thing.’

Toby handed over his phone and we tried to ignore the sounds of Kieran being shouted at down the line for several minutes.

‘So, we’ve eliminated those boys . . .’ I said, quietly, under the sound of someone trying to apologise for meteorological intervention. ‘What next?’

‘There’s still the school. And the male content of the village,’ Toby whispered back.

‘Well, there’s not going to be anybody at the school now, is there? It’ll be the holidays.’

‘There might be someone, a caretaker or something, who might know about your aunt. I reckon we should go up there tomorrow.’ He looked down at the floor. ‘Before trench foot settles in permanently.’

‘And what are we going to do about . . . ?’ I jerked my head towards Kieran, still frantically apologising.

‘They followed us home, can’t we keep them? No, really, Matz, we can’t let them spend Christmas freezing in a tent, can we? We’ll just have to spread the Christmas food a little bit.’ Toby grinned. ‘Come on, you can’t say you’ve ever spent a Christmas like this before, can you?’

At which point Patrick burst in. He’d got half a beard. ‘I was trying to have a shave, but I think the sink is blocked,’ he said.

‘I can honestly say that I have never had *anything* like this before, let alone at Christmas.’

Chapter Five

Toby and I shared the double room again. Patrick and Kieran took one of the empty rooms and, once we'd finished trying to work out some kind of bathroom routine, we all settled down into our sleeping bags. Outside, a deep silence had fallen, as though not even the local wildlife wanted to be about, not so much as an owl hooting or a cat yowling broke the blanket of quiet.

I was lying in my sleeping bag in a onesie, a fleece and three pairs of socks. Toby had a big hat with ear flaps on. 'You'll have to put in heating and some more bathrooms,' he said, when I finally got settled. 'Unless you're running a 1940's themed boarding house.'

'I know. But it can be done though. Can't it?' I was aware I sounded a bit pathetic, but this relentless cold was getting to me.

He turned to face me. His hat, unfortunately, didn't revolve with him, and he ended up talking into one of the ear flaps. 'Course it can. If anyone can do it, it's you, Matz.' A moment of quiet, in which we could hear Kieran, whose own phone was now charged, talking, presumably trying to convince his fiancée that he wasn't spending Christmas surrounded by gorgeous women in some kind of seraglio. 'So. Tomorrow we hike up to the school, yes?'

'But it's Christmas Eve!'

'So? Life still has to go on, whatever particular religious festival may be taking place. It's Hanukkah too, by the way, just so you know, but you never hear people saying "Oh, let's not disturb them, it's Hanukkah", do you?'

'Okay, you win. We'll go up to the boys' school. And I also have to go down to the village. Thea said she'd ring her gran tonight and see what she had to say on the subject of Aunt Millie.'

'And we probably ought to get in some more sprouts,' Toby said, thoughtfully. 'Those boys put away the last of that loaf like they hadn't seen solid food for a week. Although sprouts aren't really a foodstuff, they're more an excuse for additional gravy.'

I pulled my sleeping bag up to my nose and closed my eyes. I wondered what Simon would say if he knew where I was now, although I knew what he would have been doing if he'd been here. He'd have been spending all his time on the phone to estate agents, finding out how much the house was

worth, he wouldn't have cared a damn about making sure the ashes were scattered properly. In fact, he'd probably have pulled the box from my hand and thrown them into the garden. I could almost see his face, that expensively cut blond hair damp under the snow and the sneer on his lips as he stamped the ashes into the earth under a bush. 'There. Sorted. Now let's get this place sold.'

And he'd have made me believe that it was the right thing to do. Made me think that there was no way I could keep the house, that the money would be better spent in any one of a hundred ways — most of which would benefit him. And deep in my heart I would have known it was wrong, might even have tried to say something, but he would have talked over me, given me that look, the one that said 'I can hear you talking but all your words are stupid and meaningless', told me that he knew what he was doing and someone with as little sense and practicality as me shouldn't question him.

And I would have believed him. Because he knew exactly how to play to my insecurities. How to pick up and build on every doubt I had, every fear, every shred of uncertainty, twist it and turn it and make it true. I fell asleep to dream uneasy dreams of silence and oppression and hopelessness and bitter, biting cold.

The next day the house felt even more homely. The kitchen was full of people doing busy things, Kieran was making toast on the gas grill, and Patrick and Toby were arguing over a bowl of cereal about the best way to heat beans. I put the kettle on and felt the house relaxing around me. This must have been what it was like in its heyday, when my great-grandparents had a houseful of children. My grandfather had been one of six, two boys and four girls, and the girls had all been educated at home, so the place must have been in constant bustle, with a couple of maids dashing around after the family, a gardener to help keep the stretch of hill in order . . . I could almost see the kitchen as it would have been then, the deep sink with a mangle clamped to it, a clothes airer above the range, a copper for boiling clothes. And then my smile died as I remembered Aunt Millie as I'd known her. Nonsense, but in a slightly ethereal way, as though her memories were fragile and might be blown away at any minute. How had she been able to live on here, when all her siblings were gone, and her hopes for her future lost? What had it been like for her, rattling around alone in the place, with only her cats for company? I wished I'd taken more time to get to know her. Visited more,

stayed here and listened to her stories of growing up in the middle of that big, chaotic family, with a father hardly around and a mother who insisted there was no need for girls to go to school. How had she felt about that? And, when her sisters had all married 'suitable' young men, how had it been for her, staying at home as nurse and companion to her increasingly frail mother? Had she fretted against the confines of an upbringing that expected the unmarried daughters to live at home until they died? Or had it been comforting to know that she might have lost her love, but she would have a home forever?

'What are you frowning at?' Toby asked through a mouthful of cereal. 'You look like you've got rampant indigestion.'

'Just thinking. The house feels different with lots of people in it.'

'Warmer, for a start.' He scooped the last of the milk up. 'As long as we all huddle together in here, like penguins.'

'Do you want me to . . . errr . . . attend to that matter?' Patrick was giving Toby meaningful looks. 'You know, that . . . matter . . . ?' He jerked his head towards the front room.

'Oh, yes, right, if you would. While we're out.' Toby started pulling on his fur-hooded coat.

'The werewolf?' I asked.

'Yeah, that. If you could just . . . you know, feed it, walk it, keep all silver bullets to a minimum, that kind of thing?'

Patrick nodded, seriously. 'Least we can do. You letting us bunk in here has saved us from having to squat in that tent and eat cold camping food for Christmas, so, reckon we can help you out.'

'And I'll go down to the shops while you're away.' Kieran clearly didn't want to be thought of as a freeloader. 'Get some more food in.'

Toby pulled a face. 'Reckon by now they'll be down to Pot Noodle and sprouts, but, knock yourself out. Or, don't, we don't want medical emergencies as well. If this was a book, one of you would be about to give birth about now.'

The archaeologists looked at one another. 'Bags not me,' Kieran said. 'I'd be rubbish at labour. I don't even vote for them.'

'I'd take one for the team.' Patrick shrugged. 'But, you know, not going to happen.'

'Okay then. In the spirit of continuing the "sentences I am never going to

say again”, if neither of you can manage to have a baby while we’re gone, I’ll be grateful. Come on, Matz, we’ve got a hike ahead of us and only one packet of bourbon creams to assist us because *someone* had night hunger.’

‘Sorry.’ Patrick didn’t sound sorry at all. ‘But I’ve been snowed up in a tent for two days without biscuits of any kind. Leaving them lying around was just cruelty.’

I shrugged myself into my coat, pushed my feet into my still-wet wellingtons’ interiors and followed Toby out of the front door. The journey down the ice-coated steps was beginning to feel easier, now my hands knew which bushes I could get a grip on, and it was with the minimum of comedy slipping over incidents that we arrived on the road. Last night’s snow had filled in all the footprints we’d left yesterday and laid another inch on top of the previous depths, so now as we trudged upwards we sank to our thighs through a crusted surface.

‘It’s like walking through icing,’ Toby said. ‘Don’t you think? Really deep icing. Like on top of a Christmas cake deep. Not that rubbishy thin stuff you get on lemon drizzle, that’s barely icing at all, it’s more like a sugar wash.’

‘Are you really hungry or something?’ I reached out for a hand to pull me up the last bit of incline.

‘Yep. Really, really hungry. And now all I can think of is cake.’ Toby’s hand was warm, even though he wasn’t wearing gloves. ‘And Christmas pudding. And brandy butter . . . Do you know how to make brandy butter, Matz?’

‘Nope.’ This high up the snow had frozen into a solid surface that we could stand on top of, but it was treacherously slippery. ‘And even if I did, I doubt the shop will have any brandy, from the sounds of it.’ I kept hold of Toby’s hand as we trudged on. ‘We should have brought the werewolf, we could have harnessed it to something and used it like a sled-dog. How much further?’

‘nother couple of miles I think.’ He stopped again and looked around. Everything gleamed, it hurt my eyes. Even though the sky was a heavy grey colour, the snow glistened and glinted in what light there was, giving the hillside a polished look. We were walking along a lane at the very top of the hill that became the cliffs above Christmas Steepleton, high hedges had sheltered the road from the worst of the snow so we no longer sank quite so

deeply in, but the crunching noise was getting on my nerves. ‘Look, there’s the sign.’

A big, posh-looking road sign, covered in half-drifted snow stuck up out of the hedge. Toby went and dusted it off. “‘St Dabney’s Pre-Preparatory School for Boys, 4-6 years,’” he read. ‘Poor little buggers, being sent away from home to live out here.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Look at the view,’ I said, perching on a gate in the hedge. Being right up here meant we couldn’t see Christmas Steepleton, it was tucked into the linen folds of the cliff below us, but we could see the wide bay mouth, the striations of different rock formations as the coastline stretched towards the distant horizon, the freckles of white water on the choppy sea and a small boat that must have sailed from the harbour and was heading further out.

‘Yeah, because if there’s one thing a four-year-old boy likes more than his home and parents, it’s a good view. Come on, Matz, you’re not telling me you’d send your son out here! Even for a top-notch education.’

‘Of course not.’ I bridled at his sarcastic tone. ‘My dad teaches at an academy, I’m practically programmed to find private schools elitist and divisive. But, you know, each to their own.’

He joined me up on the gate, warm and bulky beside me. ‘I know.’ His breath formed little clouds and hung around his stubbled cheeks in beads of water. ‘Bet Simon will be sending his kids away somewhere like this.’

It sounded a bit like a challenge. Almost as though Toby was testing me. ‘I think he’d have wet nurses lined up for straight after birth,’ I said, evenly. ‘He wouldn’t want the mother of his child to be soiled by anything as demeaning as having to actually feed her own baby.’

Toby snorted a laugh that billowed out to join the cumulus forming overhead. ‘It’s good now you can see him for what he was, Matz.’

‘He wasn’t all bad.’ I kept staring out over the far-away sea.

‘Oh, do tell. No, wait a minute, he didn’t beat you to death or shut you in a cupboard to starve to death? What a prince among men.’

‘Shut up. No, some of the things he said about me, like me being wishy-washy about my career . . . you know what? He was right. I am, was “wishy-washy” about it, because now I’m realising that it wasn’t my thing, not what I should have been doing. *That* is why I think I’d like to run a B&B, it’s not just some idle whim. Not some “oh, I’ve inherited a house and I don’t have a

clue what to do with it”, but truly, really, something I think I can do, that I can be good at.’ I glanced across at his face, hoping his expression would tell me what he was thinking, but it was impassive. As blank and chilly as the snowfields that surrounded us.

‘You,’ he said, and his tone was level, ‘have never been wishy-washy in your life. You don’t even know the meaning of the word. Words. But if you want to think that bastard did you a favour then, go ahead, believe it, but *you*, Mattie Arden . . .’ and now he was standing very close, the clouds of our breathing mingling to puff away in the cold air, ‘you are fucking perfect.’ A pause, in which another man might have kissed me but Toby just stood, eyes on the far horizon, then wheeled like a gull on the wind. ‘Okay. Let’s get to this school and ask whether your aunt had anything to do with any boys. Only, let’s not phrase it like that, all right?’ And he was leading the way, marching along following the pointing arrow from the school’s sign, until the hedges broke away from us and we were walking up a wide driveway towards a building that gave the house in the village a run for its money in the ‘spooky’ stakes. It even had a tower, for god’s sake.

Chapter Six

A large sign above the door told us to ring the bell and wait for an answer, so we pressed the button and waited.

‘This place must never meet your aunt’s house,’ Toby said. ‘They might mate and have really scary little bungalows.’

An intercom voice told us that the school was closed for Christmas. I explained that I just wanted some information and, after a short, cross-purposes conversation during which the voice kept asking me to check the school’s website, we were buzzed inside.

‘Ah.’ Toby took a deep breath. ‘I’m glad to know that private schools smell exactly like state schools. Old dinners and feet.’

We were met by a man who introduced himself as Head of the Lower House, which made me wonder how on earth you could have a Lower and an Upper House when the children concerned were between four and six years old, and shown into an office, where we sat in unaccustomed warmth, and I asked about my aunt.

‘Millicent Arden-Wynne . . . name isn’t familiar.’ A computer, then a filing cabinet, then a Rolodex were all consulted, but all, apparently, came up blank.

‘No rumours of any affairs among the teachers?’ I asked. And he laughed a hollow sort of laugh.

‘Miss Arden, have you seen our location? I presume you have, since you walked here from the village. There’re no other buildings for two miles, and the nearest pub is at the bottom of Christmas Steepleton main road. Our teachers rarely even leave the premises, of *course* there are affairs, but they are all in-house, so to speak. I’m assured by my junior colleagues that it’s either sleep with each other or watch *The Kardashians*.’

Toby leaned forward. ‘This would have been a long time ago, maybe the forties?’

Another hollow laugh. ‘You might not remember,’ said the Head of House, ‘but there was a little business of a world war going on then. This place was a training camp for army officers from 1935 to 1950, and from 1950 to 1973 it was an RAF nursing home. We, the school, took it over in 1974.’

We found ourselves back outside in the snow, the memory of central heating and the smell of freshly brewed coffee coming with us like ‘what could have beens’.

‘So. No boys until 1974. That’s post decimalisation, so after everything was over.’ I walked down the crunching, tightly packed snow of the driveway, a newly risen wind gusting through my hair.

‘What about all those army officers and injured RAF boys? Very dashing, a man in uniform . . . never mind your aunt, *I* want one.’

‘There wouldn’t be any point scattering her ashes over the boys at the school if she’d been seeing a military bloke though, would there?’ I pointed out. ‘She’d just have asked to have her ashes scattered somewhere in the building.’

‘Or the grounds. I know I never met her but I’ve got your aunt down as not being beyond some rumpy-pumpy in the bushes of a summer evening.’

‘Now you are projecting, Toby.’

He sighed. ‘Sorry. It’s these trousers. So. Not the chalk figures, not the school. What are we left with? Someone from Christmas Steepleton.’

‘And it’s Christmas Eve, we’re snowed into Dorset with a pair of archaeologists and no heating.’

‘But, bright side and all . . .’ Toby swept an arm to indicate the view. ‘This is where we’re spending Christmas. If you squint, it’s a bit like the Alps.’

‘If you close your eyes completely it’s almost like Mauritius,’ I said, stamping my feet. ‘Except for the anoraks, the wet wellingtons, the lack of sunshine and the soup.’ But he had a point, I had to admit. From the ridge of hill we could see Dorset rolling away like white corrugated card. On the other side lay the great grey heave of sea. Gulls hung over the cliff crying like disappointed cats, but otherwise, the air was silent. ‘No traffic, that’s why it’s so nice. Thea said that the place was inundated at Christmas, because of the name, everyone must have cancelled when they saw the weather this year.’

‘So, this is our ideal opportunity. No outsiders, just “the boys of Christmas”, perfect timing for us to find out who to scatter these ashes over.’ We started walking again. Downhill it wasn’t so bad, and we slithered back into the village in time to meet Patrick and Kieran inching their way up the hill to the house.

‘We got more food.’ Kieran held up a bag. ‘Some of the boats went out

this morning and there's fresh fish.'

'It's like being marooned on a desert island,' Patrick said, happily. 'A bit.'

The relatively higher indoor temperature and the ability to walk without high-stepping like a pony or sliding backwards, made the house a relief. I sat in the small room that might have been a study had Aunt Millie needed to study anything, while the boys bickered lightly in the kitchen about the best way to cook whiting. There was a feeling of 'uncurling' about the house now, as though being lived in was making it less gloomy.

When Toby came in I was doodling designs on a bit of paper. 'Look. If we knock through the front room and kitchen we could have a big, L-shaped space that would be the heart of the house. Keep the range, put a dining table *here . . .*'

'Wouldn't it be better to have two separate rooms? So people can get away from the smell of cooking?'

He asked in a reasonable tone, not dismissive, but it still threw me back through the months. Simon, knocking back any of my suggestions about adapting his flat for us both to have our own separate spaces. 'It's better if we sit together to work,' he said. 'Then I can keep an eye on what you're doing!' Said with a little laugh, a tone that made the words not sound as threatening as they should have. I hadn't picked up on that 'keeping an eye', hadn't realised that it would mean watching my every move, commenting on my stupidity in decision-making, my inability to prioritise. Asking about my texting, my phone calls, following me from room to room to make sure I wasn't calling anyone he didn't approve of. Wasn't *escaping . . .*

'Yes, of course, you're right,' I said, automatically. *Don't argue, don't justify, it only makes him worse, makes him more insistent. Battering at me with words, with reason, keeping the argument going until I was too tired to think straight, stopping me from sleeping 'because we can't go to bed on a disagreement', on and on and on until . . .*

'But, y'know, it would give the kitchen a better view, front *and* back.' Toby was watching me carefully. 'So it could work.'

'Yes,' I said eagerly. 'And the sun would be in the room all day, so it would be lovely and bright.'

'Although, this looks like a load-bearing wall.' He tapped at the wall behind him. 'So could be risky.'

‘Oh well, it’s just an idea. What?’ He was staring at me now. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘You realise you just changed your mind three times in the course of one conversation? To agree with what I was saying?’

I mentally re-ran what we’d said. ‘Well, so did you.’

He nodded slowly. ‘Yes, but not in response. I was just disagreeing with whatever you said. And you changed your mind to fit in with me.’ He came from the doorway to where I was sitting on a beaten-up old armchair that looked as though several determined cats had tried to destroy it. ‘He’s still in your head, Mattie.’

‘He isn’t!’

‘Yes, he is.’ He crouched down in front of me, looking into my face.

‘You’re right.’ I slumped. ‘He is.’

‘Or are you just saying that to agree with me again?’

‘Well, if you’re going to be like that about it . . .’ Why had I never noticed how long Toby’s eyelashes were? Or how his eyes were the colour of that bottle glass that the sea sometimes throws up, polished smooth but with a kind of light of its own, held deep inside? He was pressed against my knees and I could feel him breathing, feel the cushioned firmness of his chest inside the thick sweater. ‘How do I get rid of him?’

‘I don’t know.’ His voice had a hoarse tone, as though the words had been dragged out. ‘I wish I did, Matz.’ He reached out a hand and touched my cheek. ‘I wish I could exorcise him. Throw him out of your brain into the hell he deserves.’ How were his fingers so warm? I was only a couple of steps away from hypothermia, but Toby was throwing out heat like a blowtorch. ‘I wish I could make you forget him.’

‘He wasn’t all bad. At the beginning, he was funny and clever and witty. It made me want to be with him.’

‘It’s called entrapment. Or hypnotism. He did it on purpose, it was all an act, so you’d give up everything he told you to. Look what he did to you. He took the lovely, confident, artistic Matilda Arden, with all her friends and her hobbies and the things she loved, and he turned her into this shadow girl, afraid to express an opinion or contradict anyone. She gave up her friends, put her family at a distance, stayed in all the time . . . and why? Because some tosser with an expensive haircut and a nice line in persuasive chat told her she wasn’t good enough at what she did.’ He raised himself up now, so he

was level with my face. ‘Don’t let him win, Matz. Seriously. Don’t you *ever* let *anyone*, not him, not me, not even your mother, tell you you’re not good enough. Because you are. You are bloody amazing.’ His voice gave a little jump, as though it was catching on some of the words. Snagging on the emotion that he was putting into them, and the heat in his eyes was so intense that I had to look away.

‘Toby, I . . .’

‘Right. Pep talk over.’ He jumped to his feet and went to stand at the window. ‘Wind’s getting up. If you want to talk to Thea at the shop, now might be the time, they’ll be closing early on Christmas Eve, won’t they?’ He was keeping his back to me, every knitted line of the Aran pattern showed a rigidity in his muscles.

‘I suppose so . . .’ My indecisiveness even annoyed me. ‘Yes, of course. Good idea, I’ll go now.’

‘That’s my girl.’ The windowpanes shook as another gust of wind dashed up the hill. ‘Do you want me to come?’

Just the fact he was asking. Asking, not telling me he’d get his coat . . . this was Toby, not Simon. ‘No, it’s fine. You’d better stay here and supervise Patrick and Kieran and those fish, otherwise it’s pea and lentil soup again and my stomach is already starting to make “no, no” noises.’

A pause. ‘Okay.’ He made a movement as though he was going to turn around or say something else, but then changed his mind and kept staring out of the window. The snow that had previously settled on bushes was being whipped up by the rising breeze and occasionally hitting the glass with a splattering sound like little beads. I could feel the draught from here.

I struggled back into my coat and boots and headed out for the shops. I could hear the sea moving; a great uneasy beast, booming and thrashing as it hit the base of the cliffs. Drifts of spray rose up over the railings as I turned into the road to see the shop lights reassuringly bright, spilling onto the snow which was being gradually eaten away by the tops of the waves that nibbled through between the Christmas lights.

‘Oh, you’re back.’ Thea was knitting again, something two-toned and fluffy.

The inside of the shop smelled of scented candle, of wool and new fabrics. The calm warmth contrasted nicely with the thrashing wild cold outside. ‘I just came to ask if you’d spoken to your grandmother. You were

going to ring her last night?’

A toss of the dreadlocks. ‘I tried, but she’d gone shark fishing. I’ll get her tonight though, it’s Christmas Eve, and we always talk at Christmas. It’s hard getting the timings right though, she’s near Melbourne and it’s the middle of the night there now.’

I picked up some little woollen figures, feeling let down. Thea’s grandmother was pretty much my only hope for any idea of who these ‘boys’ might be now we’d eliminated the likely candidates. ‘Oh. Thank you.’ Two of the felted figures looked slightly familiar and I realised that one had red hair and the other had a huge beard, they looked a bit like Kieran and Patrick. ‘I’ll take these, please. As Christmas presents.’

As Thea wrapped the little men in gift paper, I looked further around the shop. A noticeboard near the door gave details of craft clubs and knitting groups and also appeals for carol singers to gather in the village square at 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve. ‘Carol singing?’

‘Yes. We go house to house, like detectives with better voices and less agenda.’ She stuck tape along seams.

‘Does most of the village do it?’

‘Oh yes. We go around to all the tourist hotspots, earn a fortune for charity. There’s usually more Americans staying, and they love all that “tradition” stuff.’ Outside the sea roared and spat. ‘And the weather is usually better. We’re going to have a tough time doing “Silent Night” over that racket. There.’ She handed me the two packages.

‘Will you come and sing up at my aunt’s house?’ It would be a good opportunity to get a look at the ‘boys of Christmas’ and, besides, I still couldn’t really get myself into the Christmas spirit, some carols might be just the thing.

‘What, up those steps? In this?’ Thea looked towards the shop window. ‘It’s practically Plague of Frogs out there.’

‘I’ll put some salt down on the ice, that’ll help, won’t it?’

She gave a sort of thinking shrug. ‘Yeah, the Christmas Steepleton carol-singing slugs might be put off, but we’ll be fine. Okay, I’ll ask.’

‘Thank you.’ I pocketed the gifts and went back out. The gale was still rising, flecks of sea foam mingling with the snow, like toppings on ice cream, and I struggled my way against the wind back up the hill.

‘There are literally no forms of inclement weather left to be thrown at us

now,' I said, walking back into the kitchen. It was distinctly warmer in there, the three men were kneeling down in front of the range. 'I admire your dedication to the power of prayer, but . . .'

'Patrick's got it going.' Toby hurried over. 'Means we've got heating and hot water. And also a means of cooking what appears to be the world's tiniest chicken. In fact, I'm not even sure it is a chicken, I think Christmas Steepleton might be one gull short of a picnic attack.'

'Still better than cold camp food in a tent.' Kieran straightened up from where he'd been fiddling with a valve. 'u ven sprouts are better than that.'

There was a sudden glooping noise from the range and Patrick thumped it. 'Grandparents had one of these,' he said. 'The secret is not to show weakness.' Another hearty thump on the metal top and the noise stopped. The temperature was increasing noticeably. Toby had taken off the sailor's sweater and looked much more normal in his shirt. The archaeologists had got down to T-shirts, but I suppose their blood must have thickened what with camping in the snow.

'We're somewhere between Haunted House and Furnaces of Hell,' Toby said. 'Trying to balance out before something explodes.'

I went upstairs to take off some layers. The house felt — well, 'human' now, for want of a better word. Lived in. There was noise downstairs as the men congratulated one another on getting the range working, the pipes were ticking and clicking as they warmed up, and the rooms no longer felt like freezer cabinets. Although outside the wind was still whipping the snow until it covered all directions and it was impossible to tell if more was falling or whether it was second-hand snow still on the move, inside there was a sense of peace. If we ignored the draughts, some of which were so strong that the carpet rippled.

Something made me climb back up those steep stairs to the attic. Low windows threw a little light in now the snow had been blown from the ledges and I could see the shapes of the boxes stacked there. I went down onto my knees and pulled that little cream box out and took the glass bauble out. I held it in the palm of my hand, feeling the weightlessness that was somehow also immense, and watched the wild light catch the gold lettering. Baby's first Christmas.

Was there a baby that had been forcibly adopted? A miscarriage? Or simply the idea of a baby, the hopes of a husband and family that never came

true? I pulled out my phone and went through the details of Aunt Millie's life that I'd got Dad to send me. Born in 1922, lived with an ever-decreasing number of siblings and parents, until the death of her frail mother in 1950. No scandals, no 'sending away to the country', no family whispers of shame or secrecy, just a lady living a reclusive life, tucked away in her old house, with a selection of cats for company, until her own death.

Which meant that whoever the love of her life had been, he must have happened after her mother's death in 1950, otherwise something would have reached the ears of the rest of the family. And the bauble had been bought in pounds, shillings and pence, so it had happened before decimalisation. Well, that narrowed things down a bit, I thought, letting the bauble spin at the end of its narrow ribbon. A ribbon that had never been tied at the top, never formed a loop that could hang on a tree. *Never born . . .*

'Oh, there you are.' Toby pushed a pile of vegetables into my hands when I went back into the kitchen. 'I was thinking you'd fallen into that demon dimension which, temperature notwithstanding, I am still certain is whirling about in that spare bedroom. Here. Peel as if your very life depended upon it. Which, if we've got demons, it very well might.' A potato peeler of uncertain vintage was thrust into my other hand.

One of the lads put their phone on the worktop and began playing music through it. He started with rap, at which we all shuffled uncomfortably, as if the essence of 'slightly sheltered old lady' had seeped into the walls and was protesting, silently, at the use of 'language'. He moved through some country and western, which was too twangy and intrusive, to eventually settle on ABBA, as a comfortable compromise. I peeled potatoes, carefully not commenting on the fact that the villagers had clearly shopped a lot earlier than Toby, because these gave the impression of having been nibbled by mice. I cut the worst bits off and reasoned that we'd be boiling them anyway and that 'Dancing Queen' performed falsetto by three men was probably killing all known germs.

The contrast to last Christmas Eve was particularly marked now. That had been hushed, tasteful plainsong played over speakers as we hosted Simon's friends and neighbours in the carefully decorated flat. No holly branches, no mistletoe, just a few well-placed candles amid the sterile purity. Definitely no linked-arm dancing to 'Voulez Vous', while sorting sprouts, and Toby's rendition of 'Gimme Gimme Gimme', complete with grasping

gestures, which would have given Simon seizures.

Eventually, Toby declared that all the prep was done. Daylight was beginning to fade from the windows but that didn't diminish the rattle of the panes as the wind carried on its assault. From far below we could hear the waves thumping against the shore and even indoors the air smelled of salt. I went to the front door and pulled it open against the wind, looking down the road at the lit windows in the houses and the way the snow's surface was being scoured clear again. 'It looks like an advent calendar out there.' Toby peered out past my shoulder.

There was another noise now, a kind of whine above the sound of the wind, and a light sweeping up the street. 'What the hell is that?' Kieran had come to stand with us now. 'It's like some strange flying contraption.'

'It is, Mister Eighteen Twenty, it's a bloody helicopter.' Patrick pushed his head into the remaining gap. 'They'll be flying food in, and essential supplies for vulnerable people. And that's parents with small children and the elderly, before you get excited.'

'Should we go up and help?' I was already pulling my coat on and preparing my feet for the unpleasant experience of the inside of wet boots. 'Stuff might need carrying.'

'Plus, it's a Navy helicopter. Men in uniform.' Patrick was dragging his coat down from the pegs behind the front door.

'Navy is not a good colour for a helicopter. How would you see it in the sky?' But Kieran joined the general melee of booting and suiting, and we slithered our, now expert, way down the steps and onto the hill. The sound of the helicopter had brought other people out now, random shapes in burly coats were all making their way up the slope, a whole crowd of us drifting up towards the noise of rotor blades and engine.

The helicopter had put down on a flattish field that might possibly have been the village football pitch in better weather. It stood there, rotors still going and nobody appearing for a few minutes, snow agitated into devils by the blades, while we all formed a sort of jostling mass at a sensible distance for a while. 'Yeah, great, very decorative and everything, but we need fresh milk,' muttered someone. 'I hope it's a genuine mission and not some bloody training exercise.'

Like a scene from *Close Encounters*, the door opened slowly, letting a shaft of light spill out onto the whirling snow, bright against the rapid coming

of night, and a couple of figures wearing what looked like flight suits emerged. One began unloading boxes, upon which the villagers fell eagerly, the other . . . the other figure headed straight for us.

‘Hello, Mattie.’

Simon had arrived.

Chapter Seven

After a pause long enough to feel really awkward, he turned his smile on. ‘Well, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?’ And there, right there was that tone. That oh-so-reasonable tone that made me feel rude and anti-social and misplaced.

‘Oh, yes, sorry. This is Patrick and Kieran. You already know Toby. This is Simon. My ex fiancé.’

It wasn’t even worth asking him how he’d hitched a ride on a helicopter. How he’d found me. If Simon wanted something, he would get it, by charm, by stealth . . . my brain was too shocked at the sight of him here to even think the relevant questions . . . by bullying. Patrick shook his hand, Toby just dug his hands further into the pockets of his coat. Kieran had joined the villagers and was manhandling a box of food along the snow towards us.

‘Well.’ Simon looked satisfied. ‘Now I’ve finally got here, where are we heading? Back to your place?’ And he set off down the hill, following some people who’d already shouldered their box of supplies and were heading off into the village. Toby stared at me.

‘You told him?’ He had hold of my elbow, and was using it to stop me from walking after Simon.

‘No! I had no idea . . . I *still* have no idea how he did this!’ I was fighting a rising tide of indignation, anger and some nameless emotions that swirled around my head like the wind-blown snow. Toby’s assumption that I’d been in touch with Simon, after all I’d said, hurt more than the stinging little particles of ice. ‘He must have got it out of my parents.’

‘Well.’ Toby let go of my arm. ‘What now, Matz?’

‘I don’t know.’ I dropped my voice. ‘Murder is still illegal, right?’

‘Afraid so. Smarmygicide, they’d call it, and everyone would understand but, yup, against the law.’

‘I don’t want him in my house.’

Toby made a face. ‘Well, that’s a given. What do we do?’

There was a limping, dragging sound and Kieran, box on his shoulder, caught up with us. Patrick was trailing along in the wake of Simon, clearly undecided what to do, given my lukewarm response to his arrival, whilst Simon was blazing his way confidently down the hill towards what I was

beginning to realise was my sanctuary. It might be a cold, draughty, cat-smelling badly decorated barn of a place, but it was *mine* and I was bugged if I'd let Simon the Vane start putting his 'damned-with-faint-praise' mark all over it.

'We have to stop him getting in.'

'Got that.' Kieran put the box down and pulled out his mobile. After a second his call was answered by Patrick further down the hill. 'Stop him before he gets to the house.'

We heard the affirmative answer. 'How would he know which house was yours?' Toby asked.

'Knowing Simon he'll have Google-mapped it. He's probably got the floor plans and paint and fabric samples too.' I gritted my teeth. 'It's what he does. He kind of moves in and takes over. If we let him in, he'll have had it redesigned and built himself a garden studio before we get through the front door.'

'He can only do what you let him, though, Matz,' Toby said. He reached out and took my hand, pulling it from my coat pocket, where it was bunched in a fist that wanted to punch Simon so hard that he'd crash land out of Belgian airspace, but wouldn't. Would never dare. 'He's only got as much power over you as you give him.' Toby's fingers were warm as they laced with mine. His palm burned into mine. 'And he's had everything from you that you are ever going to give, right?'

It wasn't the firmness of his tone. It wasn't the feel of my hand in his. It wasn't any of the things I could reason myself out of. It was because it was *Toby*. Because he'd been there and he'd seen the damage Simon had done to me, and he still knew I was *Mattie*. The *Mattie* I'd always been, underneath.

'He hasn't had the arse-kicking that I am about to give him, though, has he?'

And Toby turned to me. 'You are so right about that,' he said, and dropped a gentle kiss on my lips. It was the first time he'd ever shown any sign of wanting to kiss me, and it came without the warning I usually expected, so my lips were dry and cold. I hadn't had a chance to so much as run my tongue over them. 'Bloody hell,' he said. 'I think you might already be dead.'

And all I could feel was the rush of blood, singing in my ears and making my heart kick in my chest like a bolshy pony.

Kieran's phone beeped. 'The subject is in the vicinity of the house,' he reported.

'Tell Patrick not to let him in.' Toby's kiss was still heavy on my lips. It weighted me down, gave me a sense of gravity and a centre. 'Don't give him any reasons, he'll just turn it all around.'

Instructions were relayed. 'You don't have to face him, you know.' Toby said, very matter-of-factly. 'Go home, lock yourself in. He'll get the message.'

'Only after six weeks or so. Trust me, Simon doesn't get any message that doesn't have an invitation from the Palace wrapped around it. I have to talk to him.'

'He won't see what he's done. He can't. He is who he is, he thinks his behaviour is normal.' Toby sounded quite worried now.

I gave his hand a squeeze. 'I'm not going to show him the error of his ways, Toby. I'm going to get closure for myself.'

We'd reached the house by now. Patrick was standing outside looking bemused, and Simon was leaning against the wall, completely at ease. 'Come on now, Mattie,' he said, all big beaming smile and bonhomie. 'You'd far rather invite me in for a cup of tea than have me stand out here and air your dirty laundry in public, wouldn't you?'

'It's hypnotism,' Toby whispered. 'Don't look into the eyes.'

'No, Simon, you are not coming in,' I said firmly.

He made a lips-pursed-sad face, like a mother whose toddler is wilfully disobeying. 'Tch.' Then an appeal to everyone. 'Look, I think we can all agree that Matilda isn't herself at the moment, I'm thinking it's some sort of breakdown. Nobody in their right mind would run from a beautiful home and a fiancé who loves her more than life itself, would they?' He stepped in closer. 'Come on, Mattie. Come back to London with me. We can get you proper treatment, a nice quiet stay somewhere out of town and you'll be right as rain in no time.'

'No,' I said, and started up the steps to the front door, with Patrick and Toby on either side of me. Kieran laboured up after us with the box still balanced across his shoulder. We carefully kept to the side of the steps, practice now telling us where to put our feet to avoid sliding back down, and reached the top to look down on Simon, who was still leaning against the wall at the bottom. He had a 'go on, you know you're only going to give in

and let me do as I want anyway' expression on his face, but I ignored it. 'Go home, Simon. It's over.'

A sigh. 'Oh no, my dear. I beg to differ.' He ran a hand through his hair, primping. Simon was always very conscious of how he looked. He knew the flight suit made him look impressively military, and I'd take any bets he'd practised that insouciant walk in it. From a distance, I heard the sound of 'Once in Royal David's City'. It was approaching us. The village choir must have turned straight out after the supplies had been unpacked and decided to start at the top of the hill, with my house.

I could see the light of candles in lanterns, guttering and flicking in the wind. 'That's either carol singers or a mob with blazing torches,' Toby whispered beside me. Simon was on the bottom step now, still smiling. He clearly thought his words were getting through, that my reluctance to go indoors was born of a desire to hear him out, to give in, to run back to him and that life of caged sumptuousness that was really no life at all.

'Come on, Mattie,' he said, and his tone was so level, so *reasonable* that I felt the men beside me on the doorstep shifting about uncomfortably. They were doing what my friends had done, rewriting their versions of me inside their heads to include all the things that Simon was saying about me. That I was unstable, difficult to live with. That I talked about them behind their backs, spreading gossip and innuendo about the people who'd confided in me.

And then Simon fed it back to me. How my so-called 'friends' laughed about me. How they discussed my failings, pretended to be friendly so that they could have more fuel for their pity and patronising. How they kept me around as a specimen of 'what not to do' to make themselves feel better.

He'd made me believe all that. And more. He'd made me believe things about *myself*, things that I knew weren't true but had come to think might be. That I was weak, no good with money. My clothes were no good, I had no eye for colour, no *style*. That I needed him, with his contacts and his flare and his sheer understanding of the world, to be able to function.

'Once in Royal David's City' stopped, and broke off into shufflings and coughs as the singers toiled up the steep slope, and it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't salted the steps as promised. If I didn't do something soon there was going to be a terrible untidy mass of people bundling about on my doorstep, and Simon might well get inside in the resulting melee.

I turned around to head into the kitchen for the rock salt, Toby, Kieran and Patrick standing aside to let me through. At which point a lot of things happened at once. Simon seemed to crack, whether it was the cold or my general refusal to acknowledge him, I didn't know, but the mask which had, admittedly, been wearing a bit thin as he stood there realising, presumably, that I wasn't going to let him in, split completely.

'Don't you turn your back on me you bitch!' He screamed the words, and a general air of quiet listening descended from the approaching carol singers, who were looming into view now as a mass of bundled shapes, some wrapped in the multi-coloured wool garments that told me they were customers of Thea's. 'You *will* let me in and you *will* listen to me!'

Simon set off up the steps, and even in the vague light that shone from inside the house, I could see his face was twisted and bent with rage. His mouth was wide, his teeth bared and his hands held out in front of him as though he wanted to tear me apart. Every instinct told me to run into the house, lock the door, shut him out. Reason with him through the letterbox if necessary, tell him I knew how wrong I'd been, apologise, take the silence and the ignoring that would result until he decided I was once more fit to socialise with.

But I didn't. I stood at the top of the steps, my face raised to the sky, and let him come. I had no idea what I was going to do when he arrived, of course, but I knew Simon, and I knew that he would make his loss of the mask my fault, somehow. That cold reason would come back down onto his features and I would be made to feel half a centimetre high.

I hadn't allowed for the sheer iciness of those steps and, clearly, Simon hadn't either. He made it just past half-way, propelled by anger, before his feet must have landed on a particularly glassy patch, because his boots shot from underneath him. He twisted, his expression now more one of surprise that the natural world dared to rise against the might of Simon Vane, and shot back down the stairway on his backside, his hands desperately grasping out to try to catch at the undergrowth, but missing all the bushes. He arrived on the road at the feet of the carol singers, turned and tried to stand, but the ice and snow was too compacted and he was moving too fast to get any purchase. There was a second of scrabbling where it looked as though he might have grabbed at someone's ankle and managed to slow himself, but his momentum was such that he couldn't get up, just flailed a bit, and then was taken by the

gradient again, whisked off down the hill towards the harbour at an impressive velocity.

‘Shall we wait for the comedy splash?’ Toby said, after a second.

‘He . . .’ I gasped, trying to get air in past the shock. ‘He’ll be injured!’

‘He called you a bitch. Bit of injury is definitely called for, I’d say.’ Toby gently pushed the front door open. A burst of light spilled out onto the snow. ‘Besides, he’s wearing a flight suit. He’ll be fine.’

‘Assuming he doesn’t slide right on into the harbour and drown.’ It was Kieran’s voice that made me realise what had really happened. Kieran and Patrick and Toby, and all those members of the village that Simon didn’t know . . . they’d all seen it. Simon’s total loss of control and then his loss of dignity and face as he careered down the main street towards the sea. It was his worst nightmare — being shown up in front of people he didn’t know. People he hadn’t had a chance to impress yet with his ‘better than you’ education and financial situation, people who didn’t know that he owned a flat in a prestigious London location, that he’d gone to Eton . . . and now, people who didn’t care. People who would always think of him as ‘that prat that fell down the steps’. And, because he didn’t know them, he couldn’t even begin to influence them, couldn’t tell them that ‘that bitch deliberately made the steps icy’, because they wouldn’t believe him.

Simon had looked a complete idiot, and that would utterly infuriate him, but he was completely unable to do anything about it.

Down on the road, the carol singers broke into a slightly ragged version of ‘Oh Little Town of Bethlehem’, clearly deciding not to attempt the steps, but then, we were all standing outside anyway, so there was no point. We then got two verses of ‘The First Noel’, after which I scuttered down to the street and put a fiver in their tin. They shuffled off and we could hear their footsteps cracking and scuffing through the snow as they headed back to civilisation, the lights of their candles and lanterns dim amid the wind-blown drifts.

In the light I could see a faint outline, climbing the hill but keeping to the shadows, hiding in a gateway to avoid being illuminated as the carol singers shuffled past it through the snow. *Simon*. It had to be. I glanced once more, briefly, over my shoulder as I went carefully back up the steps, the figure was labouring slowly upwards back towards the helicopter landing field. I hoped they’d waited for him, it would be a long limp back to London for him

otherwise.

Chapter Eight

‘Well, that was fun.’ We all clambered into the hallway to be met by a gust of warm air. The range was clearly still doing its job. There was even a faint smell of cooking drowning out the overwhelming ‘cat’. ‘If he turns up again we just point and laugh and ask if he’s thought about joining the three-man bobsleigh team.’ Toby put out an arm to gather me in to the little study. ‘Do you think it’s over, Matz?’

I thought for a moment. ‘Yes. I don’t think he’ll bother with me now. I’ve seen him at his most vulnerable and he won’t want to be reminded of that.’ I flexed my shoulders. A weight seemed to have gone, my heart felt lighter as though someone had tied balloons to it. ‘And I’ve realised that he was a complete plonker. I mean, he always was, but he could talk his way out of it by making me feel insecure. I doubt very much if even *Simon* could put a spin on sliding out of the village on his bum. And the best thing is that he did it to himself. If he hadn’t come charging up those steps intent on telling everyone what I bitch I was . . . well.’ I held out my hands.

‘Please tell me that, if he hadn’t, you still wouldn’t have got back with him.’ There was a little worried crease between Toby’s eyes. ‘You wouldn’t have been that mad.’

I laughed. ‘Nope. That bubble is well and truly burst.’

There was a knock on the front door and we froze like cartoon characters. ‘D’you think that’s him?’ Toby rubbed his face. ‘Shall I go out there and punch him?’

‘He wouldn’t.’ I went towards the door. ‘But, in the event he *would*, I am prepared to shove him back down those steps again.’

‘That’s my girl,’ Toby said, very quietly. I wasn’t sure he meant me to hear, it was that kind of undertone that sounded as though it was how he talked to himself, so I pretended I hadn’t. But anyway, it wasn’t Simon on the doorstep, it was Thea, wearing what looked like a knitted boiler suit. Big blocks of primary colours covered both her legs, and both arms were green. ‘Blimey, you look like a bar chart,’ Toby said, and I realised he’d never properly met Thea and her wool-orientated sense of fashion.

‘Those steps are killer,’ she said, slightly out of breath. ‘Oh, and that bloke that came down arse first, anything to do with you?’

‘My ex,’ I said, and stood back to let her into the hallway.

‘Uh-huh. Jerk.’ I wasn’t sure if that was a comment or an instruction, so I stood quietly hoping it would become apparent. ‘Total tosspot.’ Since we were clearly on the same wavelength, I ushered her inside and we all went into the kitchen, where it was warm and smelled of something cooking. Thea looked around. ‘Wow. It’s like a time warp,’ she said. ‘You staying here?’

‘I’d like to. Might turn it into a B&B.’

She nodded slowly. ‘Good call.’ I made a face at Toby when she wasn’t looking. Kieran, either smitten or blinded by the outfit, pulled a stool out for Thea alongside where he and Patrick were sitting at the work surface. ‘Need some new people in Steepleton, it’s, like, everyone’s lived here since forever and they’ve all run out of things to talk about.’

‘Maybe you could help me with the interior design?’ The idea surprised me, but not as much as it clearly surprised Thea. ‘You know, some of your cushion covers in those lovely sea colours would be just right when we get the place done up. And maybe some throws and things?’

Thea looked delighted. ‘That would show those old biddies who thought I was wasting my time going off to college! Is it going to be all, like, boutique then? Could do with something a bit classy round here, it’s mostly chintz and china.’ She sighed. ‘And I should know, my mum runs one. It’ll really naff her up if I go to work with a rival.’ A pause, while she looked around and took in the sheer volume of men in the kitchen. ‘It’s more like the Chippendales in here.’

All three men straightened their shoulders and stuck out their chests a bit, clearly flattered to be compared to a bunch of male strippers, though I didn’t know why. Simon had once told me I looked like a stripper, when I’d worn a shortish skirt, and it had been anything but a compliment. ‘Well, early days yet.’

Thea was looking as though she’d fallen into some form of heaven. But I suppose, being surrounded by a bunch of men that she hadn’t known since playgroup probably came pretty close — even though one of them was gay, one was engaged and the other was . . . well . . . he was *Toby*.

‘I’ve spoken to my gran,’ Thea said, when she’d stopped gazing around her. ‘She rang just before we came carol singing, and I asked her about your aunt, y’know, if she’d had a bloke or anything.’

I felt myself straighten and my spine prickle. ‘What did she say?’

She pushed her hands up inside that primary-coloured romper suit. It looked like something Toby would wear on a work night. ‘She didn’t really know much,’ she said, with a shrug. ‘Sorry. She just said that your aunt sometimes used to go a bit “misty” she called it, and go on about “secrets in the attic” and all that shit.’

Disappointment bit hard. The bauble. ‘Yes, we found that one. Oh well, never mind, thanks for trying.’

Thea got up. ‘Yeah, okay, no worries. Better go and catch up with the “Come All Ye Faithful” brigade, they’ll be thinking I fell into the harbour. We’ve got the rest of the village to do yet.’ And she was gone, out into the night of whirling wind and second-hand snow being blown around in little tornadoes, like ghosts forming and reforming. As I opened the front door to let her out the gust of air that her leaving let in was icy, bit around noses and fingers until it dissipated in the warmth of the house.

‘Well, that’s a shame.’ Toby was beside me again, in the hallway now. He looked more streamlined now he’d lost the big jumper, and the pricks of stubble had grown into something approaching a dusting of beard that made his cheekbones look strong and rugged. I looked at him. ‘What? Matz? What’s the matter?’

It was as if the Toby I’d known for all these years; the Toby who’d been my best friend, my confidante, my colourfully-dressed sidekick, had gone. Instead, here was a stranger. One with broader shoulders, longer fingers, greener eyes . . . ‘Sorry. Nothing. So, Aunt Millie went on about secrets in the attic. We’ve already found the bauble, so . . . dead end, I guess.’

‘And you’re okay?’ He was so close now that his words tickled my skin. ‘You’re sure? When you got up to open that door, I wasn’t sure what you were going to do. What if it had been Simon? You didn’t feel sorry for him, want to go and kiss him better? Not even for a second?’

Toby. Toby who had always been there. ‘Why didn’t you ever try to stop me? Some of those idiots I went out with, why did you never say anything?’

He looked a bit embarrassed. Gave his head a sort of half-jerk as though he wanted to turn away but didn’t dare, and looked quickly behind us into the kitchen, where Patrick and Kieran were fiddling with the little tree. ‘Because you were my friend. And I’d rather have you as a friend, have you around in my life, than have you storming out and never speaking to me again because I told you you were going out with the cross between David Brent from *The*

Office and . . . and . . .’ He closed his eyes as he seemed to be mentally searching for a suitably obnoxious simile . . . ‘and . . . some leering sex pest, the name of whom escapes me.’

The venom of his words took me aback. ‘Some of them were okay,’ I said, feebly.

‘They weren’t *me* though, were they?’ he said, with a rueful little smile. ‘And I wanted it to be me, Matz.’

‘You should have . . .’

‘I refer you to my previous answer.’ He put his hands on my shoulders. ‘I would rather have you in my life as a friend, than not at all.’

In the background, Kieran cleared his throat. ‘I, um, I hate to interrupt, but . . .’ We snapped apart. ‘Do you think we should stand the tree up on the table? Then we can put presents underneath it without risking spinal torsion.’ He waved a hand, indicating the lower branches of the tiny tree, which were practically on the floor.

‘We’ll look like we’re having a hobbit Christmas,’ I said. ‘But, yeah, go for it. I’m going to have a hot bath and go to bed.’ I wanted to lie still in a dark room and possibly replay that image of Simon slithering down the main street in front of the entire village. I felt mean about it, but it was still, possibly, one of the best moments in my life. Karma didn’t usually deliver when anyone was watching.

Chapter Nine

I lay in my sleeping bag listening to Toby breathing softly. Toby, who'd kissed me. Toby who wanted to be more than friends. Who'd been there for me. Who I was gradually starting to see as a man.

I'd been so blind. So stupidly assuming, as though I'd only ever taken in the superficial details. Not seen Simon for what he really was, or Toby either for that matter, just slid over their surfaces, of what they purported to be; a rich, intense, stylish but loving partner and . . . a best friend who only wanted me to be happy.

The springs in the narrow mattress plinged under my back as I shifted, letting in a few gusts of air, cool now we'd let the range die down, to chill the heat of embarrassment and shame. If you compared the two men, in fact, if you compared Toby to *any* of my previous partners, it was always a case of the steadfast and constantly good-humoured against the mercurial, the highly-strung and artistic. Good friend as opposed to the good to be seen with. I blushed so hard that, had he been awake, Toby could have read a book by the light of my face.

Why hadn't I seen it? And was it too late now, to do anything about it?

I glanced over at the other bed. By the faint light which filtered in through the wind-blown snow which hung, like dusty net curtains across the window, I could see Toby's profile. A face I had known for years. Trusted for years. Who was — although I was only coming to realise it slowly — bloody good-looking, with a body that was so sexy it was surprising he hadn't already melted the mainland clear. But never mind him, I trusted him implicitly — could I trust myself not to make another stupid mistake?

Oh, this was getting us nowhere. I got up, the cold nibbling into me like hungry mice, and pulled on some clothes. I inched my way out of the room and along the whingeing floorboards of the landing, where I stood for a moment. From somewhere came the sound of a church ringing in Christmas Day, the bell-clear through the quiet night air, and I made my decision to go upwards rather than down. To take that little glass bauble and hang it on our tiny tree in memory of my great aunt, in memory of whatever loss she had endured. Blocking out the sound of ribald snores from the archaeologists, I made my way along the chilly corridor and up that bare set of stairs to the

attic.

The bleak little dormer window let in enough light for me to see the three boxes on the floor, and I bent down with my back against the plaster of the wall. ‘Sorry, Aunt Millie,’ I whispered into the air. ‘I can’t find those “boys”. I’ve got nothing to go on . . . and I feel stupid and naïve and like I can’t even trust myself to choose a decent man.’

‘Don’t be so hard on yourself.’ The answer came in a high-pitched squeak, which made me jump really hard and nearly drop the box of decorations that I’d hauled onto my lap. ‘I think you know you’re onto a winner with that Toby, don’t you?’ He’d followed me.

‘You absolute bugger.’

‘Sorry. I woke up and saw you leaving the room. Was a bit worried that you might . . . well, I knew you’d be beating yourself up over Simon-the-Twonk and his incredible Slalom action, so I thought I’d come and talk you down.’ He came further into the attic. ‘Wow. I’ve never seen an attic so tidy. Where are all the boxes of Victorian china and old budgie cages?’ Another slow spin. ‘And, more to the point, where is the mad old woman? Apart from you, I mean, obviously.’ His hands flickered. ‘I want *atmosphere!* I want fluttering rags, I want half-heard laughter!’ He opened one of the boxes and rummaged, pulling out the old coat I’d previously seen, some ancient dresses in horrible floral fabric and a large knitted jumper, then sneezed several times in succession. ‘I want antihistamines!’

‘I think Aunt Millie just wasn’t sentimental about stuff,’ I said.

‘Then *why* . . . ?’ Toby held up the jumper. It was huge, knitted in several colours but all of them far more muted and subtle than Thea’s. It looked *genuine* somehow, ‘. . . did she hang on to *this*?’

I found myself running a finger over the knitted surface. It had gone all bobbly with age and wear, the wool under the arms had been re-stitched in a different colour and one of the cuffs was coming slowly unravelled. ‘She probably wore it. It looks pretty warm.’

He looked at me with his head sideways. ‘You’re thinking of the place when we first came the other day. It wouldn’t have been *that* cold when your aunt was here, that range belts out the heat like a fiery hell furnace, complete with little pokey devils.’

‘Maybe she only wore it outside then.’

‘So why is it up here in a box and not on the hook behind the door?’

That's where her coat and hat are.' He sneezed again. 'Plus, it's bloody enormous. Unless your aunt could give Robbie Coltrane a run for his money, it must have hung to her ankles and, while I'm sure Christmas Steepleton isn't exactly Paris in the fashion stakes, she couldn't have worn this outside even if she wanted. You'd never get down those steps in something like this. You'd have to walk like someone had stapled your knees together.' He stopped rooting around and came over to where I sat crouched over the decorations box, then slid down so he sat next to me on the boards. 'Mattie.'

'Yes?'

'Would you do me the honour of agreeing to go out with me? Just as a kind of trial run thing, you know, see if we're compatible. Maybe dinner, a few drinks, take it from there sort of thing?' He was looking at the floor, not at me. His hair was brushed forward by sleep, all flat and straggly, and he had never looked handsomer.

'I think that sounds most charming, Mister Wilson.' I leaned closer and nudged him. 'I'm sorry, Toby. I don't know why I didn't see it before.'

A casual arm came around my shoulders. 'You weren't seeing me. You were seeing Professor Pat-a-Cake and his amazing balloon circus. Incidentally, I trained up making inflated condom animals whilst we were at uni, so, you know, that degree wasn't *totally* wasted.'

'Plus, I'm an idiot who can't see what's in front . . . oh.'

'Matz?' Out of the corner of my eye I saw him turn his head to look properly at me now. 'Are you okay?'

Using the wall and Toby's shoulder to lever myself to my feet, I got up and went over to the other box. It was half-covered with discarded clothing that he'd thrown from the 'Cloths' box, and I carefully pulled it free. 'I've just been saying words, Toby. Not seeing what's going on, not properly.'

'Matz, you're scaring me now. Is our dating still on?' He stood up too.

'Oh yes.' I took a couple of steps towards him. 'Most definitely.'

'Well. That's all right then. I find myself slightly reassured. I was going to have a shave and everything, and I'd hate to waste the effort.' He ran a finger over his cheek. 'And the resultant sink cleaner.'

Now I took another small step in and kissed him. A proper, firm kiss, my hands against his chest, feeling his heart go from steady, regular pulsing to hammering. He smelled of the shower gel/dust/warm smell of sleep but he tasted ripe and exciting, which was weird. I'd never associated Toby with

excitement before, almost as if he had no corners I couldn't see around. But now, here he was, hinting of unknown things, of potentials and other things which sent a little tremor down my back, and this was a kiss unlike any other kiss ever.

When I stepped back, we were both breathing hard and slightly wider-eyed than we had been.

'Well,' I said, and my voice had gone down a couple of octaves. 'Well.' I cleared my throat.

'That's a very deep well,' he said. 'I mean . . . no, I don't. Anyway. You were previously getting all hinty about something I am clearly missing?'

'Oh.' That kiss had distracted me completely, and made my brain feel as though it was leaning sideways. 'Yes! Yes I did.' And I crossed the floor to the other box, the one labelled 'Payprs'. 'Look at this place, Toby.'

Toby looked around. 'Okay, yes, boards, dust, windows, boxes. Got it.'

'Aunt Millie didn't keep stuff. She just didn't. The bedrooms are pretty bleak, and she didn't seem to hoard anything.'

'Apart from cobwebs. She must have had a pretty hardcore attitude to those.' He ran his hands through his hair. 'And cat ornaments.'

'So then . . . why . . .?' I upended the box and the smell of old newsprint spilled out, accompanied by a pile of paper, '. . . would she keep a box of newspapers?'

Toby screwed up his face. 'For cleaning? Well, all right, admittedly there's not a lot of brass to polish, but maybe . . . maybe she shoved it in the windows?'

'Then why have the box in the attic?' I began sifting through the papers. They were complete editions, not clippings, and all of them were old. 'And why would they all be from the same week? It's like she kept all the editions of all the papers for . . .' I flicked the first couple open, '. . . the beginning of February 1953.'

Toby joined me and we spread out all the newspapers. There were about twenty, mostly local papers but also some national ones, and all the front pages seemed concerned with the same thing. VIOLENT STORMS CLAIM HUNDREDS OF LIVES. Toby got his phone out and hit Google, while I skim read the first pages of all the papers.

'1953. North Sea surge, high tide, massive storms.' Toby mumbled, reading from his screen. 'London flooded, Eastern sea defences washed out .

. . etc etc.'

My skin was pricking all over. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck rising. The most represented newspaper there seemed to be *The Steepleton, Peytonbury and Woodchurch Advertiser*, which had a morning and afternoon edition, as I found when I stacked the papers into a more orderly form. The front page, during that week, told a story of wild, high tides, sea defences breached, fields flooded, livestock drowned. And a boat, a small fishing boat, the 'Mary-Anne', out of Christmas Steepleton . . .

I raked through the copies, once I'd got my eye in I found I could pick the name out of columns of newsprint. 'Listen. The Mary-Anne had been out fishing, the storm came up, she tried to get back to harbour and sank, with the loss of all on board.'

Toby scabbled some more copies. 'The boat gets a mention in this one too. And . . . here, this paper . . . oh, and the *Daily Mirror* here — "one of the ships lost was the *Mary-Anne* from Christmas Steepleford" — wow, misprints are nothing new then, "which sank with all hands on board, only yards from the safety of the harbour.'" He looked at me, eyes shadowed. 'She kept all the papers that mentioned that night, that boat sinking.'

I scabbled again, flicking through until I found the final copy of the *Advertiser*. Dated the fifth of February, it was the only one from that day. The storm had pretty much passed from the local headlines by then, although Google told us that London was still clearing up and burying the dead, most headlines were reporting the end of sweet rationing. Only the *Advertiser* that she'd kept was covering the continuing search for the bodies of the four men who'd been crewing the *Mary-Anne*.

'Google says "The *Mary-Anne*, from Christmas Steepleton, was lost in the storm of 1953 on the night of 31 January. On board were Henry Gass, Albert Dike, Jim Pettinger and Walter Cross. All hands lost, and their bodies never recovered." That's all, but the *Princess Victoria* sank in the same storm and that was the biggest loss of life since the war, so everyone covered that rather than the loss of fishing boats.'

'That's a fisherman's sweater.' I found I was whispering. 'In with the clothes. One of those men . . .' I stopped. I could feel the words but they wouldn't come out of my mouth.

'They were trying to get back to the harbour.' Toby, staring at his phone screen, sounded as shocked as though it had just happened. 'Running for the

safety of Christmas Steepleton. And they nearly made it.'

A blast of wind shook the windows and we both jumped. The impact of the fact that everything had been right in front of me and I hadn't seen it, was sinking in slowly. Not just Toby, but these boxes. I had never bothered to look inside properly. I'd scanned the surface, found it okay but not exciting, and that had been as far as I went. 'Toby, I'm sorry.' Tears bulged in my throat. 'I should have seen.'

'Hey, hey. I hide my light under a bushel, whatever that is but when I find one I'll know because it will have my light under it.' He stepped in and wrapped his arms around me. 'And these?' I heard a toe scrape one of the piles of papers. 'How could you have known? It's a bloody attic, not a pinboard.' A hug that tightened and I could feel his cheek against the top of my head. 'I'm just glad you've seen it now.' A sigh. 'And by "it", I mean me, although obviously I am glad that you've also found out something about your great aunt.'

'Boys.' I said suddenly. 'In memory of her lost love. Boys, Toby.'

'Well, it's more girls for me, but a lot of people make that mistake, it must be the way I walk or something.'

I stepped out of his hug and looked up into his face. 'Boys. But it's not, is it? It's not B.O.Y.S, it's B.U.O.Y.S. She wanted her ashes scattered over the markers of the safe harbour, in memory of the sailors, or one of them, I don't know if we'll ever find out which one it was.'

'She didn't know it was spelled differently.' Toby's voice was a bit hushed now. 'She wrote it the way it sounded. And I don't suppose it matters which one it was, does it. Really? They sailed together and died together, and they might all have left someone behind, mourning them. So we can scatter those ashes in memory of all of them.'

'And in memory of lives that never would be.' I bent down and took the glass bauble from its box. 'Whether she was pregnant or just hoping to be . . . Aunt Millie would have been thirty-one when that boat sank. She never married, never had children, but she was a bloody good aunt to my dad, I know that. She was old when I knew her, but she was always pleased to see me. She stayed single. So she really must have been devastated when he died.' I imagined it, a night like this, the whole village out on the clifftops, willing the *Mary-Anne* to make it to safe harbour; the collective silence and grief when she foundered just beyond the reach of that curved sea wall. Great

Aunt Millie, not the bowed and dubiously-polyestered lady I'd known distantly, a supplier of lollies who'd let me stroke her cats and cuddle kittens when we visited, but a strong, upright thirty-year-old woman, with hopes and a future all planned. Maybe she'd be saving for her wedding, maybe she was hoping breathlessly for a proposal, maybe it had all gone further than that and it would be a quick wedding and a 'honeymoon baby' . . .

'We can scatter the ashes in the morning,' Toby said. 'If the wind has dropped, obviously, otherwise there's not much point, she'll get back to the house faster than we will.' The wind thumped around us again, storming down the street like an out-of-control elephant. 'But for now, bed.'

'First I'm going to put this bauble on the tree though,' I said, holding it up on the palm of my hand. 'Now we've got it figured out, sort of. I don't think it's something to be hidden, we should hang it and remember her.'

'Good idea. We can bring it out every year and put it out in memory of . . . oh, and I realise I have jumped several guns there. But, you know, hoping there's going to be a lot of Christmases in our future. Together, I mean, not random Christmases. And, here and now, I promise that next Christmas will be better planned and with a bigger tree.'

'In this house?' I hesitated on my way to the stairs.

'Why not? If you want to. I can Professor Pat-a-Cake from here, like you said, lots of Londoners weekending in those cottages, some of them might want children's parties, plus, well, the competition is probably a bit less tough out here. Got to say, Matz, I was getting tired of keeping up with the balloon giraffe Joneses back in town. I was never going to be able to master the triple dachshund with the double poodle loop.' A deep breath. 'And, of course, the qualifier, if our dates go sufficiently well for you to want to set up home with a failed actor who just suspects that he might make an excellent front-of-house man for your B&B business. Separate rooms, if necessary.'

'You,' I said, my voice sounded fierce, even to me, 'are not a failed anything, Toby.'

'Well, I am presently failing to get you to go back to bed, so . . .' He did a comedy shrug, holding his hands up. 'So let's go and hang this bauble and then get another few hours' sleep.'

The kitchen was very quiet. We didn't turn on the light, just quietly hung the bauble by the blue-ish illumination of the moonlight on the snow outside. There was something very 'otherworld' about it, even the tree had joined in

the supernatural vibe and looked twinkly, the milk bottle decorations twisting and turning and catching the reflections.

‘Technically, since it’s Christmas Day, I can give you your present,’ I said, as we stood back to admire the way the bauble pulled the whole of one side of the tree down, as if it’d had some kind of timber-based stroke.

‘You’ve got me a present?’ Toby tilted his head. I wasn’t sure if that was because he didn’t believe me or whether he was trying to straighten up the tree in his eyeline.

‘Of course! I always get you a Christmas present!’

‘Well, yes, but last year . . .’ He tailed off. Last year I’d bought him an expensive bottle of some smelly stuff he liked, but Simon had found it and refused to let me hand it over. Simon had worn it himself and I’d had to buy Toby a bottle of supermarket champagne and drop it at his flat while he wasn’t in. Simon had come with me, to check. At that point, I’d still thought it was a mark of how much he cared about me.

‘That was last year. This year, it’s different.’ We looked at each other across that magically lit kitchen, whilst the range made portentous ticking sounds, either cooling down or about to explode.

‘Yes. It is.’

Moments of silence stretched until Toby broke them. ‘Okay, presents now. Let’s do it.’

‘And when you say “let’s do it”, you mean . . .?’

He blushed and the blue light made his face a curious purple shade. ‘Oh. Ah, I wasn’t suggesting . . . come on, Matz, you know me! If ever there was a man who wouldn’t suggest sex as a Christmas present, then I am he, and I want you to notice the correct grammatical construction of that sentence as a way of distracting you from how embarrassed I am right now.’

I gave his shoulder a gentle punch. ‘Have you lost the ability to tell when I’m teasing you?’

A sudden, rather stern look, which didn’t sit easily on those friendly, open features, or under that tousled blond hair. ‘I’ve just forgotten what it’s like to have a Mattie who teases. I thought I’d lost you.’ And there he was, hugging me so hard that I could hear my ribs squeaking and my breath clattered out in a whoosh. ‘I thought I’d lost you,’ he said, into my hair. ‘And this is all I ever wanted to do. To hold you and tell you that everything would be all right even if, on current evidence, that meant squashing you to death.’

He slowly released me and took a half step back. ‘Is that all right?’

‘It’s Christmas Day, Toby. Telling me something like that . . . well, I’ve got the feeling that it means even more because of that.’ I very gently stroked the side of his face. ‘Now. Presents.’

My jacket was hanging on the back of the door. Now the lads had got the range working I no longer needed to wear it indoors as a kind of front-line defence. I reached into the pocket and drew out the little soft parcel. ‘This is yours.’

Toby unwrapped the knitted octopus and greeted it with a joy that seemed slightly out of proportion, but then, so did the octopus. ‘Wow! My very own knitted Lovecraftian monster! How ever did you guess?’

‘Technically he’s a cephalopod not an Old One, but . . . that’s pretty much what I was going for. I’ve been calling him Cthulhu, but you can change his name, I won’t mind and he doesn’t answer to it or anything.’

‘Right.’ And he plaited the tentacles for a moment. ‘Right. Come with me and I’ll show you your present.’

‘The werewolf?’

He led me to the unused front room and opened the door. ‘Ta-da.’

Sitting on a cushion on top of a chair swathed in a dustsheet, was a small grey cat. It looked up when we came in and mewed, then tucked its head in and curled up. I stared at it. ‘You were done,’ I said. ‘Werewolves are bigger.’

Toby began talking very fast. ‘After you said about always wanting a pet and you’d get a cat when you moved in, and then they had a board up in the shop and this was the last one of the litter to go — mainly, I suspect, because it’s a psychopath — they’ll take it back if you don’t want it and they’re happy to come up and feed it if you need them to and you go back to London but . . .’

I ignored him and went to stroke the cat. It ignored me, but twitched an ear in acknowledgement. ‘You’re a cutie, aren’t you?’

‘Don’t expect an answer, I’ve been trying to get him to say Happy Christmas and all I get is purring.’ Toby sounded a bit anxious. ‘Is it . . . I mean, I wanted to get you something you could keep, a reminder of this . . .’ An arm waved.

Last Christmas. Those bloody diamonds. I’d never wanted diamonds, never asked for them, they were something Simon thought his girlfriend ought

to wear. To be suitably decorated, to show off how wealthy, how expansive he was. This . . .

‘I’ve always wanted a cat,’ I said slowly. ‘Mum’s allergic so I could never have one growing up. I always told myself “When I get my own place, I’ll have a cat”. I just . . .’ I cleared my throat. Toby knew this. Of course he did. He listened. ‘Thank you. Really. He’s adorable.’ I considered the curled-up ball of silver-grey fluff. ‘I’ll get to know him better in the morning. I think he’s basically telling us it’s the middle of the night and to bugger off and get some sleep.’

‘And it’s really all right?’ He still sounded worried. ‘I mean, I know you shouldn’t give animals as presents, honestly, but I was at a complete loss and then I saw him . . .’ He tailed off.

‘The present isn’t the kitten, Toby,’ I said quietly. ‘It’s you showing that you remembered.’

A moment of quiet. ‘I remember everything you ever told me, Mattie,’ he said. ‘Because it mattered. It mattered enough to you to tell me, so it mattered to me.’ Then he coughed and swept a hand through his hair. ‘Right. Bed, young lady, we’ve got a busy day tomorrow.’

Chapter Ten

Christmas morning saw a thaw setting in which made the roofs drip and the streets cascade with water as though it was raining from a clear sky. Ice sheets detached and slithered down the hill, with a sound like skiers rushing past and occasional clumps of snow fell from bushes and trees, disturbing the peace and the gulls, which wheeled and hung overhead. The sea had calmed and now just bumped up and down breathily.

We left Patrick and Kieran at the house, arguing over the cooking. I'd given them the two felted figures, who had instantly taken part in a miniature battle, and then set about a table football match using sprouts as a ball when we quietly pulled the door shut behind us. Toby and I tiptoed down the waterfall of the steps and made our way out onto the harbour wall, negotiating the remaining patches of ice carefully, and carrying Aunt Millie's box.

The village was quiet, apart from a family group. Two small children earnestly pedalled new bicycles through the rapidly melting slush along near the shops while their parents leaned indulgently on the railings and watched. Everyone else would still be inside, enjoying Christmas breakfast or in the little church for the carol service, from where the faint sound of an organ played with more gusto than ability drifted.

'Next year, Buck's Fizz and fresh coffee,' Toby muttered, high-stepping through piles of snow. 'If you don't have children, Christmas morning shouldn't start until there are double digits in the day.' A breeze, much warmer than the one we'd got used to, tickled around my ungloved hands. It smelled of new things, of promises and beginnings and also, slightly, of fish.

I crouched down carefully and lifted the lid of the box. 'Am I doing the right thing? Toby?' I hesitated, the box at an acute angle over the sea, which respired gently beneath us, sucking and blowing at the sea wall in a gentle swell.

'You know you are.' And he bent beside me. 'It feels right. Does it feel right? It feels right to me but then it's not mine, so maybe it would feel like that anyway . . .'

'Yes. Yes it does.' I turned and kissed his cheek, which tasted of salt from the faint spray that was rising with each slap of waves. 'All round, I am

doing the right thing.’ And I upended the box, letting the wind take Aunt Millie scuttering and dancing, over the row of buoys which ran out from the harbour wall and marked the edge of the safe water before it broke out into the open sea.

‘Henry Gass, Albert Dike, Jim Pettinger, Walter Cross.’ Toby read the names from his phone as the ashes whirled and curled once more and then faded, either taken by the wind or the sea.

‘In memory of all of you,’ I said, and straightened up. Toby caught my hand and held it and together we watched as the sun’s first rays lifted gently over the clifftops, making the waves glow a rose pink for a moment. There were tears in my eyes, for the lads who never made it home, for Aunt Millie and her disappointed future and a few slightly selfish ones for myself. For the mistakes I’d made and the things I hadn’t allowed myself to see.

And then Toby turned to me and kissed me and I felt the weight of my new future, deeper than the sea which splashed approvingly up over our feet, and brighter than this early light of the new day.

‘Happy Christmas,’ he whispered, and then turned me so we could see the whole village, clinging to the cliffside, embroidered with lights, rooftops just touched with gold. ‘Happy new life, Mattie.’

The wind tugged my hair and touched my cheek, and I let myself think it was Great Aunt Millie, expressing her gratitude, and we stood and watched Christmas Steepleton wake up to Christmas Day.

Thank You

Thank you so much for reading *The Boys of Christmas*! I hope it's made you feel suitably Christmassy and desirous of sprouts (I really like sprouts, if you haven't yet discovered the joy then try them shredded and fried with bacon, food of the gods I tell you). The village of Christmas Steepleton, sadly, doesn't really exist, although it is loosely based on Lyme Regis in Dorset, where I thoroughly recommend that you visit, although maybe wait until summer . . .

I live in a house not unlike Great Aunt Millicent's, big, rambling and mostly unheated, so the bit about trying to sleep wearing a onesie, a fleece and three pairs of socks was based on extensive research conducted during the months of November through until April. Although I can also vouch for the heating power of two terriers . . .

Can I take this opportunity to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year? (If you're reading this in June, it still applies, you just have to remember I said it). Please do try some more of our delicious Choc Lit selection box, and if you enjoyed *The Boys of Christmas*, leave a review!

BOOK 3:
CHRISTMAS AT THE
LITTLE VILLAGE SCHOOL

An utterly heart-warming Christmas romance set in Yorkshire

JANE LOVERING



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*Dedicated to the memory of my mum, Betty, who always made Christmas
such a great event. RIP.*

Chapter One

October 26th

There are a few things that a head teacher can say to you to make your heart stop. ‘OFSTED are coming’ is one. Another is the one that Alan let slip, putting his head around the door to my classroom while I was tidying up. ‘Lydia, have you thought about doing a Christmas play this year? Only White Rose want to get together an outing for their residents, and they were asking . . .’ And then, like the Cheshire Cat, he was gone, only instead of a smile he left a lingering smell of Old Spice overlaying the usual ‘small children with varying approaches to toilet hygiene, glue and crayons’ scent of the room and the whiff of silage which wafted in from the farm down the lane.

I had to give my whiteboard a slow and therapeutic clean to let my heart rate slow down. Christmas play? Is he mad? Well, he’s the Head of a rural primary school with only three teachers, one of whom is so new he’s still got the plastic on, so, yes, probably. I wrote tomorrow’s date very carefully in the top left-hand corner of the board, so that nobody could say I wasn’t prepared, and had underlined it twice in two colours when another head appeared. This wasn’t a Head of School, just a body part with a half-untied plait swinging over one shoulder above a bright fuchsia cardigan, the pockets of which were stuffed with tissues, Freddo frog chocolate bars, pencils and wet wipes. Irina was a one-woman emergency kit, taught Reception, Years One and Two, and was my best friend — despite the fact that she bullied me mercilessly. ‘Lydia, it is time to go home now. Go.’ The rest of her came around the door and she flapped her hands at me.

‘Alan wants us to do a Christmas play.’ I didn’t see why the misery shouldn’t be spread as widely and as fast as possible. ‘So the residents of White Rose, you know, the old people’s home, can come and see it. Has he mentioned it to you? Or to . . .?’ I waved a hand in the direction of the other classroom, where Years Five and Six worked under the tutelage of Jake ‘Mister’ Immingham; a man I hadn’t even had a proper conversation with yet, despite the fact that he’d started at the school in September. I had, however, brought up the subjects of door handle heights, pencil distribution and Year Six’s persistent occupation of the play house at the end of the

school field. But nothing personal. Oh no.

‘No?’ Irina sat on one of the tables. ‘What is this all about? What is wrong with the usual Christmas party? I like the Christmas party. We have never done a Christmas play.’

‘Didn’t think so.’ I’d been at the school for five years to Irina’s seven. Term ended in December in a riot of Jammy Dodgers and crisps, and everyone went home at two. Well, everyone except me; usually, I stayed behind to scrub the jam out of the reading corner carpet and to get everything straight for the beginning of next term. With the cutbacks in education that were so rife, our current cleaner only just had time to run a mop over the lino and do something arcane with industrial detergent in the toilets. ‘I don’t think he quite realises what’s involved.’

‘He’s got to you too?’ The voice came from the corridor. Jake Immingham was still, as Rory Scott (Year Four and a wannabe rap artist, despite the fact that his parents ran a tea shop in the village and he was destined to be up to his elbows in scones from the minute he turned sixteen) would have it, ‘in da house’.

‘He told Lydia. I can still plead ignorance,’ Irina said into the gap between the door and the hallway. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘At a guess, we’re going to do a Christmas play.’ The door opened wider and Jake came into my classroom. He looked around at the model village that we’d made last half-term and I felt the skin at the back of my neck prickle. Although there was nothing derisory in his look, I was working on what I’d say if he even suggested there was anything wrong with the fourteen cardboard box houses of varying sizes (one per student), laid out along a carefully drawn roadway. ‘It might be fun.’ He sat down on the table next to Irina and I heard the plastic groan.

Jake Immingham was not built for primary school teaching. He was built for something that took place on a muddy field between men in shorts, involving lots of shouting and throwing. Football or rugby or hurling or one of the uniquely Yorkshire sports that we tried out every now and again with the children, and usually resolved never to do again, once we’d mopped up the blood. He was all shoulders and legs, with messy dark hair, stubble that never seemed to turn into a beard, and an attitude. Years Five and Six adored him. I wanted to send him bog walking on the high moors and see if he came back quite so smug. Even the way he entered a room made me feel defensive.

He might be easy on the eye, but that didn't mean he had any right to be quite so smiley and jocular and all round nice! Why couldn't he have the decency to be a tetchy bugger and make my life easier?

Irina sighed and looked at her watch, dramatically. I knew she was doing it dramatically because there was a, quite frankly, bloody enormous clock on the wall by the whiteboard. 'I must go home,' she said. 'I have a family to feed. Jake, Lydia, you may decide on the play and I will go along with what you think.' She stood up and her pockets swung like gun holsters at her sides. 'But nothing too complicated, please. Reception are really only suited to snowflakes and "Away in a Manger", and we are still having a few toilet issues, so not a long performance, if you can.'

'I don't think we're quite ready for the "Ring of the Nibelungs" yet,' Jake said dryly. I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic, or if he didn't expect either of us to know our Wagner.

'I'm sure Year Six would be up for Gotterdammerung,' I said, pointedly.

'As long as it comes in a format for PlayStation.' He gave me a sudden grin, at which I narrowed my eyes. Did he think I needed winning over? Well, good. Let him carry on thinking that.

Irina raised an eyebrow. 'Yes. Very good. But I am still going home. You two, who have no lives to speak of, may agree this between you, but there is a chicken stew in the slow cooker and Pawel will have picked up the children by now, so I don't care. See you tomorrow.' And then she gave me a look that was a cross between a grin and a glare. 'And remember: not too long, with snowflakes in.' She sauntered out of my classroom, hitching a cardigan pocket on the door handle as she passed through and having to return to unhook it, swearing in Polish as she did so. It was entirely her own fault, those door handles had trained me out of hip-level pockets and loose sleeves by term one, day three.

The room suddenly felt very empty. Outside I could hear birdsong and the cows waiting to go through the milking parlour calling from the yard, and I reminded myself again how lucky I was to be in such a lovely rural environment when I could have been in an inner city school with thirty-five children to a class. Instead, Irina had twelve, I had fourteen and Jake had eleven. We had thirty-four children in the entire school. It should have been idyllic. It was idyllic.

'Are you in a hurry to get back?' Jake stood up. The tables were low

enough that adults got cramp of the thigh sitting on them for too long. ‘Only, we could talk about the play now, if you like.’ He went to the window and looked out. It was just after five and the October sun was sinking fast towards twilight, slithering down behind the hills that bulked out the landscape, and smearing the sky with an improbable yellowish orange like the display of paintings Irina had pegged on her wall. Year One knew a thing or two about painting a Yorkshire Moors sunset, basically use all the colours on the ‘bright’ side of the paint-box, and a big brush.

‘Mrs Wilkinson will be wanting to lock up,’ I said. ‘She must have finished the toilets by now. Or dissolved in the backwash of Jeyes Fluid.’ I picked up my bag and my papers. I’d got seven Year Three poems to read through tonight and mark, and a lesson on the classification of living things to sort out. Plus, Jake Immingham and his careful chinos and chequered shirt made my skin twitch. I needed the slow walk home with the darkness beginning to pucker around me and the cool touch of the start of an early frost swiping the tips of my ears.

‘Why don’t you like me?’ He was still staring out of the window. ‘I mean, if it’s not rude of me to ask.’

‘I don’t dislike you.’ My voice sounded stiff and slightly distant. ‘I don’t know you.’

‘No.’ Then he turned around from the window. ‘Why don’t you come over to the farm? We can talk about the play, get the details thrashed out before Alan three-line-whips us into A Christmas Carol and the Cratchits have to have nine children so that all Year One and Two get a go on stage.’

I stared at him. ‘Why do we have to do that in a farmyard?’

‘Because that’s where I’m staying until I buy a house up here. Not in the yard, in the farm. Bed and breakfast. And, quite often, a hearty dinner and three snacks a day, because Mrs Dobson is rather old-fashioned and believes that a single man is incapable of surviving unless there is someone to do his washing and provide him with potato-based meals.’ He looked down at his sturdy frame. ‘I was nine stone when I came to Roseberry Farm.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Oh, okay. Well, how about an early start tomorrow then? School is open from seven, you’re usually here round about then, I’m only two minutes away over the field . . .?’

‘I have marking to do.’

He gave me a very direct look. It was a look that had trained up on eleven-year-old boys starting to get the hang of testosterone. ‘Now or in the morning?’

‘Both.’ I tried to return the look but my eyes wouldn’t focus on his face. They kept sliding sideways and staring at the picture of Wordsworth and his daffodils that was pinned on the wall to the left. ‘I’m sorry but I have to go now.’

I slung my big, leather document case over my shoulder by its long strap and clutched my bag to my chest, hoping he’d get the message. Actually, hoping he had piles of lesson prep to do too and was putting it off by talking to me, and that any moment now he’d remember that he was behind with his fractions marking.

He did an odd sideways nod, like half-acceptance and half-annoyance. ‘We need to talk about it sometime. There’s not that many weeks left before we break up for Christmas and we’ll need rehearsals, costume fittings, learning songs, all that. After all, it will probably be the highlight of the older people’s Christmas, seeing the cute children performing, you wouldn’t want to let them down, would you?’

That was so far below the belt that it was practically knee-level. ‘Well, if we can do something with not too many words in, that will help.’ I still had my bag tight against my chest. It was actually squashing my boobs and I had to relax a little bit or risk spraining a nipple. ‘The mums will all do costumes, given enough notice, if we can keep those simple . . . Are you trying to lure me into talking about the play?’

‘No. Maybe. Little bit.’

The smile in his voice made me look at his face again. He had laugh lines that creased the skin around his brown eyes like tissue paper and made me realise that he was older than he looked. Not the mid-twenties wannabe, sprinting up through the ranks to the coveted Head of School role, although, given Alan’s perpetually worried expression and egg-stained tie, I wasn’t sure quite why it was so coveted. ‘Well I’m sorry, I have to go. We can arrange a meeting to talk it over, if you like.’ My heart was beating so hard in my ears that it sounded as though I had a tiny animal trapped in my bag, trying to kick its way free.

I swung around towards the door and he jumped up to open it for me. This left me with no choice but to go through and out into the corridor. I’d

been hoping that he'd take the hint and go, leave me in my quiet classroom to gather my thoughts, but no chance. He compounded his error by walking with me to the main front door. 'If you come up with any ideas . . . I mean, for the play? I'm always in by seven-thirty, we could put our heads together, come up with something to keep Alan happy.'

I swiped my key card. 'I've got marking to do.' I pushed open the front door and felt the chill of autumn needling in under the residual warmth of the day. He hesitated for a moment and the thought that he might offer to walk me home crossed my mind, so I stormed off out into the shadowy evening without giving him a chance to say or do anything else.

Chapter Two

Out of the school, turn right, and then there was nothing but country lanes. Hawthorn hedges threaded with berries and filmy cobwebs lined the quiet stretch of tarmac that led from nowhere very much and stretched up like an arthritic arm onto the moors that overhung us in a bucolic cuddle. Heavington wasn't even much of a settlement these days; the big old house that had presided over the estate was now the White Rose Sheltered Accommodation and Residential Care Home for the Elderly and the estate houses were mostly weekend and holiday cottages. There was a small post office (Sara Cowton, Year Two and her little brother James, Reception), and the redoubtable Rory Scott's family tea shop. A few of the smaller cottages were still family homes for workers on local farms, who had yet to settle for long enough to produce children, and the old Dower House was occupied by the Grace family and their six children (Timothy and Oscar, Year Six, Aurora, Year Four, Atticus, Year One, Celeste, Reception, and the baby, who they all called Bo-Bo; we had no idea of its gender or real name). The rest of the children at school were driven in by parents from outlying villages or the suburbs of the local town, where the oversubscribed primary was sprawling its way into Portacabins and the lunch hall, and was therefore seen as less desirable than our bijou little schoolette, despite its positive OFSTED ranking, state-of-the-art computer room and field trips.

I breathed deeply. There was a heavy smell of mud in the air, unsurprisingly, as tractors had been up and down the road all day bearing their shiny anchors of plough, glazed with wet earth. There had been a procession of boys at lunchtime all willing and eager to tell anyone who would listen about the makes and models of tractors and stories of various dads and uncles and their ability with a sixteen-furrow reversible; it was one of the ways we knew that autumn was well underway. That and the hundred and forty pounds of blackberries that the children brought in for us teachers, having been out picking with their families at the weekends. I now knew every conceivable recipe that could contain blackberries and was thinking of starting some blackberry gin. In fact, the mere thought of having to put on a Christmas play made the gin sound very appealing.

Further along the road, where the lane turned into a single track, lay my

house. A converted village hall, built in the austerity times of the Great War out of corrugated iron and leftovers from farm buildings. It sat at the junction of the road and a bridleway, which snaked off over the fields and down towards the distant woods that had also once belonged to the Big House, and jangled its roof in high winds. I went inside and shut the door with a metallic twang against what remained of the day. Irina always said that the noise was like a bell tolling the death knell to my social life, but that's Irina for you. She thought that, as a single woman, I should be out every night not 'shut away in a metal box partying like it's 1549'. I put it down to jealousy, since she had small children and all her parties involved jelly.

With a wanton disregard for my electricity bill, because I had to be allowed to splurge somewhere, I'd left a small lamp on when I went to work, so indoors was softly lit with a relaxing pink light. The inside of the hall had been panelled in old wood, which I'd left when I'd converted the building (well, I say 'I', really I'd supervised a bunch of men in fluorescent jackets, all apparently called Dave) and the polished panels reflected the light gently as I peeled off my coat and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. The vaguest smell of cow still lingered, because I strongly suspected that the panelling had been taken from planks previously used in a barn, and every time the word 'recycling' came up at school I got a synaesthetic whiff of muck, but I loved them. I polished them all every weekend, and, through Saturday Mr Sheen won out, but by Sunday evening the warm, organic smell was back and I'd learned to live with it.

While I waited for the kettle to boil I went through into my bedroom, which had been the old hall kitchen and the mirror I used to do my make-up covered a large plastered square where the village tea urn had once stood. In there I stripped off my teacher persona; the carefully cut trousers, the stain-resistant blouse and all the accoutrements of my day-to-day life. I put on my saggy yoga bottoms, a T-shirt and then, because the heating was taking a while to warm the autumn out of the air, my dressing gown, and cautiously made my way back into the main house again.

Apart from the bedroom and bathroom, my house was pretty much all one room. The breakfast bar divided the living space from the kitchen and meant I could lean on it and see out of the front window into the darkening road beyond as I made my cup of tea. Letting my eyes unfocus, I rested both elbows on the worktop, sipped and stared through the narrow panes of

wartime glass, which made the outlines of the trees on the other side of the road wobble like an enthusiastic nine-year-old on a narrow plank. I loved this place. And, on a rural primary teacher's salary, it was a miracle I could afford anything, so I spun it to everyone I talked to into a detached residence with far-reaching views rather than a basic, small tin box with windows and a roof that made heavy rain sound like gunfire. You really didn't want to be in there during a hailstorm without ear defenders, but never mind. It was mine. The place I relaxed. The *only* place I relaxed. The only place I allowed myself those little daydreamy fantasies, the ones I didn't even tell Irina about, where Jake Immingham noticed me as more than a fellow teacher. The fantasies in which I could let him notice me, didn't have to maintain this façade of not caring what he thought of me, or keep him at arm's length.

And then I had to give myself a good sturdy talking to. *You're a good teacher. You have a life. You don't need a man like Jake Immingham. You don't need a man, full stop. Hell, you don't need anybody. That's what cats are for.*

Between the rising steam from the mug and the dimness of the lamp I couldn't be sure, but I almost thought I could see a shape outside, something hovering uncertainly in the road outside the house. I moved my head up and down to cancel out the uneven glass, yes, there was definitely something there, darker than the rising night, a shadow against the background of hedge and stile and hunting gate.

The tension was back now, between my shoulder blades. That tension that only really left me when I was alone, surrounded by my own things in my own space. The tension that I carried like a rucksack full of bricks, so ever-present that I usually forgot it was there until something like this made me aware of it, and that made me angry. Okay, so this was probably a stray cow from the farm or a horse and rider that had taken the bridleway and got lost in a night that had descended more rapidly than expected, but even so, wasn't I allowed *any* peace?

'Who's there?' I flung open the door, letting the light of the lamps spill out to illuminate the muddy bit of trackway immediately outside. As the light flowed out, the smell of mud came in, and then it was followed by a voice.

'I just had a brilliant idea and I thought . . .'

Jake Immingham. Still in his teaching clothes. The thought that he might have followed me back, been behind me as I walked home, made my neck

break out into a sweat. 'I said we could talk about it at school.' I gripped my front door, the metal chilly against my fingers but a welcome antidote to the heat that was sweeping up from my knees and was probably colouring my face. 'You didn't need to come to my house.'

'Wow, this is your house? I thought it . . .' and then adulthood cut back in. 'Sorry. Yes, no, I mean. I didn't have to come but I just wanted to run it by you before I forgot all about it. Sorry.' He half-turned, then paused. 'Are you sure this is your house? You aren't hiding out here or something?'

'Are you reading Anthony Horowitz to your class again? Why would I be hiding out? What from?'

'You have to admit it's a bit . . .' Jake stared over his shoulder at my house. 'Hutty,' he finished after obviously having groped for the right word. 'Hut-like,' he modified.

'Only on the outside,' and my tone was so chilly that I could swear it drew down a hoar frost to crisp the leaves around us.

'Well, I can only see the outside.' Jake's reasonableness made him sound as though he was talking to a ten-year-old. 'To be fair.'

I took a deep breath again. The tension in my back and shoulders felt strange, not like the usual rucksack of horror that I carried, this was warmer. As though a small animal had crawled in and was heating my spine. Good grief, was I actually *enjoying* having him at a disadvantage like this? 'I'm not inviting you in. It's late and I've got work to do. As I think I told you. Repeatedly.'

'You're wearing your dressing gown.'

'I'm marking classwork. I'm a teacher, not a TV presenter, what does it matter what I'm wearing?' I *knew* I was being unnecessarily sharp, I mean, it didn't really matter one way or the other what he thought I was doing. I could have been unravelling cats or hand-carving my family motto into the floor. Hell, *I* didn't care, so why should he? And he'd come to talk about work. But snippy was what I did. It was how . . . it was *who* I was. Plus I hated being caught out of my teaching wear, having him point it out made it even worse. 'And I have to go and do it now. We can talk at school tomorrow.'

I leaned my weight into the door and it began to close, slowly with a rusty squeak that called out for a butler with a lisp and, possibly, scuttling rats. It was a good noise, a noise that said absolutely definitely *go away, this conversation is over*. And, sometimes, *I don't need double-glazing*. It never

failed to get rid of unwanted callers. Except today, when the combination of my weight and the angle I was pushing from meant that the door accelerated in its closure and I fell against it, so it closed with a slam that was more emphatic than I had intended, and I hit my head on it as I went down. The noise was catastrophic, and the metallic ringing went on for so long that I wasn't sure whether it was acoustic or concussion, as I lay on the floor.

Eventually, the noise of the door died away, to be replaced by the sound of the letterbox flap being lifted and then a voice. 'Are you okay? Did something happen?'

'No.'

The flap rattled again. 'You're on the floor.'

'Today is really your day for stating the obvious, isn't it?' I hoisted myself to my elbows. 'It's nothing. I'm fine.'

'On the floor, in your dressing gown.'

'And fine.' The words came out clipped short by my gritted teeth. Actually, I wasn't sure I was fine, I could feel the sting of a cut and the warm drip of blood on the side of my face. 'So go away.'

A moment of quiet. The chilly evening breeze puffing through the slit in the door told me that he hadn't let the letterbox close yet and was presumably still peering through the slot. I tried to hunch myself against the bottom of the door so he couldn't see me, but there wasn't quite room. The fluff of my dressing gown snagged on the matting like Velcro.

'I was thinking about that poem. The one about Father Christmas coming down the chimney while everyone is asleep?' Jake was talking perfectly normally, as though we were having a face-to-face conversation. 'Superficially creepy, and any other time a big bloke breaking into your house at night would be an arrestable offence, but I guess we can let that go, as it's Christmas. The kids could act it out and we could have a narrator.'

'Do you mean *The Night Before Christmas*?' Actually, that wasn't a bad idea. Fairly short, not too many parts, and Alexandra Houghton, whose mother drove a Range Rover and, I suspected, gave her private tuition, had been playing the part of narrator since she was in Year Three. 'Reception could be sugar plums, I suppose. Or mice. Sugar plums would probably be better, less sewing, because tails are always a problem. They stand on the ends and pull them off.'

There was another moment of quiet, which gave me the opportunity to

properly appreciate the ridiculousness of our situation, discussing the Christmas play through a slot in my front door, whilst I lay on the floor with blood slowly seeping down my cheek, trying to pretend this was normal.

‘I don’t know it *that* well,’ Jake finally admitted. ‘Just the bit about “Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night”. Is that in it? Or am I thinking about something else? Anyway. Something to think about.’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you *sure* you’re all right?’

As I was lying right up against the door, and my dressing gown was acting as a very effective draught excluder, if I *hadn’t* been all right there was no physical way he would get into the house without shoving me back against the wall. ‘Positive.’ And then, through gritted teeth again, ‘thank you.’

‘You’re allowed *not* to be all right, you know.’ His voice was softer now. ‘It’s not an admission of anything.’

Oh, that’s where you are wrong, Mister Immingham. ‘I’ll be fine. I’ll have a look at *The Night Before Christmas*, maybe draw up a cast list, see if it’s practicable.’ I pushed my elbows underneath me to prop myself clear of the floor.

‘After you’ve done your marking, obviously.’ He sounded a bit curt now. Was he embarrassed about his persistence that I might need help?

‘Oh. Yes. After that, of course.’

The letterbox flap dropped and I heard him sigh, even through the door. ‘Goodnight, Lydia,’ he said, and it was said half-quietly, as though I wasn’t really meant to hear.

‘Goodnight, Mister Immingham,’ I replied, equally quietly. Whether he heard or not I wasn’t sure, but his footsteps were definitely audible as he headed back down the rough track, the squelch and suck of the covering layer of mud against his trendy trainers. I slid myself over to the sofa and used it to pull myself upright. I put a hand to my face and was slightly shocked when I realised that it wasn’t blood trickling down my cheek now. It was tears.

Chapter Three

October 30th

‘Miss, Miss!’ Thomas Hipgood’s hand was so high in the air that his bottom had left his seat. ‘Miss!’

‘Yes, Thomas?’ Jackie, my redoubtable teaching assistant, who had been working with Nathan Jemison (who needed some help in class, was under assessment for ASD, but a complete wizard on the football field), went over. I carried on writing on the whiteboard. *CONSTELLATIONS*. Their homework was to look at the night sky and try to identify the Great Bear.

‘Not you, Miss, *other* Miss! Miss!’ Thomas was on his feet now, his hand wobbling with eagerness.

‘What is it?’ I turned back around.

‘Why is it a bear, Miss? My dad says it’s called the Plough, but it doesn’t look like a plough either, does it?’

‘It’s supposed to look like an old-fashioned plough, Thomas. Let’s see.’ I flicked through the computer until I found a picture of an ox pulling a wooden plough and put it up on the screen. ‘Like that’.

There was a general snort of disbelief. These were mostly farming children, and even those from the town had seen enough heavy-duty equipment rumbling past the school gate to know that this thing bore as much resemblance to a plough as I did to Zoella.

‘Why’s it got a cow on it?’ Rory asked. ‘Cows can’t pull ploughs, that’s stupid. They’d fall over.’

‘My grandad’s got horses that pull a plough sometimes,’ Rebecca Francis put in.

‘Well, horses aren’t like cows, are they? Horses pull carts. Cows don’t. ‘Cos that would be mental.’

I opened my mouth to start a small sub-lesson on the history of farming, which might not come under the heading of The Universe but was clearly going to come as an eye-opener to the iPhone generation, when there was a brief tap at the door and Jake appeared.

‘Hello you lot,’ he said.

The hero worship radiated off my class and filled the room much like the

smell of chips from the dining hall was doing. ‘Hello Mister Immingham!’ they chanted. Even Nathan looked up and smiled.

‘I just need to borrow Miss Knight for a moment, if that’s all right?’ He spoke as if asking the class’s permission, but he was really asking Jackie, who blushed slightly at the eye contact. I didn’t know why.

I raised an eyebrow at him and looked at my whiteboard, but he ignored me, so I looked hopefully at Jackie. She misread my hope completely. ‘Of course. We’ll get on with drawing our Night Skies, won’t we?’ Her tone could only be described as pert. Clearly another one under the spell of Jake Immingham and his floppy hair. I scowled at her but she gave me a bright smile and came to the front of the class. ‘He’s lush,’ she whispered to me as I handed her the remote control for the computer projector. ‘You should so give him a go.’

‘Don’t you start,’ I whispered back.

‘Wouldn’t dare.’ But she wagged her eyebrows at me as I picked up my bag and followed Jake out of the classroom. We passed his room, which surprised me. I’d thought he needed my help with one of his class, but they were all head-down, enthusiastically and quietly working through something in their books and, I had to admit it but only to myself, I was impressed. Year Six, particularly, were a lively bunch, so to see them all so engaged was surprising. I wondered if he’d sedated them somehow.

‘They’re drawing designs for the Christmas decorations they’re going to make,’ he said, filling the quiet that lay between us as we walked down the corridor. ‘Alan is keeping an eye on them. Anyway. I thought kidnapping you was the best way to get you to slow down long enough for us to talk about this play business.’ He stopped at the door to Alan’s office. ‘It’s only going to be for a couple of minutes, you don’t need to panic.’

‘I wasn’t panicking.’ To prove it I stepped into the office.

‘Just to be clear, I was using the term “kidnap” in its figurative sense.’ Jake followed me in. ‘Everyone knows you’re here and everything, which would be a rubbish kidnap attempt, if you think about it.’

‘Are you trying to “put me at my ease” or something?’ I leaned against Alan’s desk. As ever it was strewn with papers and his computer smelled of burning electrical components. There was a headed letter under my hand and I couldn’t help but notice it came from the White Rose home. ‘Because you don’t need to bother.’

‘Really?’ He slouched half in the doorway. ‘Whenever you see me you get this kind of “hunted” thing going on, as if you think I’m peering through your bedroom window at night. Which I’m not, obviously,’ he added quickly. ‘I mean, you can check with Mrs Dobson. In every night by six for dinner, otherwise she’d refuse to feed me. Actually, she probably wouldn’t, and I’d find her sliding sandwiches under my bedroom door, but that’s beside the point. I just want you to feel less . . . whatever it is you feel. How’s the face?’

I didn’t want to, but my hand rose up to touch my cheek as though I was a marionette and he was pulling my string. ‘Fine.’ It was still slightly sore but the bruising had gone down in the last couple of days. ‘The play?’ The letter under my hand contained words like ‘so looking forward’ and ‘some residents with no family’. It couldn’t have invoked more guilt without actually having been slightly burned at the edges, and with a few tear-stains on the page. Its mere presence was like having an injured puppy in the room.

Jake made a movement, as though he had been about to lay a finger on my injured cheek, but then went back to his leaning against the doorframe. ‘All right, I get the message. I’m going to stop being nice to you now, just fair warning. I’ve only got so much niceness in me and it’s severely eroded by ten- and eleven-year-olds on a daily basis, so it will be a relief, actually, not to have to try to be pleasant to someone who clearly wants me packed up in a shoe box and sent home.’

His tone was perfectly pleasant, but the words stung. ‘I don’t need you to be nice to me. Civil will do. Now, about the play.’

‘Actually Lydia, even civility is straining a bit under the weight of your obvious dislike, but hey ho, professional to the last, I’ve been reading *The Night Before Christmas* and I’ve done a bit of a cast list, thought you should give it a look over before I suggest it to the kids. Nothing radical, but I thought we ought to get things moving.’ He was looking away now, staring out at Alan’s unprepossessing view of the PE equipment shed. There was a set to his shoulders, an almost defensive angle under the approved ‘teacher’ shirt. I’d often wondered if male teachers all bought their clothes at the same shop; there was a similarity to them that bordered on the uniform. He actually sounded more hurt than anything, when I considered his words. I wondered why, I hadn’t really been anything other than factual.

He’d typed the cast list. I was impressed, it showed a level of preparation that I was unused to outside my own work. ‘Rory for the lead man, yes, I

think he could do that. Sugar plums, oh, I see you've got reindeer, that's nice.' I was half speaking to myself as I ran my eye down the list, then, 'Oh.'

'Yes, I thought it might be nice for Alexandra to have an actual part. She told me she was bored with always being the narrator and she wanted to do something where she could dance. She has, apparently and not altogether surprisingly, got her own tap shoes.'

'But you've put me as narrator.'

Jake looked at me. 'Yes. Problem?'

'I don't go on stage. I do the backstage stuff. Mopping up the sugar plums. Straightening the reindeer antlers, that sort of thing.' I knew he was watching me but I kept my eyes on the piece of paper. 'Getting Father Christmas out on cue.'

'Irina can do that though, can't she? If we have Reception as sugar plums, then Year One and Two can be the children all snug in their beds — I thought a bit of theatrical stretching and yawning first — so there won't be a lot of wrangling.'

'What about you?'

'I'm props, costume and technical. Lights and sound and so forth. You'll be fine, Lydia. You've got a lovely speaking voice, very Radio Four, and we need someone who can enunciate over the sound of "there's my mummy", phones going off because they weren't switched to silent, and twenty screaming toddlers. Sorry if I sound a bit jaded there but did my PGCE in a primary with six hundred pupils and the nativity from hell.' He gave me a sideways smile. 'I sort of envisaged you just off centre stage, reading from a big book?'

I put the paper down, firmly. It covered the letter from the White Rose home. 'I don't go on stage. If I really have to be the narrator, and I would only do it under protest, I can narrate from the wings.'

'No, you'd be all muffled.'

'I can enunciate. As you said. Now, if that's everything covered, I need to get back to my class.'

'But I . . .'

'Or maybe we would be better getting Alexandra to do it?'

'I've sort of promised her that she could be the moon. I thought a quick tippetty tap across the stage would be okay and not too irritating. I think she's got ideas of a full-on routine, jazz hands and everything, but we haven't got

time for that, plus the reindeer will be getting impatient.'

I got to the doorway, where he was still propped against the frame. 'So you've already discussed this with your class? Without asking me first?' I straightened my back to bring me nearer to his height. 'That wasn't very fair, was it?' He smelled nice, my nose told me. A smell I wasn't used to; not the normal pencil sharpenings and Plasticine smell that we carried with us at all times, marking us out as primary teachers as surely as if we'd worn badges. His smell was sharp and clean and made me think of fresh air and running through fields on a windy day. The thought jabbed me in the ribs and startled my breath. 'I have to get back.'

'Of course.' He moved to one side to let me get past, and the scent bubbled up behind his words. I'd never be able to hear anyone say 'of course' again without the memory of that outdoorsy sort of smell coming back to haunt me. 'Just thought I'd give you a quick heads-up, Lydia. We'll start work on it next week, maybe during English? A proper read-through and casting and everything? And I want you to notice that I'm still being civil and polite here, although every line of your body seems to say that you want to hit me?'

I had to smile at that. 'I wouldn't hit you.'

'Pelt me with whiteboard markers then.' He gave what might have been a small grin.

'I don't not like you,' I said it quietly. 'I just think we should be professional. Because we work together, it doesn't mean we have to be plaiting one another's hair and comparing Fingerlings.'

The grin got just the tiniest bit wider. 'You really do need to mix more with people over the age of nine. And anyway, that's not really true is it? You're friends with Irina. And you're wonderful to the kids, and they're your *job*. In fact, you *love* the kids, I've seen you with them, remember.'

'Children are different.'

There was a moment of silence. Well, as near to silence as one can ever get in a school; there were the usual, distant raised voices, the whine of the photocopier, the outside hum of a hedge trimmer. In the office, just Jake and me, it was quiet. I picked up the cast list again, and between my fingers, the pages crackled.

It was a situation that begged one of us to speak, but neither of us did, and I squeezed past him, him and his outdoor smell and his sportsman frame,

and went back to my class.

Chapter Four

November 13th

At lunch, I was on playground duty. Jackie and our solitary dinner lady, Mrs Andrews, were on the far side of the playhouse, administering summary justice to the Year Sixes who were, once again, preventing access for the younger ones. I took a slow walk around the raised flower beds and wondered what they were doing in there. Running a poker school, possibly, although it was more likely just another of the wars of general possession that seemed to thread through the whole village, like gang warfare on a minor, and largely middle-class, scale. Lots of huffy garden-fence-moving and I suspected the local Planning Officer had *Heavington* written on his wall in black marker pen, with a 'Here Be Dragons' legend. We were close enough to the North York Moors National Park for the Buildings Regulations people to have to come out in pairs in unmarked cars to check up on illicit double-glazing installations. Ruthless politeness and exemplary manners stood in for machine guns and machetes and you lived to regret upsetting the Neighbourhood Watch, but it meant the village remained slightly feudalistic and impeccably picturesque.

Because of all this, strangers were rare, which was why I noticed the man standing near the front gate. Not *too* near, not hackle-raisingly near. Not near enough to the Year Ones who were pretending to be horses across the hopscotch square to make me step in, but near enough to draw my attention. He was young, fair-haired and he had one of those wide-featured faces, with a large mouth and eyes that smiled and always get called 'open'. It was wasted on me. I didn't trust any unknown adult within a hundred metres of my children. And I raised an eyebrow at a fair few known ones as well.

'Can I help you?'

The man came closer to the gate. 'I'm looking for the White Rose Retirement Home?' He gave me a grin. 'I'm thinking of reserving myself a place.'

I didn't smile back. 'Back along the lane and turn right. It's the big house on your left, you can't miss it. There's a nameplate up on the gate.'

The man shivered. He was wearing a city raincoat, great at keeping out

drizzle, but not much use against the east wind which battered against our neck of the woods like a bear trying to gain access to honey. ‘Bit chilly, isn’t it?’

I was wearing my fluffy grey jacket, the one that Rory said made me look like a pimp. I could only hope he didn’t really know what a pimp was. The careers teacher at the local secondary was in for a shock when he met Rory. ‘It’s November.’ Then I turned back to the playground. Sara Cowton was in charge of the whistle for the end of playtime this week, and she was draconian on timekeeping.

‘My grandmother is moving in. To the White Rose,’ the man said, behind me. ‘And my brother and his wife are moving to the village. So my niece might be joining the school.’

I didn’t turn around. ‘Tell them to make an appointment to look round. Any time.’

I resisted the urge to look back over my shoulder to see if he went off in the direction of the White Rose, but the electrified feeling in my backpack of tension told me that he was still watching me, as I went round the side of the building to the children’s entrance to wait for them to come in. It wasn’t often these days that I had to deal with someone I didn’t know. One of the joys of living in such a small place, everyone knew you and you knew everyone and even the driver that brought my weekly online groceries was the same small, semi-retired man every time. We lived in a little pocket of familiarity, and I liked it.

A brief flash of memory. University. My flat, on the sixth floor, full of people coming and going, laughter and parties. *Fun*. When had I last had fun? Oh, Irina had tried to get me to go to a concert with her, and I’d briefly entertained the idea and we’d enjoyed the planning, but in the end . . .

‘Miss! Miss! Mister Immingham wants to know if we can start doing the Christmas play!’ Timothy Grace and Imogen Wills bounced up in front of me. ‘He’s got the book and I want to be one of the mice!’

‘The mice are the creatures that aren’t doing anything, Imogen. It’s not much of a part.’ I turned, just once, before I rounded the corner, as they led the way into school. The man was still near the gate, looking as though he’d started to walk away but had been interrupted. He wasn’t looking at us, but down at the ground, still huddled in his town coat. I wondered why he’d come to the village instead of his brother who was moving here, but reasoned

with myself he'd probably come to visit his grandmother and check the place out.

It would be nice, I thought, as Timothy and Imogen name-checked every character in *The Night Before Christmas* with varying degrees of desirability, to have some new starters. The school was dangerously low on numbers, and without our influx from the town, the villagers alone weren't enough to keep us open. Alan talked up our role as a community focus, the fact that the school buildings were used by lots of groups from the WI (who were critically low in membership themselves) to a local writing group (who, in contrast, seemed to gain members every week. If the WI set up a writing group I was fairly sure they could attain stasis) and, so far, he was managing to keep the Local Authority from closing us down. I'd got the impression that this Christmas play, providing, as it would, an entertainment for the White Rose home, was another of his measures to help keep us all from having to relocate. I could practically hear him, bouncing into the council offices with his slightly stained tie flapping, announcing that Heavington School was such a public asset that we were within a whisker of a visit from royalty and a Lottery grant.

Oh dear. We really *were* going to have to do this Christmas play, weren't we?

We spent the afternoon casting the major parts, working on a little song for the sugar plums to sing as they danced about, and wondering how on earth we were going to get eight lots of reindeer costumes. Irina suggested two children each, like pantomime horses, but since nobody wanted to be the back-end, and Jonah North, Year Five's resident stand-up comedian, made up a mildly rude song about heads up bums, we decided to go with eight children wearing antlers and brown clothes.

I actually found myself admiring Jake during the casting session. He was firm but humorous, didn't react to Jonah's repeated chanting of 'floppy bums' with anything other than gentle exasperation, while Irina and I had to go and stand in the corridor for a moment until our composure returned. He had Years Five and Six sorted into those who want to act and those who would rather be offstage providing backing singers for the Sugar Plum Song, whilst I was still dealing with the Year Three wrangling about who wanted to be the child who stretched and yawned as they got into bed. There was a degree of stropping going on in the lower levels of Year Two, and I had the

feeling that the stockings would not so much be ‘hung by the chimney with care’ as flung in the general direction of our mock chimney breast amid flouncing and competitive arm-folding, as I helped Irina assure everyone that, when it came to Christmas stockings, size was definitely not everything.

Outside the windows, the afternoon crept towards evening and leaves began to hit the glass with a regularity that spoke of another autumnal storm flying in. Our little enclave, snuggled into the shoulders of the moors, was only twenty miles from the coast, and the weather came direct from Siberia, sometimes without a forwarding address. Farmers fetched the sheep down early here, and the cows came into the yard, leaving the fields as stretched greyish expanses, broken by pools of rainwater which would be icing over any day now. We didn’t have the worst weather in the world by any means, but in terms of unmitigated drabness, we had the edge. Days came late and left early, like reluctant office workers.

‘Right,’ Jake’s briskness made me look away from the weather, and I noticed the gathering mothers restlessly circling the collecting ring of the playground. Our casting session had taken most of the afternoon and it was nearly home time. ‘Year Five and Six, go into the classroom and collect your things.’

‘He is so masterful,’ Irina whispered in my ear. ‘I don’t know why you don’t like him, Lydia. He would make a very good man for you.’

‘No thanks, he’s not making anything for me, I’ve seen the clay dog he made at the beginning of term. Very unrealistic bits break off and the legs are different lengths.’

A moment of quiet and then Irina laughed, loudly enough to make her class stop twirling and stare at her. ‘You need to get a life, Lydia.’ And then she raised one hand in the air, which was her signal to her children to be quiet and listen to her, which they did, and she shepherded them back to their room to collect reading books, lunch boxes and small bags of damp knickers.

‘Miss,’ Rory sidled up to me as I led my class out of the hall. ‘What’s a nightcap? Mister Immingham said I need a nightcap. Dad has a nightcap every night and mum says he smells of booze, do I have to smell of booze?’

‘No booze, Rory.’ I said. ‘We will talk about costumes another day, all right? Only your dad’s here to collect you and you don’t want to keep him waiting.’ I looked into the playground at the tweed-jacketed figure of Rory’s dad, a prematurely grey-haired man with the stoop of one who spends a lot of

time with dough. I'd never noticed him smelling of booze, he normally smelled of flour and jam. But then, I'd learned to take a lot of what the kids said with a pinch of salt, otherwise I'd still believe that Aurora Grace lived in the old pig house and the baby had been flown in by jumbo jet. The Graces' mother was an author of children's books, and I think the children had got whimsicality by default.

'That all went better than I expected.' Jake was pulling on his coat. 'I thought there would be fights over who got to be Father Christmas, especially between the twins, but Timothy seems quite happy to let Oscar do it.'

I watched the children spilling out into the darkening air. They were all so full of life, full of potential, and I felt my past dragging at my heel like an anchor. Remembered how I'd been as a child; happy and trusting and energetic, so surrounded by the possibilities that the world had to offer. And now. With the weight of what had gone still unbalancing me. 'Timothy is a reindeer,' I said, only half my mind on the play. 'He said his mum wouldn't know it was him if he had a beard.'

'But he's quite happy for her not to recognise his brother?' Jake pulled his sleeves down. 'That figures.'

'And eight children isn't going to be too many?' Irina passed through, parcelling off her last child to its mother. 'We are not going to have eight beds on the stage, there isn't room.'

'We'll just lay them down under duvets or sleeping bags,' Jake said. 'As long as Father Christmas steps carefully and we can persuade Rory not to breakdance across the stage, we'll be fine. But they all want to stretch and make a performance of getting into bed, so it might take a while. We'll do a read-through next week, get some basic timings down.' He glanced at me and I was curiously aware that we were alone now. Outside all was bustle and chatter, but in this room, with the dark knocking at the windows, it felt very quiet. 'Are you sure you won't narrate?'

I just shook my head. 'Imogen will be far better than me.' To forestall any further questions, I began collecting my things together. I would rather have stayed, fiddled about in my room for a bit longer in the particular quiet that an empty school has, but I was a little bit worried that Jake might hang around and try to talk to me.

'It's an odd job that you do, for someone who doesn't want to be looked at.' Jake wasn't looking at me now. He'd got a carrier bag filled with what

looked like school books and was checking the contents. ‘You’re the centre of attention in the classroom.’

Children don’t judge. They see and they accept, and that’s all there is to it. Their normal is, well, normal. Besides, what else can I do? ‘I like teaching,’ I said, and my voice was stiff and formal, my interview voice. Hadn’t I answered this question before? ‘It’s all I ever wanted to do and I was in the middle of teacher training when . . .’ I stopped. He was looking at me now, focusing on me completely and I realised what made him such a good teacher. It felt as though a bomb could go off just outside the door and it wouldn’t distract him. It was like having a laser pointer directly in my face, I couldn’t move or look away. Along my back the tension wriggled and shifted but, to my surprise, it didn’t rise up to strangle me. It grew and tugged, but then it settled. It didn’t go, but neither did it threaten to pull me over backwards.

Jake kept looking. His dark eyes never left my face and I had the curious impression that he was somehow fishing out my secrets, luring them to the surface like trout from a deep pool. It didn’t hurt as much as I expected. ‘You — ’ he began.

‘Mister Immingham, my mum says can she talk to you about costumes for the play!’ Timothy hurtled back in through the door and Jake switched off the tight focus on my face and turned with a grin. ‘Course she can. I’m just coming, Tim. Tell her I’m on my way.’ Then, as soon as the boy had launched himself back out into the playground, and whilst he was halfway out himself, he said, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course.’ I stood up straight. ‘Of course I am.’

‘No “of course” about it, y’know. You’re allowed to be ...’ and then he met my eye and my expression clearly told him that, however fit and toned his body may be, however broad his shoulders and attractive his dark hair and eyes, this was as far into my head as he went. ‘Okay. Sorry. Yes, Tim, I’m coming!’

And then he was gone, out into the land of social chit-chat, of careless comments and throwaway observations, leaving me standing alone in the bright emptiness.

Chapter Five

November 25th

It was late November and the weather was definitely drawing in now. Winter was tiptoeing ever closer, at the moment just brushing us with the edge of its cloak and crisping the early mornings, but soon the frosts would last all day and the sky would alternate from iron-grey to diamond-blue without any notable change in temperature. The hills stood out dramatically, as though they'd been cut out of card and stuck down onto the clouds that backed them and the air smelled of smoke and cold metal. At school my class had finished the constellation project just in time to start Christmas crafts — we were cutting snowflakes out of paper and studying how they were all different, as occasional sleet showers blew in and heaped white pellets in all the doorways.

Inside my cottage I'd got the wood burner blazing, but because my walls were mostly metal, the heat dissipated quickly and I needed to wear thick socks and layers of fleece at all times. At night, ice sometimes formed on the insides of the windows and the water in the toilet had once frozen completely solid, which had been disconcerting, but I'd got used to winter here now. A change, yes, from the city, with its all-year-round temperatures, where heating systems got started in September as if to smooth out any change in the seasons. Only the flickering colours of the trees that lined the roads and the occasional wind skirling around the high buildings hinted at winter's approach there. Here, we were left in no doubt. Especially if, like me, you lived in a metal box with not much insulation.

This Saturday was the day of the much anticipated Christmas Fair. Anyone who made anything in Heavington, or grew anything or even just had a steady hand with colouring in, took a table in the school hall. There were stalls of knitted goods, cupcakes, occasionally knitted cupcakes, jigsaws, everything you could think of that might go in a bath or shower and the obligatory 'guess the weight of the Christmas cake' competition. The children had their own stall selling a mixture of indeterminate shapes covered in glitter, often with a robin on top, which they'd made in Art and balls covered in cotton wool, also usually with robin adornment, which were

Christmas tree baubles. The main focus, though, was vast structures on wire netting frames, cast in plaster of Paris and painted to resemble tiny villages in the snow. It went without saying that these were also liberally dusted in glitter and scattered with robins, and marketed as ‘table centrepieces,’ which really only worked if you had a table the size of Belgium, but they sold these to fond parents and grandparents for one pound fifty pence a pop and everyone went home happy. We teachers bought up any leftover stock, and each year I’d been here my little tree had gained more and more random decorations, and my dining table resembled a relief map of the Alps done in glitter, but the children were delighted that their handiwork had sold and the money went towards next year’s art supplies, so all was well. And it wasn’t as though I had anywhere else to go on a grey Saturday in November, was it?

I wrapped up well. Although the school thermostat would be set somewhere between roasting and the furnaces of Hell, the walk would be cold, so I added a scarf, hat (that I’d bought at last year’s sale and had been knitted by someone with more enthusiasm than skill with the Number 8’s) and mittens before I fought the door open and stepped out into the wind. As I struggled to close the door behind me, a car drove past, slowly, headlights slicing the grey afternoon into organised segments. It passed me, went a few more yards, and then stopped, engine ticking, and a window slid down.

‘Hello! We met outside the school a couple of weeks ago! How are you?’

It was the blond-haired, friendly-faced man who’d asked the way to the White Rose. I pulled the door against the wind. For some reason I didn’t want him to see inside my house. ‘Hello,’ I said, stiffly.

‘Nice place you’ve got. Very quiet, shouldn’t think you get much passing traffic.’ He’d put his head out of the window to talk to me and the wind was chopping his hair into strips and trying to push it back into the car. ‘It really is a lovely village.’

I couldn’t really think of anything to say. General chit-chat wasn’t something I had any practice in. My class tended towards focused comments or very detailed interrogations, they didn’t really do small talk, and most adults wanted specific answers. So I just smiled and hoped he’d drive on.

‘My grandmother loves the home. Says she has a nice view.’ He was trying hard, I’d give him that, but there was really not much I could say in reply, was there? What did he want? Me to agree that, yes, his grandmother had a nice view? I’d only been in White Rose once, to take some flowers that

had been delivered to school by mistake, and I was in no position to pass comment on the view, lovely though I was sure it was. So I settled for shrugging deeper into my coat and staring at the ground. It was marked with hoof-prints where the metalled road surface turned into bridleway and horses had to stand for their riders to open the hunting gate. The recent frost had set the prints hard in the mud, like handprints in clay, which reminded me that I had to get to the sale, before all the identifiable crafts sold out and I was left with the oddly-shaped gourds.

‘So. Are you heading into the village? Can I give you a lift? It’s a cold day.’ The passenger door opened and a waft of mint-scented air puffed out, to be swept away on the breeze. ‘I’d like to chat more about the school.’

I felt the hair on my neck prickle. It could have been a warning, after all, never get in a car with a stranger was up there front and centre in the lessons about personal safety that we gave from Reception onwards. Or it could have been the chill wind getting between my scarf and my hat. But, either way, I didn’t want him looking at me. ‘No, thanks. I’m fine.’

‘Are you sure?’ And, again, that warm, mint-smelling air, that promised comfort. Wouldn’t it be nicer to drive the half-mile to school than to slither and slide along the road edge, where the fallen leaves of autumn were crisping into a satin layer of slipperiness? But I’d have to get in and out of the car . . .

‘Honestly, I’m fine.’ I turned back to the door and pretended to be doing something fiddly with my key in the lock. In reality the door had locked as soon as it had swung shut, but he didn’t know that and I definitely didn’t want him to watch me start walking. Maybe I could go back inside, pretend I’d forgotten something? But as I scabbled against the old Yale and twisted and turned the big key, he waved a hand and the car smoothly drove away towards the village, being swallowed into the grey light that was filtering down from the sky. I watched until the tail-lights turned the slight corner, and then set off myself, wondering why the man was here again and why his brother and family hadn’t come to the school yet to introduce themselves. Surely they’d want their child to start at the beginning of the spring term, when we went back after the Christmas holidays? Unless they were waiting until summer to move, which, looking around me at the dew-dotted bare hedges that lined the road, would be sensible. Winter survival in Yorkshire was a learned knack, and if the family were moving from the south, then this

area wouldn't start looking its best until May.

I meandered my way along the lane until I reached the school. Inside, the lights were on, laying bright tracks along the misty road for me to follow, until I reached the front door. Two members of the village committee charged me twenty pence to go into my own classroom, where I promptly walked into Jake, wearing a rugby shirt and different chinos. He looked like an off-duty sports commentator.

'Hello Lydia.'

We were buffeted by an assortment of over-excited, knee-level children — the local playgroup had come to visit Father Christmas in his grotto, or rather Alan, in an alarming beard and a red suit which fitted more snugly each passing year. When the initial tide had run down to a single three-year-old, he carried on. 'I was thinking we could do a dress rehearsal of the play next week?'

I nodded. 'We ought to start rehearsing, yes.'

He moved a little closer. 'Are you all right? You look a bit shaken up.'

I was just opening my mouth to deny anything was wrong, when I saw the car driver again. Now he was cruising around the stalls, picking up handmade soaps and engaging the stallholders in bright, animated chat. He'd got a holly wreath tucked under one arm and an expression of one who was enjoying themselves completely, which was so bizarrely out of place that it made my eyes widen. Anyone over four feet tall who was enjoying this overheated room full of random crafts had to be either starved of human company or on hard drugs. The under-four-foot fraternity had Father Christmas and his £1 grotto presents to thank for their enthusiasm. I saw Sarah Cowton's mum, who helped in the kitchens at White Rose when she wasn't selling stamps, stop to say hello to him, and it reinforced my feeling of weirdness. She must have met him when he went to visit his grandmother, and the fact that someone else clearly found him pleasant enough to speak to made me wonder why I couldn't be nicer to him. Seriously, what *was* my problem, really? 'There's this man . . .' I started, and then stopped myself. It was none of Jake's business. I could look after myself. 'No. I'm fine. Just came in to look for some Christmas presents.'

'Your family are mostly overseas aren't they?' Jake leaned himself against the wall, hands in the pockets of the chinos. He looked relaxed and comfortably at home, exchanging the odd smile with members of his class as

they leaped from stall to stall, fuelled by pick'n'mix sweets and the excitement of seeing their head teacher with an unnecessary pillow down his front, handing out toys. 'You'll have a bit of a rush on to make last posting day.' The skin down my back twitched. 'How do you know my family are overseas?' My parents live in southern France and my sister is in Australia, so yes, fair enough. But I don't talk about them. Why would I? Who would care? Only me, that they aren't close enough to pop round to for tea and cake and a casual chat about life, but Martha works in environmental research and mum and dad like the heat, so it all seems sensible on the surface. And I told them I'm fine, I can manage, I don't need them. But I still slightly resented the fact that they believed me.

'Irina.'

Oh, that girl was so dead. I narrowed my eyes in the direction of her classroom, but she wasn't here, she'd taken her children into York to meet a more believable Santa. I turned my suspicious gaze onto Jake. 'Have you two been discussing me?'

'No.' He gave me a grin. 'Why? Have you got hidden secrets?'

'If they weren't hidden, they wouldn't be secrets, would they? They'd be . . . whatever the opposite of secrets is. Facts. And no, I haven't, I just don't like being talked about.' Understatement. The thought of people talking about me, discussing me, made my flesh creep even more than the thought of someone walking behind me. It felt — *wrong*. Even more wrong to think of it being Irina, who I trusted, and Jake who . . . who . . . *who's the problem. The reason you can't even think about another man.*

'Okay.' And he nodded his head, as though he was filing my observation away for later study. 'Well, don't worry, she didn't give away any of your non-secrets, we were just talking generally about Christmas plans. Are you staying in the village this year?'

'I stay at home, yes.'

'I expect your hut is very Christmassy.' The twitch to his lips stopped the sudden offence I was about to take.

'Yes. For a hovel it's very seasonal. Now, I'd better get on, all the best lumps of plaster will be gone if I don't get moving.'

Jake looked over at the school stall, where Oscar Grace was carefully counting change out to Mrs Wilkinson, who had just bought a small hunk of tree liberally sprinkled with fake snow, glitter and a dusting of robins. 'I think

that ship may have sailed,' he said quietly. 'If you get the three decorations in that box, I'll take the rest. Just watch out for the weight of the damn things. I swear, next year we're doing cards. Small ones.'

'I'll do my best.' I gave him an answering smile, because I knew him well enough now to know that the children's enthusiasm for plaster of Paris and plastic robins would win him round again next year. Designing a school Christmas card was nowhere on the excitement scale, when you could be making your own winter wonderland, and the fact we had to start them in October so the plaster had a chance to dry out, just extended the season of hysterical exhilaration.

'Go on then.' Jake gave my shoulder the merest hint of a push and the touch of his hand, even through my big coat, made me realise that it had been a long time since anyone had made physical contact with me. I was always so careful. So separate. 'Before I change my mind and leave you with all of it.'

'You wouldn't dare. After all, I live in a hut, remember? Too many 'table decorations' and the foundations would give way. I'd fall into a huge Christmassy hole and nobody would find me for six weeks, I'd be living on glitter and glue.' And then I had to turn away before my face gave away what my words nearly had. That fear. Fear of something happening and nobody noticing, nobody coming to look for me until it was too late, and the horror almost unbalanced me. It sent me across the room faster than I would normally go, and I ended up lurching into the back of the blond-haired smiling man, who turned around as I arrived and nearly had me smeared across his front.

'Hello again! We must stop meeting like this!' He took my arm to steady me, and dropped the holly wreath he'd been holding. 'It's Lydia, isn't it? Forgive me, I heard you in conversation with your friend . . . my name's Gareth. Gareth Graham. That's my full name, it's not like a hyphenated first name, blame my parents. How are you?'

I thought for a moment he was going to shake my hand, but he just juggled all his purchases and then slowly bent to pick up the wreath. I didn't want to answer his question as to how I was. He was friendly and chatty and personable, but I just didn't. And, when I looked up and across the crowded hall, Jake was watching me with an eyebrow raised, which made me feel even more uncomfortable. 'I'm . . . yes, I'm fine. Please excuse me, I need to have a word with one of my pupils.'

Oscar Grace was an unlikely conversational saviour, but he would have to do, and I headed for the school stall with an alacrity that I wasn't sure was necessary. Gareth Graham might be a bit omnipresent, but in a village this size so was everyone else. You couldn't escape the same half-dozen people. Just popping into the post office for a stamp was fraught with fending off questions about the National Curriculum and school league tables, or tales of how the village school used to be one room next to the church, with liberal caning — and, apparently, none the worse for it. So if the same faces popping up in unlikely circumstances was perfectly normal, why was this man's recurrence making me nervous?

'I'll have these three decorations please, Oscar.' I picked up the box. 'One pound fifty pence each'.

Oscar's lips moved as he worked out my bill. Then, 'is that man your boyfriend, Miss?'

I sighed. The children had what I considered to be an unhealthy fascination with our lives outside the school. So far they'd had me practically married to every single man in the village, including Mrs Wilkinson's nephew, who was fifty and lived with his horses in an old barn. I'd once had a conversation with him over a gate, and the children were having a collection for our wedding before I got back into class.

'No. He's a man whose grandmother has come to live at the White Rose. He comes to visit her, I think.'

'He likes you though.' Oscar took my five-pound note and put it in the butter tub that was holding the takings. I was pleased to see that there were a good number of fivers and tenners in there already. Tables around the village would be groaning in anticipation. 'He's looking at you all the time.'

I resisted the urge to check. 'That's as maybe but he's not my boyfriend.'

'Mister Immingham likes you too. He said, he said he likes you.'

I couldn't even begin to imagine how the topic of Jake liking me might crop up with a bunch of ten-year-olds, so I didn't try. Sometimes the children would fire questions that sounded like a Mastermind round on LSD, you got used to it.

'Who's that man's grandma?' Oscar brought me back from sliding into a little bit of a Jake-related dream. 'My dad works at the White Rose sometimes, he says some of the ladies are old fusspots. Old. Fusspots,' he repeated, as though he liked the sound of the words. Oscar had a good dose of

his author mother's genes.

'Not sure. Anyway, I'd better get going home. We're going to try a dress rehearsal of the play on Monday, Oscar, so maybe you'd like to read through the book again over the weekend. And I'll ask Mr Roberts if we can borrow his beard for you,' I added in a conspiratorial tone, just in case any of the little children thought that Father Christmas really was hiding out in the small cleaning cupboard, unconvincingly decked out in tinsel. The under-fives lacked the critical faculty to wonder why a man with the whole of the Arctic Circle at his disposal would hang around with an industrial Hoover and the smell of Domestos. The magic of Christmas, I suppose.

I stared around for a moment. At the classroom and school hall, festooned with limp crepe paper and silver foil stars. At the big tree that I knew Alan would have spent the morning wrestling into place and decorating, probably co-opting Mrs Andrews in to help. At the excited faces of the children, comparing their early presents from Father Christmas or trying to get the lids off tiny pots of Play-Doh. The grey light of the coming night starting to curtain the windows from outside, making this little bright world seem even more self-contained and filled with potential.

I hated myself for seeing the rips in the paper chains and the dust on the stars. Hated that I couldn't just let myself go and throw myself into the almost tangible anticipation. I knew why I couldn't feel the magic, because I was too busy feeling sorry for myself, but somehow I just couldn't stop.

'Deep in thought?' It was Gareth Graham. Smiling blue eyes and such an appealing grin. It made me feel even worse about not getting the Christmas spirit. 'Christmas can be hard work, can't it?' He said it almost as though he could read what I felt, but then, it was probably obvious from my expression. 'Any chance I could offer you a cup of tea? I passed a tea shop on the way here, and it would be great to be able to pick your brains about the locality. For my brother, I mean, he can't get up here for a while so I'm scoping the place out for him and his family.'

I glanced across the room. Jake was talking to Mrs Wilkinson, who had practically cleared most of the stalls. She had four grown-up children and they had provided her with enough grandchildren that, for her, Christmas shopping had to start in August. She used the school fair to mop up those last presents and her bag bulged with miniature iced cakes and handmade soaps. If it had been me, I'd have wrapped them separately, but no doubt she knew

what she was doing.

Jake met my eye across the room and nodded. Then he looked at the big box tucked under my arm, grinned and gave me a sudden wink that sent me lurching, flustered and warm, towards the door, where Gareth was, yet again, waiting. ‘I ought to get home,’ I said, but my words were weak. Half of me wanted to go home, to light the fire and sit wrapped in fleeces, watching repeats of *Murder She Wrote* and marking last week’s homework. But the other half of me, the half that could feel the press of Christmas and the longing to get caught up in it all, wanted to sit somewhere steamy and eat mince pies. And, in this crazily busy room, with Jake chatting to a parent and laughing, I felt an echoing loneliness. Could it really be so bad to just sit and talk to someone? And if I couldn’t talk, really *talk*, to the man I wanted to talk to, then — why not? ‘But I suppose a quick cup of tea would be nice. And you can ask me anything about the village.’

‘Oh, I will.’ Gareth held the door open for me. ‘And I understand there’s a Christmas play in the offing? That sounds interesting.’

I found myself telling him about *The Night Before Christmas*, the casting and the costume dilemmas, almost as though I was trying to entertain him on the walk to the tea shop. And I wasn’t sure why, because his closeness still made that tension tickle between my shoulder blades, despite his floppy hair and his cheeky grin. I think it was something to do with the way he kept using my name, like it was a new toy that he was trying out to see if the wheels would stay on. It made me uncomfortable.

‘So, Lydia.’ We sat down at a table. Mrs Scott began making a pot of tea behind the counter, widening her eyes at me in question at the sight of Gareth. I just shrugged. He might be a bit over the top, but a scone is a scone and I was tired of my own cooking. ‘What brought you here to teach in this little school?’

‘I like it.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’ He leaned a little closer across the melamine, steam from the teapot wobbling the outline of his face. ‘What I mean is, what’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?’

I blinked.

‘Sorry, sorry, too much of a cliché? I just, well. You know.’ He looked down at his hands. They were very fine-boned and looked young, like a child’s hands. Like hands that had never done anything. ‘Anyway.’

‘Is your grandmother still enjoying the White Rose?’ I blurted out, then lifted my teacup to prevent my mouth from sabotaging the conversation any further. The thin china fizzled against my upper lip with the heat of the tea, and I forced down the inner cynic, who was trying to tell me that Gareth was chatting me up, with a mouthful of scone.

‘Er. Yes. Yes, thank you, she is.’ He looked confused for a moment, and started fiddling with the sugar lumps. ‘And my brother is very much looking forward to moving here. How many children do you teach?’

I gave him a potted history of the school as I knew it. Told him that we’d got thirty-four children in total, that the school might be under threat if we didn’t increase our numbers, that most of the children came in from beyond the village. And all the while it got darker outside, the windows grew steamier and we were the only customers. It was like being in a black-and-white film. I half expected a steam train to whistle outside and a lot of people wearing gabardine and hats to come in.

Eventually I stopped talking and ate the last of my scone. Gareth was smiling at me again. It was the sort of smile that says ‘I haven’t heard a word you’ve been saying, because I’ve been too busy watching your mouth move,’ and I felt that small icy finger poke my spine again. *Why am I even here? Because even tea with a serial killer is better than sitting alone? That’s complete bollocks . . . and even worse, Lydia, you are lying to yourself, because you know exactly why you came here. You wanted Jake to see you walk off with another man. You wanted, in some juvenile, Year Four way, to make him jealous. Poor Jake, who you can barely stand to have a conversation with — because you fancy him, and you know he will never want you, so you are distancing yourself as fast as you can.*

‘I’m sorry, Gareth, but I have to go.’ I stood up, hoping that he wouldn’t think that the blush was because of him. ‘I’ve got marking to do, and some reindeer antlers to sew on before Monday.’

He stood up too. ‘Then please let me give you a lift home. It’s dark and that road isn’t very safe to walk along. I mean, it must be slippery and you . . .’ he stopped. Flipped his glance down to the floor and then back to my face. ‘It must be difficult,’ he said.

‘I will be fine.’ I was glad to hear that my voice sounded more definite than I felt. But then, it was used to saying things I didn’t really mean. To keeping things at bay. ‘Thank you.’

‘Oh, but . . .’

‘Really. Why don’t you pop in and see your grandmother? You could take her the holly wreath, I’m sure she’d like it to put it up on her door.’ I’d got my ‘teacher’ tone on, I could hear it myself. That no-nonsense, we-are-going-to-do-as-I-say, voice that I usually reserved for my class when they got hyped up about something. Last time it had been when a small dog got loose in the playground and they’d all clustered by the window to watch its owner attempting to catch it. It had been amusing for three minutes, but then I’d had to get back to our World Map, and I’d had to wheel no-nonsense out for a good ten minutes before they’d started to concentrate again. Nathan had to go and sit in Alan’s office for the rest of the morning, he didn’t deal well with unexpected events.

‘I could. I suppose.’ There was a distinct Year Four sulky tone to Gareth’s voice now. ‘But can I see you again sometime?’

‘Less than a hundred people live in Heavington. You couldn’t miss me if you had your eyes closed and your arms strapped down.’ The clinging feeling that tightened my skin was guilt now, rather than suspicion, and the guilt was making me sharp. Did Gareth think I wanted him to date me? Or even that I was available to date? And all the time the creeping knowledge that I was only here because I couldn’t be with Jake Immingham and his strong shoulders, unruly hair and dark eyes, tainted the aftertaste of my delicious fruit scone with bitterness.

My own fault, of course. My own catch-22. I was rude to Jake because I liked him but I knew he would never want me, and the rudeness just proved to him that I wasn’t very nice, and therefore not the kind of woman he would ever want to be with. And so it circled. And so, I stayed alone. Because alone is better than pitied, alone is better than used as a warning — ‘Things might be tough, but at least you aren’t Lydia.’ To be seen as noble and self-disregarding, because you went out with someone like *me*. God, sometimes I was so self-pitying it even made me feel sick.

Gareth smiled that young, untroubled smile again. ‘I suppose I can’t,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘Well, if you’re sure you’re all right to get home, I shall, as they say, see you around.’

I let him leave first by a wide margin. I wanted to make sure that he wasn’t sitting outside in his car, waiting for me. Turning down a lift home would have been so much harder if he’d driven up alongside me, I would

have started to look churlish rather than independent, and, after all, I didn't want to alienate him totally. He might advise his brother against our school, and while one more child wasn't going to cause the Local Authority to admit that we were totally safe, it would be one more on the roll and one more lot of money in the school coffers. Once I considered it ought to be safe, I took my teacup and plate up to the counter, to save Mrs Scott the trip, and headed out into the dark of the winter afternoon.

There was nothing scary about Heavington in the dark, despite the lack of streetlights. The moon was full enough, even strained through the net of tree branches, that it lit the way back to my house. I set out past the little square of houses that formed the main village street, down the lane past the school. All the lights were out now and the cars had all gone. Mrs Wilkinson would have left most of the tidying up to do tomorrow, and gone home to watch the football. She'd be sitting there now, in the tiny cottage at the back of the playground, wrapping Christmas presents in front of the fire and yelling abuse at Chelsea when they scored, I could see the light on in her living room window from here.

Further down the lane lay the Queen Anne Manor House. White Rose as it was now known. Of course, it didn't front onto the lane like the plebeian dwellings of the rest of the village, it lay down the end of its driveway, which curled like a cat's tail around the building. Huge cedar trees bulked between it and the road, dark looming things in the night, on either side of the iron double gates, which stood open as I passed, but I couldn't see any cars. Didn't know whether Gareth really had gone to visit his grandmother, and I wasn't going to toddle down that loose gravelled drive to find out.

A few squares of light at some upstairs windows spoke of residents going about their business in their little self-contained flatlets, and the blaze and flicker from downstairs showed that the TV lounge was occupied too. I could just see the range of steps which led up to the front door, illuminated by a string of coloured lights which had been woven between the railings. They swung slightly in the breeze, but there was no sign of any activity other than that.

I walked on back to my home. The glow from White Rose was just visible from my doorway and it helped to see it and to know that there were other people out there in the world. Otherwise, the old village hall was isolated from all other buildings, and on some days when there was no

school, the only people I saw were the bobbing heads of riders as they trotted past or opened the bridlepath gate. They usually had their attention on their horses, but occasionally one would glance my way, make eye contact and then ride off, leaving me feeling even lonelier for the brief interaction.

The hall was still warm, but I lit the wood burner again anyway, more for the company of the flickering flame than anything else. Then I sat and listened to the owls on the roof, the steady drip of damp from the trees in the hedgerow, the crackle of the fire. After the noise and bustle of the Christmas Fair it should have been soothing, but today it only highlighted how alone I was out here, in a self-imposed isolation that I thought I enjoyed, but that I was increasingly coming to see as an extended sulk. The box of table decorations sat accusingly beside me with the smell of glue and plaster radiating off it as the warmth grew. It positively shouted that Christmas shouldn't be confined like this, it should be allowed to fill the whole house, but I couldn't bring myself to unpack it. I should have dotted the decorations around on the shelves, used them to show how I was getting in the Christmas spirit, along with my tasteful collections of pine cones and driftwood and artfully knitted hangings, but I couldn't.

Today's encounter with Gareth, his eagerness to chat and try to get to know me, had thrown up so many memories. So many doubts. So much regret. Because my life couldn't be the way I wanted it, would *never* be the life I had hoped for and half-planned, during those years of university and teacher training. Oh, I could have a sort of life, of course I could, I wasn't *dead*. But so much had been lost, and now . . . I looked around me. Now I should be counting my blessings instead of pining for a man I couldn't have and feeling creeped out by the man who showed any sign of wanting me.

I allowed myself an obligatory five-minute wallow, then blew my nose sharply and started on the pile of books I had to mark.

Chapter Six

December 15th

‘No, no, Jocasta, it’s fine!’ I tried my best soothing voice, but Jocasta would not be placated.

‘I *can’t* go to bed in my school uniform! Mummy says it’s not allowed.’

I sighed and tried to ignore Irina digging me in the ribs with her elbow. ‘Look. It’s just a dress rehearsal, you don’t have to . . . Rory! Rory, calm down!’

Jocasta wasn’t the only one to have forgotten her costume, and a kind of communal despondency was breaking out.

‘Do we have to brush our teeth? Only we have to at home. Miss, miss, where do we brush our teeth?’

Jake threw me a look over the heads of our cast. Along with despondency, it now looked as though we had an outbreak of literalism. ‘Alex, it’s a play. Not real life. Yes, you have to brush your teeth in real life but — you don’t see Captain America brush his teeth, do you?’

Alex frowned. ‘But you don’t see Captain America put his pyjamas on either,’ he said, reasonably. ‘So, so, maybe Captain America never goes to bed!’

‘Don’t be stupid.’ Rory bounced past, wiggling the hem of his nightshirt as though he was about to break into a Folies Bergère routine. ‘You don’t see him weeing either, and he must, otherwise he’d burst.’

I heard Jake’s intake of breath. Irina had her head in her hands now. ‘Okay,’ Jake said, slowly. ‘Maybe we should move on to the reindeer. Rory, let’s take it from “went to the window and threw up the sash”, shall we?’

Irina and I cleared the stage and Rory positioned himself at the cardboard window. ‘Ready!’ he said, cheerfully and unnecessarily.

‘Away to the window I flew like a flash.’

‘Can you speak up a bit, please, Imogen?’

‘Away to the window I flew like a flash,’ Imogen said again, at exactly the same, tiny, volume.

‘A bit more.’

Imogen repeated the line twice more, with no notable increase in noise.

Jake waved a hand and Rory, who obviously hadn't heard a word of the narration, 'threw up the sash' with such force that our cardboard frame tore at the top and the 'window' shot across the stage and hit one of the reindeer. As the reindeers' antlers flopped about on their headbands and looked more like ears, the sight of one of them dashing across the stage to complain about the affront to his dignity on being smacked with a paper window reduced Irina and I nearly to tears of helpless laughter. This first dress rehearsal was not going well.

By the end of the read-through, several of the sugar plums were bored and wandering about, Imogen had dropped to a whisper, Rory was dancing around in his nightshirt singing 'Despacito' with made up words, and Jake, Irina and I were stretching our tethers about as far as they would go.

'Remind me again who said this was a good idea?' Jake cued up Oscar and his sleigh for the final scene again, trying to stop the Grace twins from shoving each other, whilst the flopping effect of the antlers was driving Irina and me into tired hysterics as we marshalled the remainder of the cast to the back of the makeshift stage to wave at Father Christmas as he rode past at the front.

'Alan,' Irina and I said together.

'Any chance we can ply the White Rose crew with whisky so they don't notice the chaos?' Jake stood back. 'And you two aren't helping. You're not supposed to giggle like loons all the time.'

'Sorry. It's the antlers,' I said, trying to hide my sniggering from the children. 'They look . . . well . . .'

'They are looking like floppy willies,' Irina whispered, which set me off again, and Jake threw his hands in the air.

'Okay everyone, I think that's enough rehearsing for today. Get changed and then back to class, all of you.'

Irina went to help the sugar plums change out of their costumes. The rest of the children piled through into Jake's classroom, which we'd used as a changing room whilst we rehearsed in the hall, amid much chatter and laughter. We were only a week from the end of term, and timings meant that, this year, it fell two days before Christmas Eve, so excitement and anticipation were running through the school like an electrical charge. The children were hyped and silly and keeping them quiet and calm enough to do any work was a full-time job, never mind actually teaching them anything.

We'd taken to lots of outdoor work, nature walks and drawing and generally trying to give them fresh air and exercise to damp down the hysteria. The fact that snow was forecast, and odds were being given on a white Christmas, wasn't helping one little bit, because my class would run to the window at every drop of precipitation, to check whether it had started to snow yet.

We couldn't break up soon enough.

'Nice to see you laughing,' Jake said, as we waited for our respective charges. 'You're always so serious, Lydia.'

It was a pleasant exchange, just chit-chat. But the fact that it was Jake meant I had to forestall any pleasantness. Couldn't bear him being nice to me, because it gave me hope that I had no right to have. No *reason* to have. It would have been so much easier if he'd been horrible.

'I laugh a lot. Just not when you're around,' I replied.

'Fair enough.' A moment's silence. 'So, how's it going with that bloke you left the Fair with, the other week? I've not seen him around before, must be a newcomer?'

The question surprised me. I didn't think he'd even noticed me leave the fair. Why would he? 'Oh, I don't know him. He's scoping out the school for his brother, and his grandmother has just moved into the White Rose, so he comes to visit her. We just keep running into each other.' I kept my eyes on the cupboard behind Jake's head. Didn't want him to think I was actually looking at the way he was watching my face. Couldn't bear to see his gaze flick downwards, as people's always did. Looking. Wondering. Because I didn't want Jake to be like everyone else. Knew he would be, of course, he was just a man, just another man; the way I secretly felt about him didn't stop that. I shouldn't put him on a pedestal, no matter how covertly. *He was just a man*. I kept telling myself that.

But even more secretly, I couldn't believe it. He was just so nice! Good-looking, a great teacher, kind . . . which was why I had to keep my distance. Be cold and unfriendly to him. 'Any particular reason you want to know?'

'Er, no. Just an idle wonder, and Mrs Scott mentioned it to Mrs Wilkinson who mentioned it to me, so . . .'

Of course, village gossip. I'd been the subject of much of it when I'd first come to Heavington, but my years of doing absolutely nothing noteworthy had dulled the communal interest. 'I was just telling him about the school, and our league table status.'

‘Wow. Riveting stuff.’ He put his hands in his pockets and sort of stuck his elbows out, as though mentally searching for another topic of conversation. ‘So. What are you doing for Christmas this year? Looks like we might have snow.’

‘So the forecast says.’

‘You are hard work, Lydia. I’m just chatting, all right?’ There was something — anger? Amusement? — in his eyes. ‘You don’t have to be so snippy all the time.’

Then I did something I rarely do, something I can’t afford to let myself do. I snapped. ‘Yes, I do. Because, you know something? Snow isn’t pretty for me. It’s not some lovely festive decoration that makes the village look clean and Christmassy, it’s something that stops me leaving my house. And yes, I do have to be snippy, because I’m sick of people pitying me, feeling sorry for me talking to me out of politeness or wanting to ask ‘What happened to you?’ Wanting the dirt, wanting all the inside information! And, do you know something else? I’m fed up with being the one that everyone gossips about behind my back!’

Tears I hadn’t even been aware were building were starting to slide down my cheeks and I sniffed loudly, turned and walked as fast as I could out of the hall and down to the little teachers’ room at the end of the corridor. For a few moments I didn’t care that my class wouldn’t know where I’d gone, all I wanted was two minutes to regain my composure. To slip back into the ice-maiden persona that I’d cultivated and hung on to so hard that my fingers ached.

Footsteps in the passageway and Jake came through the door. ‘I’m taking you home.’

‘I can’t go home!’

‘Yes, you can. It’s only half an hour until school is over, Jackie has your class and Alan is minding mine. I’ve told them you’ve been taken ill. It’s all done, Lydia, please, just let me take you home.’

I took a deep breath. ‘This is my life.’

‘Being like this?’ Jake came over and held out my coat. ‘Or the school?’

A snorty laugh escaped. ‘Both.’

‘Look. Teaching is stressful, we both know that. It’s high pressure and it doesn’t let up, even in this sort of environment.’ He waved a hand to encompass the whole school. ‘I deal with it by not letting it get to me. I came

into teaching after training to be an engineer, you know.’ He dropped out of his stern tone and became more conversational. ‘All my family are engineers. I mean high-powered, design and technology, bells and whistles stuff.’ He helped me into my coat almost without me realising he was doing it. ‘And it took a while to dawn on me that, just because my mum and dad and my brother are all engineers, *I* didn’t have to be one. I wasn’t born under the star sign Dyson. It’s not predetermined.’

He opened the side door and let us out into the cold air. The day had been bright but the sun was setting and the air had crisped around the edges. The brown ghosts of fallen leaves were stuck to the pavement like a mosaic and the low sun slanted down through the hedges, making the hawthorn berries and rose hips that were hanging on despite hungry birds glow like little lanterns.

‘So, that’s me.’ Jake fell into step beside me as we headed down the lane. ‘What about you?’

I shrugged. ‘Nothing to know.’

He turned to look at me but I kept my eyes on the ground. I could see the side of his face out of the corner of my eye and there was a half-smile on his mouth. ‘Really? That little outburst earlier says different.’

But I’d got it under control now. And, nice as it was walking along the lane with Jake with the setting sun in our faces and the rooks calling themselves home over our heads in a ragged cloud, my guard was back up. ‘Yes. Sorry about that. I think I’m just tired. It’s been a long term, and we seem to have the Christmas play from hell on our hands. It all got a bit much.’

We walked along in relative silence for a bit. We weren’t talking, but the cacophony of nature around us filled in any conversational gap. Over at the farm, the cows in the yard were mooing to be let into the parlour for milking, away in a field a tractor chugged determinedly back and forth and the race to the roost had begun for the small birds, who were fighting for prime position in the hedges. At the entrance to the White Rose, I stopped.

‘Thanks for walking me back. I’ll be fine from here.’

‘Are you sure? I’d like to see you all the way to your door, really.’ He was looking ahead now, as though he could visually project us down the road. Then he flicked a quick glance my way. ‘To make sure you’re all right.’

‘I am fine.’ And I sounded determined. Hard. ‘I’ll see you at school

tomorrow. Please thank Jackie for minding the class,' and I started to walk on ahead.

'Lydia!' His voice sounded stretched, although he wasn't that far behind me. 'I'm sorry. But I don't know how to play this. I try to treat you like everyone else, but, you know something? Being disabled does *not* entitle you to be a complete dick!'

I stopped. 'What?'

'Okay, yes, and now I come to think about it, that came out a lot more confrontational than I was intending, but it's true. I'm sure you have your reasons and that it's second nature to you and all that, but.' A deep breath. 'Yep, sorry. You're still coming over like a dick.'

Now I started to walk again. *What else did you expect, Lydia? Of course he's just like all the others, of course he is. Being all rugged and muscular and cute and good with kids doesn't stop him from basically being just the same as everyone else, does it? Unable to see, unable to understand.* 'I'll see you tomorrow.' The words were so stiff they could have been in a mortuary.

'Lydia, I'm . . .'

I didn't even slow down now. My eyes were focused on the warm safety of my house, there, at the end of the lane, although it was blurry through the tears that kept on forcing their way down my face. *How dare he? How DARE he call me a dick? I had to keep people at a distance, that was all, stop them getting close, stop the pity and the questions — why could he not see that?*

'Hello, dear.' The voice, from the top of the wall of the White Rose, made me lose my balance and I had to stop and catch at the brickwork so as not to fall. A half-glance over my shoulder reassured me that Jake had gone and wouldn't have seen my momentary lapse, and a full glance upwards revealed an elderly lady, either levitating or up a ladder. She was leaning her elbows on the coping stones of the wall and wielding a large pair of shears, which she waved at me. 'Ivy,' she said.

'Hello, Ivy.' The words were a bit breathless as my heart was hammering too fast for me to be able to draw the air in.

'Oh, no, that's not my name. I'm Marguerite. I'm cutting back the ivy, that's what I meant. It's a real nuisance on the brickwork you see. You're that young teacher from the school, aren't you?'

Now I knew how Alice felt, talking to the caterpillar on his mushroom, and I'd be able to read that section from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to

my class with a lot more conviction. It was just so ridiculous, addressing what appeared to be a floating head. Even if the caterpillar hadn't had carefully cut grey hair and a pair of glasses which seemed to be attached to a fluorescent green string, and Lewis Carroll had remained quiet on the subject of the cloud of *Poison* which was evident to my nose even at some distance.

'I teach at the school, yes.'

'Excellent.' The shears clattered. 'We are all so looking forward to the Christmas play! Most exciting thing most of us will have been to since they took us to that exhibition in York and Brian lost his trousers. And it's so nice to have something *Christmassy* to look forward to, if you see what I mean, because, honestly, most of it is just a nice dinner and a long nap. It's such fun to watch the children getting over-excited and know that it's not going to be you woken up at four in the morning to see them open their presents.' She settled her elbows more comfortably on the wall.

'What are you standing on?'

'Ladder,' she replied. 'Oh, don't worry, I've done all my Health and Safety stuff. Brian's holding it for me down the bottom. Aren't you, Brian!' she called.

A voice, muffled by distance, brickwork and ivy floated back. It sounded affirmative.

'Don't you have a gardener?'

'Oh yes. But it's nice to have a purpose sometimes. Life in here can get a bit . . .' She glanced up and down the road and lowered her voice, as though the place was run by the Stasi. 'Samey. Boring. I like the odd challenge. Don't I, Brian?'

'Arfnurnurfnur'.

I had no idea what that was supposed to be.

'Yes, thought you must be a teacher. A couple of the residents have got grandchildren at the school, they've mentioned you. Great grandchildren, I think, in Ruby's case. Anyway, they talk about you.' A shrewd look. 'Are you the Polish one or have you only got one leg?'

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out.

'You don't sound Polish, so I suppose you're the other one. Miss . . . Knight, is it? Never was good with names.'

'ArfnurnurFURNur.' It sounded as though Brian seconded that.

'Lydia Knight, yes.'

‘Can’t shake hands, up a ladder.’ Marguerite looked down. ‘We had a meeting, you know. About the school.’

Ninety per cent of me wanted to keep walking. To get home and get out of my teaching clothes, into my loose, comfortable, sobbing-about wear. I was tired and Jake’s words kept echoing around in my head with just the tiniest hint of question — *was he right? Was I, in his words, ‘being a dick’? Keeping people at a distance not to protect myself but because I couldn’t be bothered to make the effort to be nice?* — and then the ten per cent of me that knew we needed the White Rose on our side to help keep the school open, should it come to it, cut in.

‘What sort of a meeting? I mean, we don’t really have much of a connection, do we?’

‘That’s why we had the meeting. It seems ridiculous, the school over there and you all understaffed and overworked and everything, and here’s us, in here, underworked and overstaffed, and, to be honest, most of us are bored out of our trees. We thought we could do some sort of exchange visits. If you were agreeable, you see.’ The shears clipped at something, as though to punctuate her point.

‘Exchange visits?’ I asked, weakly.

‘Yes. We thought some of us could come into school and maybe listen to the young ones read, teach them some of the old crafts — we’ve got Eleanor who used to make lace, and Poppy is a demon with the knitting, and maybe you could bring some of them over here now and then? Listen to some of the older ones rambling on about the War, that sort of thing?’

Maybe next year we could get the children to make lace or knit things for the stall . . . my arm ached with a kind of residual memory of carrying the box of plaster ornaments. And we’ve got a topic coming up on World War Two — having an actual living resource on our doorstep would be a huge bonus. ‘That sounds like an amazing idea. The children would love it.’ As would OFSTED.

‘And it can get a bit lonely in here too.’ Marguerite ran a thumb along the shears. ‘I mean, I have Brian . . .’

‘Fnurnur.’

‘. . . but so many of the others are spending more and more time in their rooms, it’s quite worrying. It’s one of the downsides to being old, feeling a bit redundant. Not useful any more, and it makes some of us a wee bit lonely.’

That's why I thought of the school, we might not be any good at a lot of things, but we can help the next generation. You have to be — now, what's the word? Like yoghurt. Proactive, that's it. You have to be proactive. Otherwise, what's the point? "Died a lonely old biddy" isn't much of an epitaph, now, is it?'

'Quite.' Her words made me feel a small stab of guilt. Self-imposed isolation because of feeling that there was so much you couldn't do, that was me to a T. 'I'll mention it to Alan on Monday, but I think it sounds like a wonderful idea, twinning White Rose with the school.' I looked up at the sky. 'We ought to get on, it looks like snow. I have to get home and you don't want to be up a ladder in a blizzard.'

'Oh. Of course, yes. I'm sorry, I do go on a bit sometimes.'

'FnurNURfnur.'

'It's just that I don't see many new faces, it's harder for those with limited mobility, you see. Another reason that we're looking forward to your Christmas play, a chance to see other people from the village. Oh, there's a few have family here, but not all of us, and it's just pleasant.'

'You must get new residents though, from time to time. Haven't you just got someone new? A lady whose family are thinking of moving here?' Gareth Graham and his grandmother must be the centre of attention if new faces were hard to come by. I could just see him doing his super-friendly smile to the ladies in here, I'd bet that at least half of them would be in love with him. And the other half would have him doing odd jobs around the place, given half an hour.

Marguerite frowned. 'I don't think so.' She looked down towards the base of her ladder. 'Brian, have we had anyone new in?'

'Fnurfnurfnur.'

'Not her, she's been here ages. Who was the last one in? Oh, yes, Gerald. But he's not a grandmother though, evidently.' She looked back over the wall at me. 'No, no new faces for a couple of years. So, again, it would be lovely to have the children coming and going a little around the old place. And I know it's a little late for this year, but perhaps, next year, might you, perhaps, need a hand with any of the costumes? So many of us in here are a dab hand with the needle, you know. Although,' and her face went a bit wobbly as she glanced down, presumably at Brian, 'the arthritis has put a stop to so much, for a lot of people.'

My brain did a kind of double-take. ‘Nobody new at all?’

‘Only Gerald, and he’s been here since, what spring 2015? I know it was spring, we’d just got the first daffs up and he ran over them in his chair. Never liked the man after that, but he does have good whisky.’ Marguerite stared dreamily across over my head into the field beyond the lane, as though memories of distant days were frolicking over the rough ploughed land.

‘Furnur.’

‘I know you don’t, but we have to make allowances.’

‘Someone who might be visited by a youngish man? Blond hair? Very smiley?’

‘Oh, that sounds like Gary! No, dear, Gary is the new handyman, who comes in to fix things. He’s been in a couple of times lately. Fixed Poppy’s door a while back, and he was here a week or so ago to do something to the roof.’

So Gareth Graham was a liar. No grandmother in the White Rose. And, presumably, by extension, no family thinking of moving to the village either. I gritted my teeth. ‘I shall put your suggestion to Alan tomorrow, when I get into school.’ And the sudden memory of the reindeer antlers flopping about on their headbands came to me. ‘And it would be wonderful to have some help with costumes for next time around.’

‘That would be lovely. It would be so nice to feel that we had something we could help with. Give us an investment in watching, if you see what I mean.’

Oh, dear Lord, that would mean we’d have to do another play next year. I’d practically promised, hadn’t I? Maybe I could get a job somewhere on an isolated island before then. Wasn’t there a school on a remote Scottish outpost that only had about five children? The best they could expect would be a tableaux. Something nice and static, no arguing, no shoving and no bloody jazz hands.

I bid Marguerite as cheerful a farewell as I could manage, and set off towards the light of my home, which was now visible in the increasing dark, glowing out of the front windows across the lane, like a beacon calling me in.

Chapter Seven

I sat and stared at my leg.

I didn't think about it as often now as I used to. The whole thing had become second nature to me, and perhaps I kidded myself that it was less noticeable than it had been, now I'd had practice. I didn't limp quite so visibly, I could run a bit, within limits. I had to be careful on slippery surfaces, and walking in snow and ice was difficult, when I couldn't sense whether my foot was going down on something that had no grip, but . . .

But I was still defensive. Still on my guard against those remarks that made me feel like an object. 'Oh, that poor girl, so pretty but having to wear that false leg . . . she'll never be able to go to the beach and wear a bikini . . . the boys won't want to date her, with that great plastic thing strapped on . . . poor girl.' *Poor girl.*

The wood burner crackled and made me jump. It would be nice to say it jolted me out of my self-pity, but it would take more than that to stop the replay going on in my head, a recitation of failed relationships and cut-short dates. I'd come to the conclusion a while back that I wasn't really made for anything long term, and that the men I really liked were best off without a woman for whom long walks on the beach weren't a romantic proposition, but instead were a series of stumbling obstacles, tiredness and sand-drag.

Was Jake right? Was I being deliberately unpleasant to keep people away? I'd always aimed at 'remote, but polite'. Had I bypassed that and gone straight to 'stand-offish and rude'? Had my attempts to keep myself from being hurt veered into, as he put it, 'being a dick'? Were all those broken relationships and failed dates not because men didn't want a girlfriend who wore a prosthetic, but because they didn't want *me*?

I slumped on the small sofa and rested my head in my hands. Why had nobody told me? Here I was, trying to be all noble and understanding about men not wanting to be landed with a woman who needed help sometimes, but really just pushing away anyone who might care. Paying the price in loneliness. And now, coming to realise, that I was Lydia-the-unsociable rather than Lydia-with-one-leg. Lonely, because I was pretending to protect other people, whilst really protecting myself.

The accident hadn't been spectacular. No tortured, twisted metal and

being cut out of a car by the fire brigade, or an illness that had turned to blood poisoning and meant I lost my leg to save my life. Just a rather stupid, drunken encounter with a metal staircase on a wet night in unsuitable shoes. Painful, yes, but no tales to tell of flashing blue lights rushing to the rescue and handsome fire-fighters in awe of my self-possession, telling me I'd still be beautiful even after the amputation. None of that. Just exasperated doctors who couldn't work out why my bones wouldn't heal properly, tired nurses moving me from ward to ward, and occasional visits from university friends, who'd gradually all moved on, graduated and left the area, while I struggled with appointments and deferred my placements.

And now I taught in a tiny school, because young children didn't ask questions. Or rather, they did, but only once. And as soon as they heard I'd fallen down some stairs and had to have my leg removed, they lost interest, I became 'Miss', and never had to deal with it again. I kept my head down, worked hard and was just another teacher.

And there was Jake. My body told me I fancied him, my brain admired the way he taught the children and had such a fantastic relationship with them. But my rational mind knew he saw me as a colleague, a member of staff. How else *could* he see me? It's all I was. So I protected myself from the inevitable disappointment by . . . evidently, by being a dick.

My whole face flared with heat and those long-denied tears finally made a proper appearance. I cupped my forehead in my hands and let myself cry until my shoulders were twitching and my breath fell out in great gasps that I had no control over. He was right. He really was right. I could have been fun, sociable and amusing with no intention of any kind of reaction from Jake. I did it with Irina, why couldn't I treat him like I treated other people? Why did I feel I had to punish not only myself, but him too? It wasn't Jake's fault I only had one leg, even if his presence did make me feel more conscious of it.

I was such an idiot.

There was an echoey rap at the door. I'd been so absorbed in my misery that I hadn't noticed any kind of figure approaching and I'd turned off the lamp in the front window, so there hadn't been any shadowy shapes for me to see. I quickly wiped my face on my sleeve and limped to the door, using the furniture for assistance. Maybe Jake had come to . . . not apologise, no. I'd come to realise he had nothing to apologise *for*. But maybe, being the person he was, he'd come to make sure I was all right, even though he probably

suspected I'd try to bite him through the letterbox, and maybe throw things at him for even attempting to be nice to me.

Gareth Graham stood on the doorstep, wide smile and innocent blue eyes twinkling in the light that got past me. Snow had started to fall, outlining him against the darkness, and was settling on his hair like a flaky halo. 'Hello, Lydia.'

You're a liar, I thought, but couldn't bring myself to say. 'I'm in the middle of some marking,' I said, figuring that two wrongs might at least set the record straight.

'Oh, I just thought I'd call by. Can I come in?' And before I had a chance to use the weight of the metal door to keep him out, he was in my face, then past me, knocking me off balance so I had to grasp at the door handle so as not to fall. I had to swing myself up so that I could grab the back of the nearest chair to help myself move through after him, and found he was already standing in front of the wood burner, rubbing his hands together as though he'd just got home after a long, cold walk. 'Lovely home you have here. Very cosy.'

Those eyes didn't look so friendly now. The smile was less open, more like a guard against words, words I didn't want to hear. 'You can't stay, I have friends coming over in a minute,' I tried. All my skin was standing to attention, poised for me to act, but I couldn't think of a single thing to do, and without my leg on I couldn't move fast enough to get out of the house. On snow, I'd get precisely nowhere.

'Oh, that's probably not true, is it?' He sat down on my carefully throw-covered sofa and crossed his legs. 'Do you have any wine? Sherry? I mean, it's the season of goodwill and all that, we should sit and have a drink together.' He actually patted the seat next to him, like I was an over-anxious dog waiting to be invited onto the couch. 'Come on, calm down, I'm not going to hurt you.'

Really? Because I'm fairly sure you didn't just burst your way in here to sing me two choruses of Silent Night and rattle your collecting tin. I stayed standing, with my knuckles going grey against the cushioning of the chair back. 'I don't have anything in.'

'A week before Christmas and you haven't got any alcohol in the house? What are you waiting for?' Gareth unbuttoned his coat and let it flap loose.

'Tesco,' I replied, shortly. I was running through the floorplan of my

little place, trying to think if there was somewhere I could shut myself in, barricade the door and ring for help. But the whole open plan thing, whilst great for decorating, getting around without my prosthetic, and making the place look larger, was a bit light on panic rooms. Even the bathroom didn't have a lock on the door. Why would it need one?

'Well then, why don't you pop the kettle on and we can sit and have a proper chat.' It wasn't a question, but fell just short of being an order. My heart was beating so hard it was a wonder it hadn't impaled itself on my ribcage. 'We should get to know each other a bit better.'

Why had I taken my leg off? At least I could have made an attempt to get away, but as it was I was stuck hopping round the furniture. And I'd left it in the bedroom, so I couldn't even pretend to make tea and put my leg on under the noise of the kettle boiling. 'I want you to go.'

'Aw, come on now.' Gareth lounged comfortably, arms stretched along the sofa's back. 'We get on so well, I'm just wanting the chance to get to know all about you.'

All of the no's. The whole of the inside of my head was basically one claxon. *What do I do?* My phone was in the kitchen, on the worktop, I'd have to pretend to make tea and call the police. I started forward, pulling myself along the chair back towards the next support, and suddenly there he was, standing in front of me. He smelled strange, a little musty, as though he'd put his clothes on damp.

'I know you don't really have a grandmother in the White Rose,' I blurted out. 'You're the handyman.'

He sighed. 'Yeah, well. Tell a girl you work part-time fixing some dodgy old geezers' stairlift — well, it's not exactly Richard Branson territory, is it?'

'So you lied?'

A shrug. 'What can I say? Stopped by the school to get directions and fell in love at first sight. Been watching you ever since.'

'That is not love, that is stalking. You don't even know me!'

'Aw, come on! Let's have a cuddle. Or we could just, you know.' He reached out a hand and stroked my hair. 'Fool around.'

I reared back so far that I nearly fell over, and had to clutch towards the table to hold myself up. 'No!'

A moment of silence. The glass on the woodburner ticked, and outside an owl hooted. There was the gentle kind of quiet you get when snow is falling

outside, as though even the soundlessness is on mute, almost a white noise. Then he reached out to touch me, I saw his face coming closer, the hand aiming to grab my shoulder, and I knew he was going to try to kiss me. Everything fell into the slow motion reserved for accidents, he was lunging and I was moving back, coming up hard against the table, grabbing behind me at whatever came to hand.

My fingers closed around the box I'd brought back from the Christmas fair. I'd forgotten it, left it on the table awaiting my half-hearted attempt at decorating prior to my solitary Christmas lunch, and as my fingers grasped at it, it tipped. A particularly over-decorated village scene, doubling its weight in glitter and, as Irina had said, 'more robins than a Batman convention', fell into my palm and I didn't even think. I gripped it and swung, and it connected with Gareth's temple in a disco explosion of sparkles and plastic birds, plaster of Paris splinters flying like fake snow.

There was a *crack*. I didn't know if it had been his head or the plaster, and he dropped to the floor. I hardly dared to look, in case I'd killed him, but a quick check told me that he was out cold on the rug. Breathing, and only a tiny amount of blood, where it looked as though some of the artistically roughened snow had grazed him, which was good enough for me. I hauled myself to the kitchen, grabbed my phone and dialled 999.

I was actually giving my address to the police when there was another knock at the door, and I had to hop over the still-fallen Gareth to open it. I didn't even care who was there, I just flung the door wide and hopped back to continue giving my details. Didn't care that someone was going to see me without my leg, didn't care that it could have been *anyone* on the step. With Gareth crumpled on my colour-coordinated rug covered in flakes of plaster and scattered with fallen robins, I somehow felt all-powerful. Probably poisoned with adrenaline, but still, powerful and a little bit super.

'I came to say sor . . . what the hell happened?' It was Jake, peering past me, as I recounted events to the police despatcher on the other end.

'I hit him. He tried to grab me,' I explained.

'Wow.' For a second Jake looked just like Rory Scott, on finding out that I knew all the words to the latest Nicki Minaj song. 'That's . . . impressive. Would you like me to — I don't know, sit on him or something?'

'If you wouldn't mind.' I hung up. The police were on their way. There was a chalkiness in my mouth that told me the adrenaline was leaving, and I

probably only had another few moments before I descended into shock, but for now . . . well, for now I was going to use it. ‘And you have nothing to apologise for, Jake. You were completely right, I was being a dick. I thought I was just keeping you at a distance, but I didn’t have to be quite so . . .’

‘Emphatic?’ He sat on the rug, firmly on top of Gareth’s legs. Gareth was groaning a bit now, but neither of us paid any attention. ‘And I didn’t have to be quite so offensive. I just . . . look, I really like you, Lydia.’

I realised that I was standing, my legless state obvious, in front of a man I really liked, for the first time ever. I’d never dared take my prosthetic off on a date. Scared that, once they saw my obvious disability, that would be all they’d ever notice about me again, that I would become someone else in their eyes, someone different, other. And here Jake was, and I didn’t care. ‘I like you too. That’s why I was horrible, I didn’t want you to think I liked you and have to be all polite about it.’

‘Wow,’ he said again. ‘That’s what happens? People you like turn you down?’

‘I don’t know if they’d turn me down. We never get that far. I just sort of pre-empt any turning down by never putting myself in that position.’

‘You’re an idiot.’ But he said it almost fondly. There was no hint of any kind of pity or suspicion in his eyes, and he was sitting there at knee-level, practically staring into the space where my leg should be.

‘Yes, I am. A complete wally. It would just have been horrible to really like you and for you to know it, so it would be all unrequited and having you trying to avoid me and everything.’

Jake glanced down at Gareth, who was starting to make coming round noises. ‘Yes. You are clearly very lovable, and anyone who says differently is just asking to be taken out with a plaster of Paris table centrepiece.’

‘He tried to kiss me. I didn’t even want him to come in, he just barged past me.’

‘I thought you liked me.’ Gareth spoke, his voice a little muffled from being face down on the rug. ‘I thought we had a connection.’

‘Nope. And whatever you thought, it didn’t give you the right to come waltzing in here and trying to kiss me. *And* you lied to me about why you were in Heavington, so *not* a level playing field, Gareth.’

‘You hit me.’

‘Yep. *And* I called the police, so any minute now you can explain to them

what you thought you were doing. I don't want to hear it.'

There was a momentary pause, then Gareth said, sulkily, and still into the rug, 'This always happens.'

'You've done this before?' My tone was as icy as the wind currently flipping at the letterbox.

'I'm too nice, that's my trouble, too easy to say "no" to. But you had tea with me, chatted, reckoned I'd be in with a shout. Thought you might be up for a Friends With Benefits thing, you know. Something casual, just to take you out of yourself, sort of thing.'

'I was being . . .' I had been going to say 'friendly', but I hadn't even been that, had I? Just used him to try to make Jake jealous. 'Bursting into a woman's house and trying to force her to kiss you isn't the way to go about getting someone to date you, you know?'

'I'm a great kisser.'

'Had a lot of feedback, have we?' Teacher-sarcasm now.

'I practice. On my hand.'

'Can you sit on his head now?' I suggested to Jake, who was staring at Gareth, aghast.

'I reckon you should just hit him again. What sort of an attitude is that?'

I sighed. 'I admit he's on the warped end of the male spectrum, but it happens. Especially if they think you can't get away very quickly.'

Jake shook his head. 'Again, I'm sorry. On behalf of my entire sex, I apologise. No one should ever have to put up with this kind of thing.' He must have bounced, because Gareth squeaked. 'And I'm sorry if I contributed.'

'No. You were just friendly. I was the one with the attitude.' I sat down on the dining chair and realised, again, that I didn't have my prosthetic on. It surprised me, because I was used to feeling disadvantaged without it, but right now I was still reliving hitting Gareth and my lack of a leg really wasn't featuring. 'I've been playing professional martyr, I think.'

'So you'd actually consider going out with me?' Jake sounded astonished. 'In, like, a relationship format?'

I grinned. 'I'll think about it.'

A blue light strobed along the snow-covered hedge. The local police force didn't have all that much excitement and, this close to Christmas, they were probably spending most of their time fishing drunks out of ditches and

stopping fights. A woman with an intruder in her home rated flashing lights and sirens, and I bet they were hating the fact that the snow would have prevented them from skidding to a halt with screaming tyres outside my door.

‘Let’s just hold those thoughts, shall we?’ I said. ‘I think I might have some explaining to do right now . . .’

Chapter Eight

December 22nd

I woke up early on the morning of the last day of term. A grey, cold kind of light was filtering in through the arched window of my bedroom, and the silence outside was only broken by a robin sitting on the ledge, staring in with an accusatory look on its beak and tweeting pathetically. It was perched on a crust of snow that had thickened in the night to reach nearly halfway up the window, and made most of the table centrepieces look understated.

‘Good grief.’ I sat up and struggled into my leg, before pulling a dressing gown on and going into the living room for a proper look. ‘There’s *feet* of it out there.’

‘Feet of what?’ Jake sat up under his duvet. He’d been sleeping on the sofa for the last few nights. ‘In case Gareth comes back,’ he’d said, but I suspected the police warning and a night in the cells had put paid to any intentions Gareth might have had. Plus being hit around the head with a plaster model village would have left him in no doubt that my affections, as they say, lay elsewhere.

‘Snow. It’s snowed again in the night. A lot.’ I tried to ignore the fact that Jake had no shirt on, and was revealing a large acreage of quite hairy chest as he wriggled around to look out of the window.

‘Ah.’ Then he grinned. ‘Am I going to have to carry you to school?’

I gave him a stern look. ‘I’m fine, if I can just lean on your arm. No carrying.’

‘Are you sure?’ And, dropping the duvet, he bent and picked me up. ‘I quite fancy carrying you in.’

This was the closest he’d come to me, apart from holding my hand on the sofa while we’d watched TV, and a peck on the cheek as a goodnight kiss. For a second I almost panicked. The powerlessness of being off my feet, that sensation of loss of control over my own body flowed over my head and made me grab onto his arm. But then other sensations cut in, the feel of his chest against my cheek and shoulder. The muscles of his bare arm under my hand. The spark in his eyes as he grinned at me again and lifted me higher and whispered ‘I hid all the table decorations last night,’ and lowered his

mouth down onto mine. And, before I knew it, the feel of his hair in my hands, the cool slide of his skin against mine and the lack of breath as I whispered his name.

‘We’re going to be late for school.’

‘In this, so is everyone else.’ He laid me down on my bed and, before I knew it, we were tangled in one another, making the kind of energetic love that comes from two people who have spent too much time correcting spellings, policing a Wendy house and getting their pockets ripped by vindictive door handles. It was unexpected, but lovely. Jake was gentle, but not too gentle, he didn’t make me feel as though he thought I might break if he made any sudden moves, and the whole experience was thoroughly satisfactory.

‘The children are going to know something’s happened,’ I said, when we finally made it out of bed and the bread was in the toaster. ‘Expect lots of daft rhymes, and Rory chanting Beyoncé lyrics at you.’

‘I’m going to have to take him to one side and tell him it’s not “all the simple ladies”, aren’t I?’ Jake pushed his hair back. ‘It’s like being dad to eleven kids. And they don’t have to know about *this*. We can tell them we’re a couple, though, can’t we?’

‘Are we?’

‘Aren’t we? They’ve noticed us pitching up at school together these past few days and I’ve told Mrs Dobson to put the cheese and potato pie on hold for a bit.’

‘Let’s just get to school, shall we? We might have to do some recasting before the evening’s performance, if the snow’s bad enough that some people can’t get in, and those sugar plums won’t sort themselves out.’

It was worse than I’d thought outside. The snow was about three feet deep, it must have snowed all evening and all night, but Jake and I had been watching TV, drinking wine and laughing, so we hadn’t even noticed it start. The sky was heavy and the kind of yellowish-grey that spoke of more snow to come, and we plodded our careful way along the lane towards school. Not a single vehicle attempted the road, not even some of the bigger 4x4s were out. The only tracks were from a tractor, heading out to feed stock and, when we reached school, only Alan was in.

‘Irina can’t get in, and the main road is closed,’ he said. ‘We’re going to have to close the school and cancel tonight.’

Jake's face fell so far that you'd have thought Alan had said he was going to cancel Christmas. 'But we can't!' he said. 'The village kids will still be here.'

'And the White Rose folks are so looking forward to it,' I added, remembering Marguerite and her eagerness. She'd already been in to talk to Alan about some kind of reciprocal visiting arrangements, and he'd leaped on her offer for residents to come in and listen to children read. 'More than Christmas, I think.'

Alan pondered for a moment. 'Well, we were opening later today to account for everyone being up late for the performance this evening, so let's give it a while and see who can get in. I'll phone the farm and ask Mr Dobson to scrape the lane clear as far as White Rose, and we'll just hope for no more snow beforehand. It would be a shame to have to cancel when everyone's worked so hard.' He flapped his tie in an Oliver Hardy sort of way. 'You two look very perky today. Excited about Christmas?'

I looked at the huge tree in the hall, decorated with baubles and wound with unnecessarily glamorous lights and tinsel. Amid the stacked chairs, discarded coats, left-behind reading bags and the packed-lunch trolley, it looked like a stripper in a cow barn. And I thought about this morning, with Jake. About his arms around me and his kiss on my lips. 'Yes, I suppose we are,' I said.

'We're spending Christmas together,' Jake said. 'What with the two of us being the only two single people here.'

'Are we?'

'Aren't we?'

We looked at each other. Alan continued to fiddle with his tie. 'I suppose we are,' I said again. 'After all, we've got a house full of table centrepieces to use up.' The thought of waking up on Christmas morning was suddenly appealing. Rather than Christmas feeling like an ordeal that had to be undergone, a day that had to pass, it was suddenly full of shadowy promise, like a bulky Christmas stocking waiting to be unpacked. 'Yes, we are,' I said again, more firmly.

Jake grinned. 'Of course we are.'

'Right. Right.' Alan didn't seem to know where to look, so he examined his tie again. 'Well. Let's get things sorted for tonight then, although I have to say, I rather think cancelling might be a better idea, but I'm not going to

close the school whilst some of us are here.’

We headed off to our respective classrooms, to await any over-excited children who might manage to struggle in through the snow, but when it became evident, with the arrival of Rory, telling us that the main roads were completely blocked, that we weren’t going to get many, we amalgamated in my classroom. Which was just as well, because we ended up with just the village eight: Rory Scott, Sarah and James Cowton and the five Grace children.

Jake, Alan and I looked over our tiny flock. ‘Well,’ Jake said, philosophically, ‘I think the moon tap-dance is out.’

Alan shook his head. ‘We have to cancel. It’s ridiculous.’

I surprised myself then. ‘No, we can’t. The White Rose people will come anyway, it’s an outing for them, and as long as they get to see some cute children doing things in costume, they’ll be happy. Tea and mince pies afterwards, like we planned, Rory’s brought in about a tonne of Christmas muffins — we can do it. We can make this an event to remember.’

‘It’s going to be forgetting it afterwards that’s the challenge,’ Jake said.

The two men looked at me. I looked at the children. Rory, Timothy and Oscar were cleaning my whiteboard, Sarah and James were playing with some building blocks, and Aurora, Atticus and Celeste Grace had found the dressing-up clothes and were dancing around the room draped in various garments. ‘We can do it,’ I said again, firmly.

‘Are you sure?’ Alan said, in a wobbly sort of way. ‘I mean, eight children . . . is it enough?’

‘And three adults,’ I said. ‘Okay, we’ll have to scale back on “children going to bed” and, Jake, you’re going to have to double up, but we’ve got our lead character, and our Father Christmas, if I do the narration and play a couple of parts, and we run everyone through some quick clothing changes, I think we’ll be all right.’

Jake drew me to one side. ‘Are you sure?’ he asked, in a completely different way to Alan. ‘Narrating and everything? I thought you didn’t want to be the centre of anyone’s attention?’

I have a feeling that the look I gave him was slightly pitying. ‘This is putting on *The Night Before Christmas* to an audience so small that we could probably hold the performance in Alan’s office. Not Saturday Night at the London Palladium.’

‘Yes, but . . .’

‘I have to start somewhere. Start *again* somewhere, I mean. Perhaps this is nature’s way of telling me to sort myself out. Stop feeling sorry for myself and trying to blend into the background all the time.’

‘I think that makes nature sound a little bit vindictive actually.’ Jake gave me a grin. ‘Here you are, reinventing yourself!’

‘In front of about nine people.’

‘Baby steps, baby steps.’

I clapped my hands and got the children’s attention. ‘Right chaps. The play is going to go on, but we’re going to need you lot to listen very carefully . . .’

‘All *right!*’ said Rory, enthusiastically, and punched the air.

‘I can shake my belly,’ said Oscar, with relish. ‘I’ve been practising.’

‘That’s good.’

Celeste’s little lip was wobbling. ‘Am I still going to do my dance?’ she asked. ‘I want mummy to see me doing my dance.’ She clung on to Sarah Cowton, whose lower lip was dangerously close to the floor too. ‘We want to do our dance!’

‘You are going to dance. You are also going to get to be reindeer and put stockings up on the fireplace. Let’s get the bag of costumes, and we’ll sort this thing out.’

Jake, from where he was sitting perched on my desk, whispered to me as I went off to find the costume bag, where it had been hung up in the staff room. ‘You are so masterful. I think I like it.’

‘And Mister Immingham is going to be a reindeer too! Won’t that be fun?’ I called over my shoulder as I left the room. I had to imagine his expression, but the thought made me smile, as I sorted out the bag with the floppy antlers and the oversized beard, and went back for an emergency costume fitting and cast reappraisal.

Chapter Nine

The hall, small as it was, wasn't exactly full. The front row contained Mr and Mrs Cowton, the Grace parents, plus Bo-Bo, and the Scotts. Behind them, and tripling our audience, were the nine White Rose residents plus five of the house staff. Everyone was wearing their best clothes, albeit under layers of coat and wellington boots. There were even some fancy hats. Marguerite, I saw, was wearing a feather fascinator, as if she was off to a wedding, and there was a degree of raucous chat breaking out, a lot of it involving Bo-Bo burbling and being cooed over by a trio of old ladies. Mince pie crumbs were everywhere, and I made a mental note to drop a box of chocolates in to Mrs Wilkinson after the performance was over. Mr Scott had his phone out, and was obviously set to record his son's stage debut, I thought about asking him to put it away but decided not to bother. Rory was going to act his young socks off, and it deserved to be filed away for posterity.

I stood backstage. 'No, no, you look lovely,' I said to Jake, who, in his initial capacity as The Wife was wearing a nightshirt hastily contrived from an old sheet, and a nightcap which was actually Father Christmas's red Santa hat turned inside out. We'd worked out some lightning costume changes, which were going to make some elements of the play come over more in the line of a French farce, but *The Show Would Go On*.

'And you make a great mouse.'

I'd squeezed myself into the grey onesie that Jonah North was to have worn. The legs finished halfway up my calves, and made my prosthetic very evident but we had more to worry about right now than a plastic leg. The sugar plums, all four of them, were having collective stage fright in the girls' toilet. 'I try.'

'Very cute.' He touched the tip of my nose.

'Thank you. Now, get on stage and settle your brain for a long winter nap.'

'Think I'd rather be a sugar plum,' he muttered. But his eyes were shining as he said it, and I knew he didn't care how ridiculous he looked, as long as the children got to perform.

'It might come to that, if we can't get them out of the loo.' I blew him a kiss and regretted it when Rory, bouncing up and down in his rather better-

fitting nightshirt, squealed.

‘Miss just kissed Mister Immingham!’

‘It’s going to come out sooner or later,’ Jake said to me, and then adjusted the sheet, ‘And there’s definitely going to be an element of something coming out sooner rather than later, in this costume.’

‘Onstage. Now.’

And *The Night Before Christmas* happened, as magically as was possible.

I narrated and moused, curled up in the middle of the stage. Alan was a rather oversized child asleep in his bed, the stockings were hung with theatrical care by the cast, those not already night-shirted were draped in sheets and sleeping bags as nightwear. The sugar plums’ dancing was backed by some rather falsetto singing by Jake and Alan, while Aurora Grace helped out her younger brother and sister and Sarah and James, by being a rather tall sugar plum in a rather undersized costume, so much of her dance was performed in a half-crouched position. There was a brief moment of panic when James caught sight of his mother in the audience and froze, but he soon went back to twirling and singing again. We were a little under-reindeered, and those we had were a rather patchwork assortment of colours, being played by Alan and Jake wearing nightshirts and antlers, Timothy in a proper reindeer costume, and Aurora, Atticus and Sarah all still wearing their sugar plum gear and antlers. Oscar wore the full Father Christmas regalia and managed a good ‘Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night’, whilst showing off his prowess at wobbling his belly again, and the round of applause that resulted belied our tiny audience by being resounding and heartfelt.

Afterwards, we all ate mince pies, drank tea and enjoyed the adulation. The White Rose crew had a whale of a time congratulating the children, cuddling Bo-Bo (whose name, apparently, was Lysander) and generally behaving like a massed ensemble of grandparents. Marguerite took me to one side as I clambered off the stage and told me that they hoped we’d do a play every year from now on, as they’d found it such a refreshing change from spending the night before Christmas Eve watching Hercule Poirot films and eating mint thins. I had to agree that we’d do something similar next year, only hopefully without the restricted cast and lightning costume changes that we’d had inflicted on us this year.

And then it was all over, and we turned out the lights, leaving the school

to its cabbage smells, its paper chains and its silence, and Jake and I walked back up the snow-filled lane to my little house.

The wood burner was still glowing, the lamps threw long, golden flares onto the snow and the place smelled of warmth and still-drying plaster of Paris. Jake had decorated a bare branch with an assortment of hanging baubles as made by the children, and propped it in one corner, where it had shed glitter until it looked like a gaunt glam-rock star up to his knees in a pool.

We stood together in the little living room and looked at one another. Jake was still wearing his antlers and I'd got Timothy's Father Christmas hat on.

'In the immortal words of Roy Wood, I wish it could be Christmas every day,' Jake turned and put his arms around me. 'This is amazing. Tonight was amazing. I'd like to stay like this forever — you, the firelight, the snow and all that. I am so glad that you managed to . . .'

'Stop being a dick?' I returned his hug.

'I was going to say, that you managed to come to terms with things a little bit, but yes, now you mention it, I'm glad of that too.' He gave me a kiss, which started as a passing peck on the lips, but extended until we were wrapped around each other.

Eventually we broke apart. 'Of course, there is one problem,' I said.

'I'm not seeing it.' He moved a bit closer. 'This is practically perfect from where I'm standing. So, what is it?'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Which one of our millions of table centrepieces are we going to use for Christmas dinner?' With a wave, I indicated the white plaster mountain, glitter prising in the lamplight and the assorted plastic robins all regarding us with identical beady eyes. Tiny white plaster houses decorated with cotton wool snow sat lumpily on bark-shedding bits of tree trunk. We had a lifetime's worth of ornamentation.

'No contest.' He picked up the one on the top. Its plaster was shredded, revealing the framework inside, the glitter had all gone and only one robin remained, at a drunken angle, clinging to one side of the plaster cone. It was the decoration I'd used to hit Gareth over the head. 'This one. It's symbolic.'

'It's lopsided, is what it is.'

Jake lifted me off my feet, sweeping the Father Christmas hat from my head and placing it down on top of the chosen decoration. 'So are you, Lydia,

my love,' he said. 'But you are gorgeous, nonetheless!' And he carried me through to the bedroom, to start the Christmas holidays in style.

THE END

Thank you

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed spending time with Lydia and Jake, and the rest of Heavington village, and you now feel suitably Christmassy and ready to engage with crackers and pudding. Hopefully, your table centrepieces won't be nearly as combative as the one in the story. If you enjoyed this, then there are plenty of other Choc Lit books for you to choose from, lots of novellas if you don't have much time, and full-length novels for when you really want to lose yourself in a book.

Can I take this opportunity to wish you a peaceful, happy and fun-filled Christmas?

Acknowledgements

I'd just like to use this space to acknowledge all the teachers out there. I only teach adults, and goodness knows, they can be a handful at times, so I can only imagine how tough things can get faced by a classroom full. And, at this time of year, I particularly admire all those hard-working primary teachers, trying to teach, prepare for Christmas, and deal with their own families!

Thank you also to the Tasting Panel readers who passed this book: Vanessa W, Janine N, Michelle M, Ruth N, Melissa C, Kathryn M, Yvonne G, Els E, Melissa C, Melissa B, Jo O, Hilary B and Cordy S.

About the Author



Jane was born in Devon and now lives in Yorkshire. She has five children, four cats and two dogs. She works in a local school and also teaches creative writing. Jane is a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association and has a first-class honours degree in creative writing.

Jane writes comedies which are often described as 'quirky'. *How I Wonder What You Are* is Jane's sixth Choc Lit novel. Her UK debut, *Please Don't Stop the Music*, won the 2012 Romantic Novel of the Year and the Romantic Comedy Novel of the Year Awards from the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Jane's Choc Lit novels are: *Please Don't Stop the Music*, *Star Struck*, *Hubble Bubble*, *Vampire State of Mind*, *Falling Apart* and *How I Wonder What You Are*.

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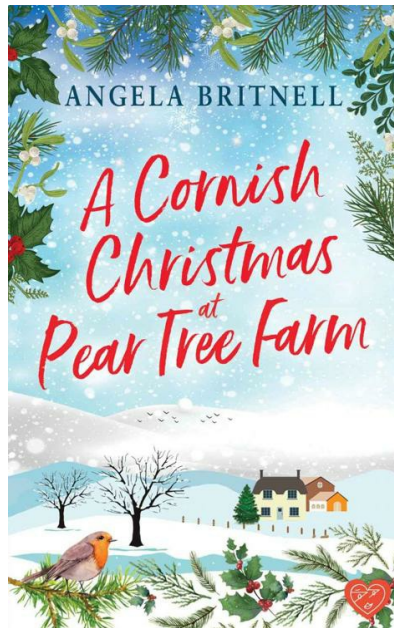
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**A CORNISH CHRISTMAS AT PEAR TREE FARM
BY ANGELA BRITNELL**



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0CHS62YQ1

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LET YOURSELF BE WHISKED AWAY TO CORNWALL AT CHRISTMAS IN THIS ENCHANTING FEEL-GOOD ROMANCE ABOUT SECOND CHANCES.

Festive lights and reignited flames . . . The brightest Christmas yet at Pear Tree Farm!

It's the run up to Christmas at Pear Tree Farm in idyllic Cornwall. The farm is known for taking in lost souls, and ex-soldier Crispin Davies certainly would have been lost without the kindness of the good people at Pear Tree.

He likes to keep to himself, but the arrival of Ashley from Tennessee sends

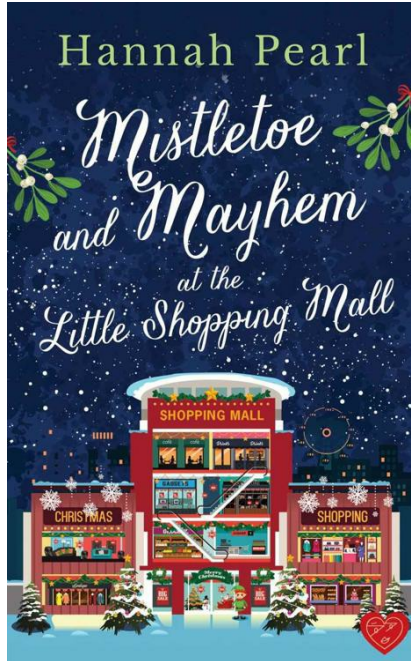
Crispin's world spinning. Reuniting after a brief but memorable meeting the year prior, the spark between them is brighter than ever.

As he begins to rebuild his confidence with a helping hand from Ashley, a letter arrives — it's a blast from the past that throws everything Crispin has worked for into turmoil . . .

Should he flee, or fight for the home he's finally found at Pear Tree Farm?

The festive period is a time for people to come together. But can Crispin find the courage to open his heart to Christmas? And maybe a certain American, too . . .

MISTLETOE AND MAYHEM AT THE LITTLE SHOPPING MALL
BY HANNAH PEARL



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0CHMSBRZZ
US www.amazon.com/dp/B0CHMSBRZZ

Mistletoe, mayhem . . . and mystery?

Assistant manager Caroline never has a dull moment working at Holly Walk Mall. Especially at Christmas.

But she wouldn't have it any other way. The shopkeepers are like family to her, and nothing can ruin their wonderful community.

Until the shop owners are shocked by sudden rent increases. Then a new jewellery store pops up in a prime location. The owner seems dodgy and Caroline just *knows* he's up to no good . . .

Her suspicions are confirmed when she notices a rather handsome stranger watching the new tenant. Damian's a detective and suspects the man of

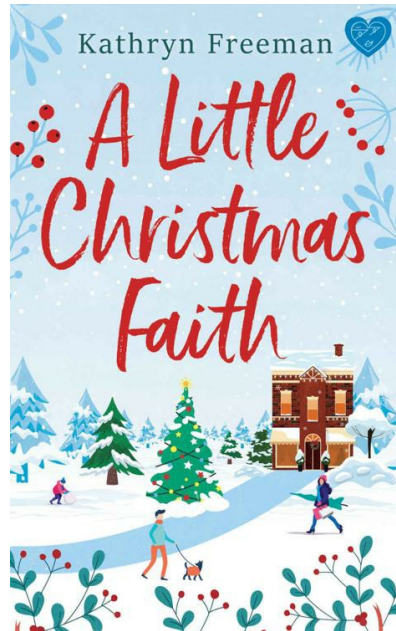
hiding stolen jewels in his store.

But with evictions looming over their heads and a jewel thief to catch, a lot rests on Caroline's shoulders. Perhaps Damian can make her see that she doesn't have to face this alone.

Could they discover something even more valuable than jewels that could make this the most magical Christmas at the mall ever?

This uplifting romance is full of warmth and perfect for fans of Cary Elks, Morton S. Gray, Portia MacIntosh, Angela Britnell, Hannah Lynn or Jessica Redland.

A LITTLE CHRISTMAS FAITH
BY KATHRYN FREEMAN



UK www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0CHFK1YHW
US www.amazon.com/dp/B0CHFK1YHW

He hates Christmas. She's nuts for Noel. Perhaps all they need is a little Christmas faith . . .

Christmas fanatic Faith Watkins has just opened her very own boutique hotel in the charming Lake District. It's a dream come true.

Now all she needs is for the rooms to be filled with happy guests. Faith just knows this year will be the best Christmas ever.

The Old Mill's very first guest is rugged, handsome and . . . Christmas-hating Adam Hunter.

It's always a difficult time of year for Adam. He wants solitude. She wants to spread Christmas cheer.

So why are the sparks between them brighter than any of the Christmas lights hung around the hotel?

Faith and Adam both have their baggage. Could this be a Christmas to remember . . . for all the wrong reasons? Or can they put aside their differences at the most magical time of the year?

This magical Christmas romance will capture the heart of fans of Phoebe MacLeod, Catherine Walsh, Lucy Keeling, Portia MacIntosh or Kim Nash.