

REBECCA BOXALL

Christmas
at the
Cabin



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Cabin

OTHER TITLES BY REBECCA BOXALL

Christmas at the Vicarage

Home for Winter

Christmas on the Coast

The Christmas Forest

Christmas by the Lighthouse

Christmas at the Farmhouse

A Winter's Day

Christmas
at the
Cabin

REBECCA BOXALL



WILD FOX PRESS

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In memory of Auntie Jane
And for my children – Ruby, Iris and Buster

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Prologue

Jed

September 2022

There are worse places to be homeless than St Helier. Jersey is one of the smartest places in Britain, after all, and the people are generally very nice. They don't like to look at me – I'm a blot on the beautiful landscape – but they're generous when they see me busking, tossing their coins past my dog, Lola, into my open guitar case.

The weather here isn't too extreme – rarely too hot or too cold, though you'd be surprised how bitter it can feel when you're trying to sleep in a bleak multi-storey in the thick of winter. And there are charities, soup kitchens, shelters, hostels – even some vicar who seems to have made it his mission to befriend me.

In many ways, I'm lucky. I'd far rather be a tramp in Jersey than in London, or any other city come to think of it. But let's face it: nobody really wants to be homeless. Not Claude from the car park, not Stacey down at the Parade, not me. And definitely not her.

She walks past me sometimes. The woman with the black hair blow-dried into an unmoveable helmet. Occasionally she casts a glance in my direction. Once she stopped and smiled, then threw a coin into my guitar case.

'Now you know what it's like, don't you,' she said, her smile unfaltering. 'What it's like to be penniless. To be cut adrift. I scraped myself up from the gutter and made something of myself. Let's see if you can do that too.'

Then my mother turned and walked away, her Louboutins, with their distinctive blood-red soles, clattering along the pavement towards her office.

PART ONE
SEPTEMBER 2022

Chapter One

Hattie

The first day of a new school year always feels like waking up in fresh sheets, laundered and ironed to precision by Mum. A new start. A chance to shine. Mum has high hopes for me this year: she's determined I'll get straight As in my A levels even though – aside from Art and Textiles – I've never really been top of the class. I'm much happier somewhere in the middle, plodding along, but I don't want to disappoint her, so I've made a promise to myself: I'll work in the town library for an hour after school every day. No Netflix to distract me; you even have to put your phone on silent. Not that I use my phone as much as I used to after *that* happened.

I make a good start, heading straight there after my first day even though I'd rather tag along with my girlfriends for hot chocolate at Bean Around the World. I say 'tag' because I'm very aware that I'm only part of the group by the skin of my teeth. I'm not nearly clever, pretty or scathing enough to truly belong but I've been friends with Willow since we were babies, so I'm tolerated by Alice and Mimi thanks to Willow's generous-hearted loyalty.

I choose a desk by the window and take everything I need out of my bag: laptop, books, notebook, pencil case, phone (on silent). I make a start, completing my English homework quickly, then pause to look out of the window on to the street. It's the usual town scene: mothers pushing buggies, workmen in paint-splattered overalls joshing with each other, schoolkids like me in little groups, hanging out after school. I'm about to move on to my History essay when I spot something unusual. Sitting hunched in the doorway of a closed-up shop is a man with a dog sitting at his feet. He has a guitar beside him, which might mean he's just a busker, but he's got that haunted, homeless look about him. I wonder briefly what might have led the poor guy to end up in such a bad situation but then my phone flashes brightly with a message and I forget about him. It's from Willow.

Come and join us at the Bean. We've bagged the counter by the window. You can do your homework after!

I waver for a moment and then decide to join them for a short break. I leave my jumper on the chair, just taking my valuables with me, and within five minutes I'm at the coffee bar, where everyone greets me as if they haven't just spent the entire day with me.

'Yay!' says Willow. 'I got you a hot chocolate just in case! Here,' she says, nudging it towards me as I climb up on to the stool next to her. 'Mimi was just telling us about this guy she met.'

'He was hot,' Mimi tells us as we listen intently. Unlike the rest of us, Mimi has bags of experience, her principal interest having been boys for as long as I've known her. 'One hundred per cent,' she adds (her favourite phrase, used indiscriminately). 'But we went for dinner, and he ate like a pig. I'm not joking. A total pig. One hundred per cent. So I told him I was going to the loo, and I just sacked it off and left him there.' Considering the experience, she's surprisingly choosy.

Mimi looks like she's about twenty-five, not seventeen, and her parents are loaded so she has everything: a Fiat 500 convertible, the latest phone, a house with a pool, hair extensions (blonde), Shellac nails (always red). She even has lip fillers. Mum is very disapproving of her but she loves Willow so she reluctantly lets me remain in the group, though I've long since learnt to keep quiet on the subject of Mimi.

Alice is equally beautiful, though much more natural looking, as her parents are super strict and she's not allowed to wear make-up or have her ears pierced (I'm not allowed pierced ears either, but Mum does let me wear make-up). She has straight brown hair and strong eyebrows, enviably clear skin and naturally thick eyelashes. Willow, too, is gorgeous, though a bit more haphazard looking, with Afro hair, a smattering of freckles on her nose, and a wide, friendly grin.

And me? Well, I'm just ordinary looking, I guess. Medium height, medium build, mousy hair, acne-prone skin, boring

features... my own mother would probably be hard pushed to pick me out in a line-up. I know I'm unmemorable because loads of people I recognise and say 'hi' to all the time seem to look at me like they're trying to recall who on earth I am. As you can see, I'm not brimming with confidence. Not about my looks anyway. There are other things I'm pretty okay with. I'm a great crafter, for example. No-one would argue with that.

I finish my drink and say bye to my friends, putting in my earphones, then I take one step outside the coffee bar before having an idea. I go back to the counter and order a hot chocolate to take away. After a short wait, I make my way along the street, stopping in front of the homeless man. He's strumming listlessly on his guitar while his border collie, a brown one, sits at his feet with its head cocked, looking like it's smiling.

'Hi,' I say, and he looks up from his guitar strings, startled. I realise, close up, that he's not exactly a man – maybe just a year or two older than me. He looks like a young version of that SAS guy on the TV – Ant Middleton. Black hair and beard, blue eyes, a strong nose, a solemn look about him. Good-looking, but with large bags under his eyes. I guess sleeping rough doesn't involve much actual sleeping.

'Oh,' he says to me. 'Hi.'

'I brought you a hot chocolate.'

'Why?' he asks, looking guarded. He doesn't take it.

'You're homeless, right?'

'Go to the top of the class,' he says scathingly, but I ignore his sarcasm.

'My mum says you should never give money to a homeless person as they'll just spend it on drugs,' I explain, probably too honestly. 'She says you should buy them a hot drink or something to eat instead.' I frown. 'I should have got your dog some food.'

'It's okay, you can give her cash – she hasn't got a drug habit,' the guy replies, and it takes me a moment to realise he's joking. We smile at each other and he instantly turns from

stern to friendly. 'Thanks,' he says, taking the drink from me. 'It's feeling a bit colder today. An autumnal nip in the air.'

'That's what I thought when I got up this morning. I could smell wood-smoke, too. I love autumn.'

'You wouldn't if you were homeless. The start of the cold weather.'

'Yeah,' I say, embarrassed. 'I guess... Well, I'd better go.'

'I'm not, by the way,' he says to me as I make to walk away.

'Not what?'

'A drug addict. Everyone always thinks that if you're homeless you must be an addict but I'm totally clean.'

'I never thought you were. I was just saying what my *mum* thinks.'

'Mums, eh?' he says, smiling into his drink.

'Yeah,' I agree. 'Mums.'

Chapter Two

Christine

I finish my shift at Tesco at five and check my watch. An hour until I start my office cleaning job. Time to nip back to the flat for tea. There might even be time to put a wash on too. In my hurry, I stumble off the pavement. I find myself being steadied by someone.

‘Thanks,’ I say, and I try to smile. It sounds bad but I smile so rarely these days that I actually have to make a conscious effort.

‘No trouble,’ the man replies, and I notice his voice first – it’s lovely. Deep and calm. He meets my gaze and I see that his eyes are a warm conker brown. I find myself wishing I’d bothered to wear some make-up. After a day in the air-conditioned shop, my skin must look parched and tired. The man seems in no rush to move on. ‘Are you okay?’ he asks. ‘Ankle alright?’

I test it, circling it absent-mindedly. ‘Fine, yes, thank you,’ I tell him.

‘And otherwise okay?’ he says and I feel tears spring to my eyes, experiencing a sudden urge to pour out all my stresses and worries to this complete stranger. I bite my lip, looking down, then glance up at him again and see a white band around the collar of his shirt. A dog collar. The man’s a bloody vicar!

‘Fine,’ I tell him curtly. Rudely. And I turn and disappear along the street, wondering if he might be watching me.

My encounter with the vicar puts me in a bad mood. I clatter around the kitchen until Hattie appears from her bedroom and asks if everything’s alright.

‘Why shouldn’t it be?’ I ask her, as I shovel sausages and chips from the baking tray onto our plates.

‘Just, you were making a lot of noise,’ Hattie says, getting the ketchup out of the fridge and taking it to the table with

some cutlery.

‘Oh, well pardon me if I make too much noise while I’m getting *your* tea ready!’

Hattie just sighs and sits at the table, pouring herself a glass of squash from the jug. She knows I get a bit ratty these days. I hate myself for it but I’m just so *tired*. Tired of trying to make ends meet in this extortionate island, tired of working all the time, tired of trying to make sure Hattie will have a better life than I can provide. I take the plates to the table and half-smile at my daughter.

‘Sorry,’ I say.

She just smiles back. ‘Can you pass me a serviette?’ she says.

‘Napkin,’ I remind her. I’ve been reading a book on etiquette. It’s taking me forever as I fall asleep by the time I’ve read a couple of pages each night but I’m learning the ‘right’ way of doing things and what you’re meant to say in polite company. If Hattie’s going to have a better life, she needs to get it right, especially if she ends up at Oxford or Cambridge.

‘Yeah,’ she grins. ‘I know. Napkin, not serviette. Loo, not toilet. Thank you, not ta. Don’t burp at the dinner table. Don’t start eating until everyone else does. Honestly, Mum, you’re hilarious. Like anyone cares!’

‘It matters,’ I reply.

‘Only to you,’ Hattie says gently then she changes the subject, telling me about some homeless lad she bought a hot drink for earlier in the afternoon.

‘I hope you didn’t talk to him,’ I tell her.

‘Why not?’

‘You’re too trusting, even after all that business we went through. He could mug you! It’s nice to be charitable but you should hand him the drink and then move on quickly.’

‘He doesn’t seem very threatening. He’s got a dog.’

‘Dogs are dangerous.’

‘Not this one, she was smiling.’

‘Dogs don’t smile,’ I reply but I can feel a giggle bubbling up from within me. I let it out and it feels heavenly. Like a release. Hattie laughs too, and everything – just for a tiny moment – feels right with the world.

Chapter Three

Ben

The woman dashes off as soon as she spots my dog collar and I sigh. That bloody dog collar is the bane of my life. It works like a magnet for all the types of women I don't want to attract and a repellent for the ones I'm interested in. Not that I'm all that interested yet. It's only been nine months, after all, since Caitlin left me – for the second time.

It's early evening and I'm on my way to a meeting of all Jersey's clergy at the town church, a separate parish to Holy Saints, my church, which is also in town but on the outskirts. I hate these meetings. Vicars are so dreary and pompous and *worthy*. Well, not all of them, but there's a little group of island rectors who drive me mad. I'm sure some of them really are as kind-hearted as they like to make out but, to me, that's how they ruin it: when they get together it's like a competition to see which of them is the most charitable rector in Jersey, with the real purpose – helping people – getting lost in all the showing-off.

I arrive late and sneak in the back, though the heavy church door slams behind me and a series of pie-faced middle-aged men, as well as a handful of women (also pie-faced), shoot me impatient glares. As predicted, one of the rectors is holding forth about his latest 'even if I do say so myself' stupendous idea about raising money for some worthy cause.

I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket and try to hook it out of my jeans as sneakily as possible. I check the new message.

Hope all's hunky-dory. I've a new girl for you to meet. Harold and I will expect you for a fork supper tonight. 8pm. Don't be late!

I groan. My sister, Fiona. A decade older than me and honestly like some sort of escapee from Malory Towers – though she's a teacher at a school that's anything but. In fact, since she turned fifty she's been slowly merging Enid Blyton's

best student with Barbara Woodhouse, inclusive of the yapping dogs.

Within half an hour I realise I can't hack the meeting a moment longer and perform what Caitlin told me is called an 'Irish goodbye' and what my sister calls 'sloping off'. On the way home I make a detour to see Jed, who's halfway through an Oasis number, though nobody is stopping to listen or chuck any coins his way.

'That was good,' I say when he's finished.

'You again,' Jed replies.

'Yep, I'm a pest. But seeing as how you're trespassing here just as much as I am, you can't get rid of me. Do you even have a permit to busk?'

'Of course I have. I'd have been given my marching orders without one.' He pauses. 'Look, why are you bothering with me?' he asks, not aggressively – just like he's trying to work me out.

'Because you're an enigma. You don't need to be busking and sleeping rough. There are shelters. I've given you all the info you need. You could get a pretty decent room, a proper roof over your head and some food in your belly. You'd get in easily – you're completely sober.'

'They wouldn't let me take Lola.'

'I've told you before, I could take care of her for you. And what about getting on a list for government housing?'

'No point – the list is really long. Stacey down at the Parade has been on it for over a year.'

I look at him appraisingly. 'You're looking for obstacles. Which leaves me wondering.'

'Wondering what?' Jed replies, looking down at Lola and gently pulling her towards him as if to use her as a shield from my probing.

'What are you punishing yourself for?'

His head shoots up at that and his blue eyes seem afraid. I think for a moment he might open up to me, but I can see him closing off as he utters the words I deserve.

‘How about you mind your own business? I’m not doing you any harm.’

‘Fair enough,’ I tell him. ‘Here, budge over.’ I hunker down next to him, a bit more out of the wind, and reach for a packet of fags from my pocket. ‘Want one?’ He pauses for a second before clearly deciding not to hold my questioning against me. He takes the cigarette and I light his first, then my own. We both inhale deeply then breathe out like a pair of dragons.

‘I’m surprised you don’t vape, like all the kids these days,’ I say.

‘Nah, got myself into the real thing at school and can’t see the point in switching for something that’s bound to be just as bad for you in the end.’

‘You might be right. Jed, you got any plans for supper tonight?’ I ask him.

He laughs. ‘Does it look like it?’

‘Do me a favour then. Come with me to my sister’s. She’s trying to fix me up with someone. I need some back-up.’

‘You don’t think she’ll mind you turning up with a tramp?’

‘She doesn’t need to know your circumstances. Come on,’ I say, stubbing out my fag and standing up.

‘What about Lola?’

‘She can house-sit the vicarage for me.’

Jed nods and picks up his stuff. I take his sleeping bag for him, and he brings his backpack and guitar. Lola follows on his heels without a lead.

We’re just turning the corner of the road when it happens. I hear a moped speeding along behind us. A second later, I feel somebody touching my bum. Startled, I look at Jed. Then I realise what’s happened: my wallet’s been swiped out of my back pocket.

‘Hang on!’ I shout, seeing the bike make off, the passenger with my wallet in his hand. I’ve heard of these crimes being committed all the time in London, but I’ve never heard of it happening in Jersey.

‘What’s going on?’ asks Jed, looking worried.

‘My wallet!’ I seethe. ‘Moped thieves!’ I’m absolutely fuming. I take a deep breath. *What would Jesus do?* I ask myself, as I often do when pushed to my limits. The driver mocks me with a little wave as he tantalisingly slows down then speeds up again.

‘You fuckers!’ I call out at them.

I’m pretty sure that’s not what Jesus would do.

Chapter Four

Jed

The vicar's sister is a force to be reckoned with. The house is some relic from years gone by and so is Fiona, who looks a bit flustered to find me standing at the front door with her brother. She has bushy brown hair, rabbit-in-the-headlights eyes and a florid complexion that suggests a love of either the outdoors or wine or maybe both.

'You've brought a pal?' she says to Ben, smiling brightly but rigidly.

'Hope that's okay,' Ben says, and he brushes past her into the house. I follow, feeling slightly awkward.

'Shoes!' Fiona barks at the vicar before he gets further than the front hallway. I've already taken mine off, well trained by my mother. Ben stops and takes off his Converse then throws them towards the front door, making Fiona flinch. She takes us through to the kitchen where four dogs, all terriers, start yapping away and jumping up at us all, making me laugh.

'Down Anton! Down Shirley!' she shrills. 'Now, get off him Darcey, you naughty girl!'

'So this must be Craig?' I ask, realising she must have named her dogs after the judges on *Strictly Come Dancing*.

'Well done you! Quick off the mark! My favourite show. Heralds the start of the Christmas season for us. The new series starts this month, though of course Darcey left a long while ago now! I miss her.'

'You could re-name the dog?' I suggest.

Fiona looks aghast. 'You can't do that! Re-name a dog!'

'I'm pretty sure my dog used to have a different name. She was a stray. I call her Lola.'

I can see Ben looking a tiny bit uncomfortable as I guess he wonders where this thread of conversation might lead.

‘Well, how jolly kind of you, to take on a stray!’ Fiona says but she’s already distracted by the arrival in the kitchen of a man who I assume is her husband. Appropriately, he looks pretty much like a dog himself – one of those jowly ones with droopy eyes. He has a scarlet face, too.

‘Come on everyone!’ he booms. ‘Abigail’s through there and I’ve run out of conversation already!’

‘Sounds promising,’ says Ben.

‘Yes, off you go,’ Fiona insists, shooing us out of the kitchen. ‘Harold and I will bring drinks through in just a min. And some salty snacks. That’s it, off you go... No, doggies! You stay here with me.’

Ben leads the way through to the sitting room where there’s a coal fire lit even though it’s only September and the fancy curtains are pulled across now that the evenings are getting dark earlier. ‘Whore’s drawers’ my mother used to call these types of curtains. She always went for minimal furnishings herself. Sitting beside the fire, perched on an armchair and looking as if she’s not absolutely certain she wants to see this through, is Abigail.

I feel a sudden heart-swoop as I realise she reminds me of the girl who gave me the hot chocolate earlier today. She has a different colouring – darker – but there’s something about the tilt of her head. The eyes are similar, too – a pretty, almond shape. I try to process the heart-swoop, but I can’t really pinpoint why recollecting that girl – who I only met for a moment – would cause such a reaction.

‘Nice to meet you, I’m Ben,’ the vicar says, shaking her hand. I introduce myself too, and then Ben and I sit down on the sofa opposite Abigail. The sofa feels like marshmallow beneath my weary body.

We all smile at each other, desperately trying to think of something to say. Then, of course, we all try to speak at the same time. Fortunately, Fiona comes rushing through a moment later, bearing a tray laden with glasses of sherry and bowls of crisps and nuts. I feel my belly rumble and as soon as she puts the ‘salty snacks’ down beside me I find myself

forgetting my manners and devouring the lot. Fiona stares at me, looking horrified, then takes the bowls back to the kitchen, presumably to re-fill them.

‘You’re hungry?’ Abigail asks in a little mouse voice.

‘Oh, he’s always ravenous, aren’t you Jed?’ Ben says, smiling.

‘How do you know each other?’ Abigail asks politely, her hands clasped together on her knees.

Ben and I look at each other. ‘Just from round and about,’ I tell her, vaguely. Fiona is back with more crisps and nuts which she cleverly places beside Abigail, who puts one little crisp in her mouth and nibbles on it. She really is mouse-like.

I decide to excuse myself and ask Ben to direct me to the loo. I find it along the hallway and after locking the door behind me I look around, savouring the detail. A sink, a shower, and a loo, all in a funny green colour (save for the fluffy loo seat cover, which is pink) but sparkingly clean. I run my hands over the shining sink, try out the soap. Even this is old school Imperial Leather. I eye the shower, deliberate for a moment, and then quickly strip off, jumping into the cubicle and enjoying for two brief minutes the hot pounding water on my aching limbs. I use the Imperial Leather all over my body, hair, face and beard and emerge feeling like a new man. I feel it would be a liberty too far to use the large fluffy towel on the heated rail, so I rub myself down with a hand towel and quickly dress again.

I return to the sitting room feeling a bit sheepish but, despite my damp hair, no-one seems to suspect that I’ve been busy showering. After a little more stilted conversation Fiona tells us supper is served and we all troop along to the kitchen where I see a steaming shepherd’s pie in the centre of the table. Aside from the crisps and nuts, I haven’t eaten since this morning when I had an Egg McMuffin at McDonald’s and I have to restrain myself from grabbing hold of the dish and stuffing the whole lot down me. Once my portion is served, I tuck in, not waiting for the others (which I know is rude, but I’m desperate) and decide that the food makes the excruciating

social side of the evening worth it. Fiona is a good cook. I have second helpings and then pudding – black forest gateau served with Viennetta ice cream.

The conversation seems to improve while we eat. You can see that Ben is very good at putting people at their ease – I guess he has to be with his job. Abigail remains timid but she speaks up whenever she's asked a question. I deflect all questions out of loyalty to Ben, who in his own unique way has provided me with the best meal I've had in a very long time.

I think it's pretty clear there's going to be no romance between Ben and Abigail but as we all sit round the table drinking coffee, Fiona clears her throat.

'So, what do we think then? Do you like each other? Will you be meeting up again?'

I want to crawl under the table. Judging by the looks on their faces, so do Ben and Abigail. They eye each other desperately.

'If you want to join one of the Alpha courses – I could give you my number, you could give me a ring and we can organise that,' Ben suggests. Well played.

'I don't mean to do with *churchy* stuff,' Fiona guffaws. I think she may have had one glass of wine too many. 'Or is romance dead these days?'

Poor Abigail. I have to save this. 'Actually, Abigail, I was wondering if I could give you my number? I mean, maybe we could meet some time for coffee?'

Abigail sweetly programmes the number of my pay-as-you-go into her phone and, after shooting me a look of gratitude, Ben begins his goodbyes, Harold affably thumping him on the back. 'Been pipped at the post by your mate, here. Ah well, all's fair in love and war and all that, eh?'

Fiona has a face like thunder when we say goodbye to her. I can hear her muttering in Ben's ear. 'I'm sure she won't be interested in him really. He's at least a decade younger than her! *And* he looks like he needs a good wash! I'll give you her

number. You can take her out for supper. A terrible waste of my time otherwise!’

Ben murmurs, no doubt trying to placate her, and then steers me out of the door.

‘I don’t know about you, but I need one of these,’ Ben says, pulling out his packet of fags. He lights one up and passes it to me, then puts his own to his mouth. ‘Bloody hell!’ he says.

‘Your sister...’

‘I know.’

When we reach the vicarage, I call Lola and grab my stuff, about to head to the car park.

‘Don’t go,’ the vicar says. ‘It’s cold tonight. I’ve got a perfectly good spare room. Stay and have a drink with me. Stay the night.’

It’s tempting. But then I think of *him* and I know I can’t. The vicar thinks there’s an element of self-punishment to my homelessness. He’s perceptive.

‘No,’ I say. ‘But thanks.’

He sighs. ‘Goodnight,’ he replies as he watches me and Lola go. ‘God bless.’

Chapter Five

Hattie

I'm at the library again. I've taken to keeping an eye on the homeless lad. It's quite fascinating, really, because he has a routine of sorts, which I wouldn't have expected from someone who's homeless. I only ever see him between four and five, but even within that hour I can see there's a pattern. Just after four he takes out a little brush from his pocket and grooms his dog. He does it really gently and I can imagine him being rewarded with that doggie smile.

Then he picks up his guitar and tunes it, before playing for about half an hour. If he's lucky a couple of people throw him some coins. It's crazy how many people cross the road to avoid passing by him. I feel sorry for him. He seems like a perfectly decent guy to me. He doesn't deserve to be so obviously shunned.

After playing for a bit he retreats further back into the doorway and shuts his eyes, maybe having a power nap, and just as I'm packing up my bag to head for home I see him yawn and stand up, stretching into some yoga poses, ruffling his dog's head.

You'll have gathered from this detail that not a lot of homework is getting done. I try to focus on the English essay I need to finish but I'm distracted by the fact that, today, there's no sign of him. He's not there, there's no sign of the dog, his stuff isn't there. It's like he's vanished without a trace. After five minutes I know I'm not going to get anything done while I'm wondering about the guy. I shove all my stuff into my bag and run out of the library on to the street. I go across to the closed-down shop and check out the doorway, like I'm searching for clues, but there's nothing there.

I decide to have a little wander around town, just to see if he's set up home elsewhere. I head straight down Halkett Place then turn left up towards Boots and along the little street behind. I smell fried food as I walk along. I'm about to head up to Snow Hill when I spot his dog lying outside McDonald's

next to a bowl of water. I head inside and look around but he's not sitting at any of the tables. I decide to get some fries to keep me going until tea, even though I know they'll do my acne no favours. I head up to the server, some beardy guy with a red cap on.

'Can I get some fries please?' I ask.

The guy smiles, his blue eyes twinkling. 'Are they for you or have you spotted a drug-using tramp who looks a bit hungry?'

I look at him properly this time and realise it's the homeless lad, working at McDonald's!

'Oh, it's you!' I say, handing over the exact money.

'You look surprised.'

'I thought you were maybe eating here. I saw your dog outside. I didn't think you'd be *working* here.'

'Why not?' he asks.

I feel my cheeks flaming. 'I... I suppose I just thought that if you're homeless you wouldn't have a job.'

'Everyone always thinks that. It's a bit of a generalisation. A lot of us tramps do have jobs. But this is an expensive place to live. My wage here isn't enough to get me even a skanky bedsit; the government housing list is as long as your arm. And I literally had nothing, not even a pound to my name, before I started working here... so there you go, I'm saving for a deposit and then, well, we'll see.'

'Right,' I say, still embarrassed.

'Here's your fries,' he says, handing them to me.

'Do you want any?' I ask. 'Or a burger or something?'

'I get a meal during my break as part of the deal.'

'Ah, okay.'

'But thanks,' he says. I see him look behind me and realise a queue has begun to build up. I'm about to step away when I decide to go against every bit of advice on the subject of

‘stranger danger’ my mum has ever given me – particularly after the trouble a couple of years ago.

‘I’m Hattie, by the way.’

The guy smiles. ‘I’m Jed.’ Then he does the funniest thing. He holds out his hand for me to shake! I think Jed might even be *posh*.

Chapter Six

Christine

There's something going on with Hattie. She seems distracted and, although she goes to the library after school every day, I'm not sure she's getting any quality work done while she's there. I've seen her hastily finishing off essays while eating breakfast when she should have plenty of time to get everything completed if she's really studying.

I don't like to be one of those helicopter parents. I wouldn't have the time for one thing. But today I decide to spy on her. I know, my own child. Shoot me down in flames. As soon as I finish at Tesco I scuttle along to the library, knowing she should be there for at least another ten minutes. I pull my beanie hat down so that I'm not obviously recognisable and then make my way inside. It smells book-ish and feels all drowsy and peaceful.

I sneak behind bookshelves and finally spot Hattie upstairs, sitting at a desk by the window. I feel relieved to see her where she should be, getting on with her work. Though after a few minutes of observing her, I realise she hasn't actually focused once on the laptop in front of her or the book beside her. Her gaze is completely fixed on the window. What on earth is she looking at? I sidle my way to the window nearest to me and peer through it but there's nothing that stands out. Perhaps she's in a daydream. I keep my eye on her but she doesn't do a jot of work and then, finally, she puts everything away into her bag and makes her way out of the library. I follow her, feeling underhand and concerningly like my nosy neighbour Rhonda.

Outside, the wind has got up and I hear crisp autumn leaves blowing along the street. I expect Hattie to turn right out of the library towards home, but instead I see that she crosses the road. I stand outside the library doors and watch as she approaches a shut-up shop. I wonder what she's doing before realising there's a person sitting in the doorway with a dog. The homeless man she mentioned, it must be. I see her chat to him for a bit and then, my stomach lurching with fear, I watch

as he gives her something. Whatever it is, she keeps it gripped in her hand as she leaves him, turning left along the street.

I'm frozen in horror. Drugs. It must be! This homeless kid is supplying her with drugs! I'm torn between storming over to the guy and having it out with him and following my daughter before she has a chance to 'pop' the pill or whatever it is he's given her. I decide to race after Hattie.

'Wait right there, young lady!' I shout as I approach her from behind. She turns around, looking startled and guilty. 'Don't you dare get rid of that,' I tell her. 'Hand it over now!'

She blushes deeply, her pretty face bright pink. 'What are you talking about?' she says, looking around as though keen to ensure none of her friends might witness this scene.

'What did he give you?' I ask. 'That homeless kid. Show me. Come on, it was drugs wasn't it?'

Hattie looks at me defiantly. 'Have you been *following* me?' she asks.

'That's none of your business. For pity's sake, just show me what's in your hand before I lose it completely!'

She holds out her fist and gently unfurls it. And there, in the centre of her palm, is a wooden cross. I feel a bit dizzy, the wind completely taken out of my sails.

'A *cross*?' I say.

'It's for luck,' she mumbles. 'I told him I was nervous about my interview tomorrow for the exhibition place at the Christmas craft fair, so he lent me this. A vicar gave it to him.'

For a moment I think drugs might have been easier to deal with. This situation – completely unexpected – throws up all sorts of questions. Exactly how friendly is Hattie with this kid? Why is he giving her a *cross* of all things?

'Were you going to tell me about this?' I ask her.

Hattie shakes her head. 'I know how you feel about... you know, religion and stuff.'

'It's not that I'm worried about!'

‘What then?’

I sigh and put my arm around her, the adrenaline wearing off and leaving me feeling wrung-out. ‘Come on,’ I say. ‘Let’s head home.’

Hattie falls into step with me on the pavement and leans her head against my shoulder, her hair tickling my cheek. She’s nearly as tall as me these days.

‘I forgot about the fair.’

‘You’ve been busy,’ Hattie says. ‘We haven’t had much time to chat lately.’

‘I know,’ I say, guilt coursing through my veins. ‘Is the competition tough?’

‘Yeah, there are so many crafters and only a limited amount of space in the Royal Square.’

‘Just show them those amazing Christmas stockings you made last year and you’ll be a dead cert. How about Toby?’ I ask, trying to keep my voice neutral. ‘Is he going to exhibit his stuff too?’

Hattie rolls her eyes. ‘I should never have told you about Toby and that red rose!’

‘I thought it was sweet. Romantic.’

‘A red rose on Valentine’s Day? So cheesy! Anyway, that was ages ago.’

‘Don’t you think he’s in love with you anymore then?’ I ask.

‘In *love*? Life isn’t some stupid fairy tale, Mum. A prince falls in love with a girl with stupidly long hair and they live happily ever after. Blah blah blah.’

We’re nearly home now but I stop and turn to my daughter. ‘You sound jaded,’ I say. ‘I don’t want you to be like that, just because my experience of love didn’t have a happy ending. You’ve got it all to come.’

We approach the alleyway that leads to our flat, where I feel my shoulders tensing as I hear Rod Stewart playing in the

neighbour's flat again (something that's begun to drive me daft). Before we head in, Hattie looks at me and I try to read the expression on her face. But I can't. For the first time in seventeen years, I realise Hattie has started to become unreadable.

Chapter Seven

Ben

I'm in the Central Market a few days after that dreadful supper at Fiona's. I've chosen some sunflowers but as the florist wraps them I remember I have no way of paying for them. I cancelled all my cards and the new ones aren't due to arrive until this afternoon.

'Look, I don't suppose I could get these flowers on account could I? Only I had my wallet stolen...'

The woman looks at me as if that's a likely story and shakes her head. 'Sorry, cash or card only. Do you want them or not?'

'He wants them,' says a voice and I turn around to see Jed and Lola standing behind me. He takes a tenner out of his wallet and passes it to the florist.

'No!' I protest. 'You can't do that!'

'You can owe me. I know where you live,' Jed says, smiling. He has one of those smiles that changes his whole face, turning him from almost sullen to lit-up in an instant. I can't believe I'm borrowing money off a homeless kid.

'Thank you. Really, I can't thank you enough!' I gush, as the florist hands over ten pence change.

Jed flicks the change into a charity collection pot, then shrugs, and in unspoken agreement we head out of the market together, down towards the library. 'Who are they for?' Jed says. 'If you don't mind me asking.'

'A woman.'

Jed raises his eyebrows.

'And eighty-four years old,' I tell him, offering him a smoke. We pause while I light our fags. 'Joyce, she's called. She's up at the hospice: hasn't got long left. She's one of my parishioners.'

Jed shudders. 'I don't know how you do all that shit. All the dying stuff.'

‘People are afraid of death. But I’ve got used to it. Unless it’s a child. You never get used to that.’

‘But what do you say to the people dying and their families? Don’t you feel like you’re just coming up with a load of clichés?’

I laugh. ‘Nah, I don’t say much really. I just let them talk. Some don’t want to admit they’re dying, even to the last minute, so we talk about the weather or the football or whatever. Then you get a lot of people who want to get burning secrets off their chest.’

‘Is that the case with Joyce?’ Jed asks as we approach his doorway.

‘Not so far, but people never fail to surprise me.’

I say goodbye to Jed and make my way towards the hospice. Joyce is propped up in bed. Her skin is yellow and clammy-looking and her breathing is ragged. I think today’s the day. I’ll need to gather in her family and read her the last rites. I’m about to call her daughter when I see her open one eye.

‘You’re here,’ she croaks.

‘Yes,’ I say, pocketing my phone.

‘The handsome vicar.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ I say, laughing.

‘Like that one off of *Grantchester*.’ She always says this. She thinks I’m like James Norton. Sadly I’m not, but I am ginger. I busy myself finding a vase for the flowers, filling it with water and then plonking the sunflowers in.

‘I need to tell you something,’ Joyce wheezes, looking troubled. ‘While we’re on our own. You won’t tell a soul, will you? Just between us. Got to get it off my chest, you see.’

I pull up a chair next to her and listen.

‘I killed my sister,’ she says, just like that.

I don’t react. I just nod my head. ‘What happened?’

‘They brought her home from the hospital. Like a doll, she was. Better than a doll. I loved her. I really did. She was in her basket and her blanket had slipped. I thought she was cold so I went and got my doll’s blanket and I put it over her, made sure her face wasn’t cold either. I went off and played with my doll after that – dressed her up while I waited for my sister to wake up. Then I heard my mother screaming. I’d smothered her, vicar.’

I look at Joyce and see the tears glistening in her rheumy eyes. I put my hand over hers.

‘They never forgave me – my mum and dad. Not really.’

‘How old were you, Joyce?’

‘I was two. My first memory. I’ve never told another soul. Not my husband, God rest him, or my children. I’ve clutched my sorry secret to me for eighty-two years. The pain and the guilt. But I don’t want to go without telling someone. I’m sorry to burden you, vicar.’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ I tell her. ‘You were two years old. You were just trying to look after your sister. Did you never ask yourself the most important question about that day?’

‘What’s that?’ Joyce croaks. I can see she’s tiring.

‘Where were your parents? Why had they left their toddler alone with their new-born?’

‘I never thought of that,’ she admits. ‘But they never forgave me, regardless.’

‘I think, most likely, they never forgave themselves. Just as *you’ve* never forgiven yourself. Can you do that for me now?’ I ask her, gripping her hand as I feel her slipping away from me. ‘Can you let it go at last?’

‘Isn’t forgiveness up to that God of yours?’ she asks, with a faint smile.

‘He never had anything to forgive you for.’ Those are the last words she hears. I don’t get to call in Joyce’s family or administer the last rites. I choose to think, after I open the

window to let her soul pass through, that her face, lying against the pillow, looks more peaceful.

Once I've dealt with all the necessary formalities and spoken to Joyce's daughter it's the afternoon. I leave the hospice and start my walk home to make a late lunch.

On the way back I stop in the park and sit down on a bench, lighting up. As ever, when I've been so close to death, I notice the world around me with fresh eyes, as if I've only just been born. The conkers fallen from tawny-leaved trees. The scudding, pink-tinged clouds in an autumnal sky. The precious sound of a child laughing. And I think of her. Always. Caitlin. Caitlin and all her secrets and all her vices and all the feelings I still have for her, even though it's nine long months since she left.

Then I go home and find my new cards waiting for me. I have some lunch and then walk to the nearest bank, withdraw some cash, and go to find Jed.

'With interest,' I say, handing him a twenty-pound note.

'You don't need to do that.'

'I know.' I hand him a fag and he lights it, sheltering the flame of his lighter from the wind.

'Did she die?' he asks, exhaling.

I sigh. 'Yeah.'

'Burning secret?'

'A sad, burning secret.'

'Can't be many of us that don't have one of those,' Jed remarks, as he studies the cigarette held between his tanned, slim fingers on hands that look young and smooth. Not a homeless person's hands. And I look at him and wonder, again, what his secret is.

Chapter Eight

Jed

We're becoming quite friendly really, Hattie and me. I look forward to seeing her. I look out for her.

'How'd it go?' I ask her when she brings me a bacon sandwich before school. She has some Bonios for Lola too and immediately starts to feed her.

'I got it, the exhibition space!' she says, and I've not seen her look so full of vitality before. She's buzzing. 'I can't believe it! I'm going to have to work really hard to get everything made between now and the end of November, but I'm so happy! Your cross must have done the trick. Here you are.' She takes it out of her pocket to give it to me. I put my hand out to take it and notice it feels warm. Which doesn't surprise me. Hattie is the warmest person I've ever come across. She moans a bit about her mum, who's raised her alone, but she must be a pretty decent person to have brought up someone like Hattie.

'I'll have to come and help you – do the wrapping or something.'

Hattie smiles. 'I'd love that! But you'll have to look out for my mum. She saw you give me the cross – thought you were dealing me drugs!'

I laugh. 'I hope you put her right!'

'I did, but a cross isn't much better as far as she's concerned.'

'How come?'

'My dad was a vicar. Left her when she was pregnant with me... She's hated anything to do with religion ever since.'

'Are you in touch with him?'

'No. He didn't want to know. I've never met him.'

She looks sad. I feel for her.

‘They’re not all bad – vicars. I’ve met a nice one, the one who gave me that cross.’ At that moment I see my vicar walking along the street towards us. ‘Talk of the devil, this is him now.’

A minute later Ben approaches, smiling broadly, just as I finish off my sandwich.

‘You must be Hattie!’ he says. ‘I’ve heard all about you. Did you get the gig? At the Christmas fair?’

‘Yes,’ she says, looking a little disconcerted that Ben seems to know all about her. I shouldn’t have blabbed to him – she’ll think I’m a weirdo.

‘Ben’s sister’s a teacher!’ I say as a diversion, seizing on this irrelevant fact.

‘Which school?’ Hattie asks, smiling.

‘Ferndale.’

‘That’s my school! What’s her name?’

Ben looks a bit embarrassed. ‘Fiona. Fiona Carter.’

Fair play to her, Hattie’s smile doesn’t slip. ‘She’s been there forever. She’s my English teacher. I’m going on a trip with her to Oxford next week.’

‘Why Oxford?’ I ask.

Hattie blushes faintly. ‘It’s for students who are supposed to be Oxbridge material – which I’m not,’ she quickly adds. ‘But my mum’s convinced I’m bright enough to get in, so she made me push for a place on the trip. Even though she’s had to take on extra work to pay for it.’

‘Well, you must be promising enough if the school agreed for you to go,’ says Ben, passing me a lit fag. I nod to thank him.

‘It’s only because they needed six students to make the trip worthwhile and my friend Mimi dropped out so there was a space.’

‘Well, even so...’ Ben perseveres. ‘Do you *want* to go? To Oxford or Cambridge?’ he asks, rubbing his hands as if trying

to warm up. It's one of those cold, misty September mornings that will probably end up boiling once the sun breaks through.

Hattie frowns. 'I'll know once I've had a look round, I guess.'

'Look,' says Ben. 'It's nippy standing around here. How about I take you both out for a coffee? If you don't mind hanging out with a boring old vicar for half an hour?'

'Have you got time before school?' I ask Hattie and she nods. 'Well, if you're paying then we'll put up with your boring company,' I say to Ben and we all troop along the pavement to a café I've never spotted before, not far from the hospital.

'It's Portuguese,' Ben says. 'Serves the best coffee. And you have to try the Pastéis de Nata.'

'What are they?' Hattie asks, her head tilted in that sweet way she has.

'Custard tarts like you've never tasted before.'

I stub out my fag and leave Lola outside. We find a table in the café, though most of the customers are sitting at tables on the pavement despite the cool weather. The owner, a young-ish woman with curly black hair and an open face, comes over and kisses Ben on both cheeks.

'Lucia!' Ben says warmly and she chunters away to him, half in English and half in what I assume is Portuguese. Then she takes our order and comes back five minutes later with coffee for me and Ben, hot chocolate for Hattie, and the custard tart things, which are – as Ben promised – pretty damn good.

'How do you know Lucia?' I ask as I sip my coffee.

'She helped me out once... An important time. At Christmas last year.'

'Christmas,' I repeat, and I can't keep the loathing out of my voice. 'I hate Christmas,' I say.

'It can be a tricky time of year,' Ben replies. I expect Hattie to tell us off for being miseries and tell us how much she loves

it – especially as she’s doing this Christmas fair thing – but she just nods.

‘You’re not keen either?’ I ask.

She sighs. ‘I love the *idea* of it. I’d love it if I was like one of those people in the John Lewis adverts or in one of the films, but it just never lives up to expectations. My mum tries, she really does, but to be honest I’m always just glad when it’s all over.’

‘Jesus would be really depressed to hear us talking,’ Ben says, with laughter in his voice. ‘Although you’re not alone. Every year on Christmas Day I look at my congregation and think to myself that at least half of them won’t know any joy despite the pressure we all feel to be jolly and happy.’ Ben looks at Hattie. ‘What would your ideal Christmas be like then?’ he asks her.

She looks into the distance, her eyes all dreamy as I see her imagination starting to whirr. ‘There’s a cabin, a cosy little log cabin – everything wooden inside it, like a little Wendy house but on a bigger scale. Outside it’s snowing, obviously, but inside it’s cosy and warm, a log burner blazing away and a Christmas tree – a real one – twinkling with lights, or maybe even real candles like in the olden days. There’s a bed in one of the rooms – a massive wooden sleigh bed, piled with cosy bedding and goose-down pillows – and in the kitchen there are amazing smells, cooking smells, and people, a group of people who love each other, who chatter and drink mulled wine and laugh and dance and the music is all that mellow Bing Crosby sort of music and...’

She pauses to take a breath then shakes her head. ‘Sorry, I got a bit carried away there. And it’s all just a dream, isn’t it? But you can’t blame me for dreaming.’

Ben looks a bit pained. Raw, almost. I wonder if there might even be tears in his eyes. ‘No,’ he agrees. He clears his throat. ‘Dreams are good. Dreams and memories. We need them. We really do.’

Chapter Nine

Hattie

On the day I'm flying over to England I get myself completely ready and then go to say goodbye to Jed and Lola. I tell Mum I've run out of deodorant and that I need to nip to Boots. She's not really listening, anyway – she's too busy checking and re-checking my bag to ensure for the twentieth time that I have my passport and enough cash and woolly jumpers that are 'warm yet smart'.

'Hey, you look good,' says Jed as I approach him. I'm wearing one of the knits, with skinny black jeans and biker boots. I've dried my hair straight, my skin isn't too bad right now, and for once in my life I feel quite sleek.

'Thanks,' I reply, smiling. 'I'm off in half an hour. Just came to say goodbye.'

Jed shakes his head and laughs ruefully.

'What is it?' I ask.

'Just... this...' he says, shrugging. 'This future Oxbridge student bothering to say goodbye to some homeless dropout. God, you probably won't even remember my name once you start at university. I'll be a distant memory.' He looks a bit sad.

'You're forgetting that I'm highly unlikely to get in! And I'm not going to forget you, Jed.'

'You say that now, but you will. Don't get me wrong. You don't need to get the violins out. I'd much rather you *did* forget me. One of us needs to get on in life. You have everything at your fingertips.'

'How about you?' I ask, bravely. I've never asked him before why he's homeless. It seems too impertinent. But now feels like my chance. 'You're clearly an educated guy. You're only a bit older than me. Why don't you have everything at your fingertips too?'

He rummages around in his pocket and finds a cigarette, taking his time lighting it. He looks at me as he inhales, then he blows the smoke out the side of his mouth.

‘I’ve had a tough time,’ he says. ‘Maybe one day I’ll tell you about it. If you’re still interested.’

‘Of course I will be.’

‘Yeah,’ Jed smiles. ‘We’ll see. Now you go and have a blast, okay? Get off this rock and see what the world has to offer you. Will you come and tell me about it, once you get back?’

‘I could message you while I’m there.’

Jed frowns. ‘You know what, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you use your phone.’

‘Yeah, well, I try not to. Something happened... Shall I take your number?’

But Jed shakes his head. ‘Nah, I never have any credit. And I quite like that what we have is *real*, if you know what I mean? I can wait.’

‘I’ll come and find you,’ I say. I hover, awkwardly. Jed puts out his cigarette and then leans towards me and I move forward, into his arms. In case you’re wondering (because I know I would), he doesn’t smell bad. It’s really weird, because he actually smells pretty good. Of body spray. And his clothes have that particular kind of launderette washing powder smell about them. Even the cigarette smoke is okay on him.

I realise, as I walk away, that I still smell of his body spray – and that I don’t want it to fade.

As soon as I arrive at the Travelodge in Oxford I feel homesick. The building is big and impersonal and on a noisy road and I’m sharing a room with a dorky girl called Erica. She’s bagged the best bed, next to the window, leaving me with the one next to the tiny en suite and the continual sound of its extractor fan. Erica has immediately curled up on her bed with a book, sucking her thumb and twiddling her hair as she reads. She breathes heavily and I can imagine how the

heavy breathing will turn into snores later. It's mid-afternoon and it's raining outside. Mrs Carter has told us all that we can either 'unpack and settle in' until we meet for tea in the hotel restaurant at six or we can go with her for an 'initial exploratory session at St Hilda's'.

Hoping it might make me feel better, I quickly head down to the lobby to find Mrs Carter and a couple of the true Oxbridge candidates – Gareth and Selma – who I've only ever passed in the school corridor before now. How is it fair that Selma can be so intelligent *and* so pretty? She seems nice, too. They're all studying a map of the city. After a fair amount of faffing about we head out into the rain where we stand around waiting for the bus and, as we're drizzled on, I realise straightening my hair this morning was a waste of time.

The bus deposits us on a street that Mrs Carter promises us is close to St Hilda's.

'I know you won't *necessarily* want to apply to St Hilda's,' she says as she takes the lead and we all follow like ducks. 'But it was my college and I've such fond memories. What fun we had!'

I try to imagine Mrs Carter as a young person but, studying her reddish-purple face, completely make-up free, and her bushy hair, which is brown with a smattering of silver, it's impossible. She looks decades older than her brother. He's quite nice-looking for a vicar.

'It was all girls back then, of course,' Mrs Carter continues. 'But that's changed like everything else has these days. Here we go look, just up here... Look at the Hall Building! Isn't it magnificent?'

I shiver just looking at it – a huge gothic place that looks like something out of a novel. In the teeming rain it looks both grand and depressing. The only appealing thing as far as I'm concerned is the river that runs alongside the college, the water reminding me of home, where it's impossible to be more than ten minutes away from the sea.

'The River Cherwell,' Mrs Carter chunters on, while we mill about. 'Wonderful to be so close to the water. We used to

keep a little boat. I expect it's still here. Ah, now that's probably Mr Piper over there. He's going to be showing us around. Come along troops!'

We follow her and with every step we take from one building to the next, the more out of my depth I feel. This is a place for intelligent people – not just the reasonably bright, but the properly intellectual. Not only that but – despite the fact that I'm sure the university tries to be as diverse as possible nowadays – it still has a whiff of privilege about it: I know that I would always feel like an imposter here.

'And here's an example of one of the student bedrooms,' says Mr Piper and he takes us into an icy little room that feels dark and soulless despite the history of the building. I think of home, of our very modest flat with batty Rhonda next door, and my warm bedroom filled with my precious possessions, where there's an old armchair next to the bed that Mum comes and sits on to chat to me while I work on my craft projects. I know I'm not even going to get into this university, but I suddenly feel slightly panic-stricken – as if I'm never going to be allowed to escape.

After what feels like hours, we make our way back to the bus stop. I spot a coffee shop and, feeling chilled to the bone by the never-ending rain, I suggest we go and have a cup of tea.

'Jolly good plan,' says Mrs Carter and this is the most cheering part of the day.

It's one of those old-fashioned coffee shops where the staff members waft around in long black dresses with white aprons over the top, like they're in *Downton Abbey*, and it feels warm and snug. There's a pleasant sound of clattering plates and we manage to bag a table next to a steamed-up window. We hang our dripping coats on the backs of our chairs and place our order with a waitress who has a deep smoker's voice, a heavily lined face and cropped grey hair.

'I'll have a hot chocolate please,' I tell her. 'And a scone.'

'Oooh yes,' says Mrs Carter. 'A scone! I'll have one of those too please, and a pot of tea.'

‘Certainly Madam,’ says the waitress, then she scribbles down what Gareth and Selma want and clomps off towards the kitchen.

‘How peculiar,’ says Mrs Carter, as she fiddles with a serviette.

‘What is?’ I ask.

‘That waiter. I know everything has to be gender-neutral, or whatever the expression is, nowadays, but why on earth do they make the waiters wear the dresses and aprons as well? I’m sure there must be a male equivalent...’

Selma and I look at each other across the table wide-eyed. I feel giggles bubbling up within me.

‘But she’s not a man,’ I say.

Mrs Carter looks at me sharply, like I’m messing with her. ‘Isn’t he?’ she asks, her cheeks burning up as she cranes her neck to look for the poor waitress. ‘Are you sure? I was convinced it was a man...’

‘No,’ I manage to say, though it comes out all squeaky, making Selma burst out laughing and earn a look of reproach from Mrs Carter. ‘And you can’t say “it”!’ I add. ‘It’s so offensive! You should at least say “they”.’

‘Oh God, he’s coming back,’ Selma whispers. ‘I mean *she*,’ she amends, forgetting all about “they”, and it’s all too much for me, the restrained laughter making my tummy muscles strain with the effort of keeping it all in.

‘Going to find the ladies,’ I manage to say, and Selma follows me. The two of us burst into a cubicle, lock the door, and then let all of our laughter out. We’re properly howling, and it feels so good to let the tension of the whole trip lift off me. It feels like it’s broken the ice between Selma and me, too, and we begin to chat together once we’re calm enough to return to the table. She’s definitely super bright but she really is nice too. I have that happy sensation of having made a friend.

Even so, I find myself wanting to relay the waitress story to my other new friend: Jed. I picture myself going for coffee

with him and the vicar and telling them about Mrs Carter's faux pas and I just know it would tickle them. Because despite everything he's up against, Jed still has a sense of humour. I long to know what led him to the path he's now on but he said he would tell me one day and I believe him. I'm curious, but I can wait.

'Penny for them,' Selma says to me from across the table and I realise I must have gone into a daydream.

'Just thinking about someone back home,' I explain.

Selma smiles. 'A special someone?'

I think about this.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I think he's pretty special.'

Chapter Ten

Christine

I can hardly bear Hattie being away from me, even though I was the one who pressured her into going. But every time my stomach lurches with the fear of her being so far away from me I imagine her in the ‘city of dreaming spires’, where she’s surrounded by all those people so hungry to learn, all those students receiving the very best education there is, served up in such stunning architecture. Okay, so I’ve not actually been to Oxford, but I’ve watched every episode of *Lewis* there is so I’ve got a fairly good idea.

As soon as she leaves, I sink into a bit of a decline if I’m honest. I think it’s not having her there to make an effort for. I don’t feel like eating, the flat starts to get messy, I bother even less with my appearance than I do usually.

It’s on the second night of her trip that I have a strange experience. It’s quite late, about nine, and Rhonda from next door is just playing *Maggie May* for the umpteenth time when I realise I’ve run out of milk. I nip to the shop on the corner, but it’s just closed so I head down near Sand Street car park to the Tesco along there. On my way, I come across that homeless friend of Hattie’s. He’s just sitting outside the car park with his dog. I slow down, about to say something to him, though I’m not quite sure what, when suddenly a figure lurches along the pavement towards me – clearly completely drunk.

‘Oh Jed, Jed, Jed,’ he slurs, as he stumbles towards the young man. I’m about to scurry off, slightly intimidated, but before I do I notice the streetlight glinting off a white band around the guy’s neck – unmistakably a dog collar. He’s young-ish and has red hair and I realise I recognise him. The vicar with the lovely voice who I was so rude to after he helped me. I pause, intrigued to witness what on earth is going on.

The homeless lad, presumably called Jed, stands up and tries to help the vicar stay upright.

‘What’s going on, mate?’ he asks.

‘It’s her, it’s all Caitlin. All Caitlin...’ he wails (no evidence of his deep, calm tones) then he starts to sob.

‘Look, I’ve no idea what you’re on about but I think we’d better get you home.’ Jed starts to pick up his stuff, but I realise he’s never going to manage to carry his backpack, his guitar, lead his dog *and* prop up the vicar.

‘Can I help?’ I say, looking at Jed. ‘I’m Hattie’s mum.’ He glances at me and smiles.

‘Thanks, could you take my guitar? I can manage the rest, and Lola will follow.’

‘Is it far?’ I ask as I fall into step beside Jed, who seems to know where he’s going.

‘About ten minutes, bit longer maybe... that’s right, Ben, come on... hang onto me and we’ll get you home.’ Ben is clinging to Jed like a little child but seems to have stopped crying.

I realise I might have been a bit judgemental about this Jed character. He’s obviously a kind person and he speaks very nicely. I can’t think why he’s living on the streets. I know he didn’t sell Hattie drugs in the end, but I can’t help thinking drugs must be the reason behind it all.

When we reach the vicarage Ben fumbles around for his keys and Jed takes them and opens the front door. I’ve not been in a vicarage for a very long time and I follow them slightly hesitantly, though I’m interested enough not to just dump the guitar and leave. I’m surprised by the condition of the house given the current state of its occupier. It’s warm and neat and homely. So homely, in fact, that I realise the vicar probably has a wife. No doubt this Caitlin person he was wailing about. Perhaps they’ve had a row. I know nosiness is not a good character trait but I’m far too fascinated to leave now.

‘Would you mind putting the kettle on?’ Jed asks as he shunts Ben off into the lounge. ‘Some black coffee might help...’

I find the kitchen and the coffee machine. While I wait for the water to heat up, I take in my surroundings. The kitchen units are dated (who am I to talk? The kitchen in the flat is like something out of the 1950s) but the room feels warm and calm, the appliances buzzing happily and a lamp on the pine dresser making the room all nice and mellow.

I go to the fridge to get the milk, realising I never did get my own, and see various community flyers attached to it by magnets. There's a photo, too, of a striking woman with long hair – an unusual colour. Not red, like the vicar's, but a sort of apricot. She has pale skin and mesmerising eyes; they're crinkling as she smiles but even so I can see they're enormous and the palest blue, baby blue. *This must be the wife*, I think to myself. I wonder where she is.

'I've made the two of us milky ones and here's a black one for the vicar,' I say a few minutes later as I take a tray bearing the three mugs, plus some biscuits, through to the lounge. Ben is slumped on the sofa, his head back and his mouth gaping open.

'Here we go, mate,' says Jed, prodding him. Ben opens one eye, then takes the mug and gulps the coffee down, wincing slightly at either the heat of it or the strength. He passes the mug back to Jed then leans forward, his head in his hands. I notice there are the embers of a fire in the grate and make myself busy loading on kindling and giving it a good stoke. I remember homely fires from my childhood in East Sussex and wish I could live somewhere with a proper fireplace. But then I feel bad – Jed doesn't have a home at all, after all, let alone one with a fire.

The vicar sits up all of a sudden and looks at Jed, then me. 'I know you,' he says, pointing at me. 'How do I know you?'

I feel myself blushing as I perch myself on a sofa. 'Oh, we just met in the street, that's all. I fell off the pavement. You helped me.'

'And you ran away!' he says, looking put out. 'You didn't like the look of me!'

‘It wasn’t that... I just don’t like vicars!’ I realise this is coming out all wrong, but Ben just laughs.

‘Neither do I,’ he says to me. ‘Neither do I.’ He looks at me with bloodshot eyes. ‘But the question is, why don’t *you* like them?’

I look uncomfortably at Jed, who’s sitting on the hearthrug stroking his dog, then at my bitten-down nails. I sigh. ‘I got knocked up by one,’ I say, deciding to be brutally honest. ‘He was a decade older than me. Very charming. What’s the word? Charismatic. He promised me everything but when I got pregnant with my girl, Hattie, he dropped me like a hot brick.’

‘Over here? In Jersey?’ asks Ben, looking a bit more sober, probably shocked by my admission.

‘No, back in the UK – Hastings, where I’m from. Jersey was my escape, when it all happened. A friend of mine invited me to stay with her; she was pregnant at the time too. Never left.’

Ben looks thoughtful. I wonder what he’s thinking. Then, ‘Bastard,’ he growls, and I smile. Jed looks at me, a sympathetic look on his face, too, and I realise I’m quite enjoying the company of these two strangers. Then it occurs to me that I have absolutely no reason to stay any longer.

‘Well,’ I say, draining my coffee. ‘I should go.’

Jed hops up, really polite. ‘Thanks so much,’ he says. ‘You know, for helping out.’ He casts a glance at Ben, who’s closed his eyes again.

‘No problem,’ I reply. I make my way towards the front door and open it. I turn to close it behind me and see Jed is there, holding it open.

‘How’s Hattie getting on?’ he asks at the last minute, as if he’s been plucking up the courage to mention her. As if he knows how disapproving I am of him.

‘She’s loving it,’ I say automatically, like I would to my work colleagues, before recognising that there’s no reason not to be honest with Jed. ‘Actually, she’s not that keen.’ I sigh. ‘But the weather’s been bad. She hasn’t seen it at its best. And

she's still got a couple more days there. I reckon she won't want to leave by the time they're due to come home!

'Yeah,' Jed says, looking a bit glum. 'I think you're probably right.'

Chapter Eleven

Ben

I'm no stranger to a hangover but this one is a blinder. I wake up on the sofa with a raging thirst and a banging headache. I open one eye and see that Jed is lying on the sofa opposite, asleep with an arm around his dog.

I try to remember the evening before. A date. My first proper date since Caitlin left. Not with that timid woman Fiona introduced me to, but with a stunning concert pianist I met at Joyce's funeral.

The date was perfect. We got on well. We laughed; we flirted. I found her attractive; she seemed to feel the same way about me. But then, tucked into a corner of that new cocktail bar, she kissed me. And it just felt wrong. Weird. I suddenly found myself unable to get Caitlin out of my head. She was always like that: always entangling herself in my thoughts throughout our relationship – throwing my usually steady character into highs and lows of emotions – day in, day out. That power of hers hasn't gone just because she's no longer in my life. So I had to stop her, this poor pianist. She stalked out of the bar, mortified, and I decided to drown my sorrows.

I try to remember how I got home then recall that Jed came to my rescue – no doubt the reason he's fast asleep in my sitting room. It wasn't just him who helped though. There was someone else – an attractive woman who looks like she's had a hard life. I can't for the life of me remember her name, but I know that she's Hattie's mother. The young girl Jed seems so keen on – which worries me because, let's face it, did you ever hear of a romance ending well between a homeless bod and an Oxbridge student?

I leave Jed with tasks to do for me while I endure two excruciating meetings, some sermon preparation for Sunday, and a row with one of the church flower arrangers, and by five thirty I realise that the only cure is going to be a hair of the dog. I head to Tesco and pick up a couple of bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon, then join the queue even though there are

loads of self-service tills available. I just can't get my head around them.

'It's dumb, isn't it?' says a voice, startling me. I look round and see Hattie's mother behind me in her shop uniform. 'I mean, look at us – standing in a queue when there's all those self-service ones free!'

'I was just thinking that. But every time I try to use one it goes wrong and I have to wait ages until a supervisor turns up.'

'Snap! That happened to me yesterday and I bloody work here! Your turn, look,' she says, nodding, and I take the bottles out of my basket and hand them over to the cashier.

'They're not for me,' I say to Hattie's mum and as soon as the lie has slipped from my lips, I regret it. 'I just... you know...'

'Communion wine?' the woman offers, a serious look on her face. Even I can't try and pass the wine off as the holy sacrament.

'No, I...'

'I'm kidding!' she says, smiling. 'So you're having a hair of the dog. Who can blame you, the state you were in last night!'

The cashier hands my card back to me and I loiter while Hattie's mum (I need to find out her name!) pays for her stuff, handing over some sort of staff discount card. She puts the modest groceries into a carrier bag she's brought with her.

'Look,' I say to her as we both head towards the exit. 'I'm embarrassed on so many levels. About last night, for one. But also – I'm afraid I can't remember your name.'

'It's not that you can't remember. I don't think I've told you it. I'm Christine.'

'Well, Christine, are you going to head home and pine for your daughter, or are you going to come and help me drink these?' I say, lifting up the bottles. Given my disastrous attempt at dating last night, I have no idea why I make this invitation. Something about Christine just makes me want to

know her even though she couldn't be more different from Caitlin. 'Jed's there, at the vicarage,' I add, 'so you won't just be stuck with me.'

Christine regards me for a moment, not quickly coming up with an excuse or enthusiastically agreeing. 'Alright,' she murmurs in the end, as if she's doing me a favour, and I smile to myself.

'We can walk from here,' I say.

'I know,' she replies. 'I helped you home last night, with Jed. I was just passing in the street, and I saw he was going to have trouble getting you home and carrying all his stuff, so I gave him a hand. That's how I ended up at the vicarage, making you coffee.'

'I do like a few drinks, I can't deny it,' I say, pausing a moment to light up. I take a drag then exhale, before turning to Christine. 'But I don't usually end up in that sort of state.'

'So what was it that drove you to drink last night then?' she asks me as we walk along the street together.

I don't want to mention her. How can I hope to ever start another relationship if I can't stop talking about my ex? But it's clear to me that Christine is the kind of person who won't hang around unless you're honest.

'I went on a date, but it was disastrous. I couldn't stop thinking about my wife. Caitlin. I can't...' I stop, to swallow the lump wedged in my throat. 'I can't get over her.'

'The woman with the apricot hair,' Christine says. 'The picture on your fridge. Who finished it?'

'She did. Twice.'

'Ouch.'

This makes me smile, despite everything. 'Yeah... ouch...'

'Come on,' she says, as we approach the front door of the vicarage. 'Let's get inside and warm up. You open that wine. Then you can tell me all about this Caitlin of yours. Right from the very beginning.'

Chapter Twelve

Jed

I stay the night in the end, the evening I help the vicar home with Hattie's mum. Only because I want to make sure he doesn't choke on his own vomit. I lie down on one of the sofas, but it's so comfortable I fall into a deep sleep and feel guilty when I wake up that I would hardly have known, even if Ben had choked. He's suffering with a hangover, and I tell him briefly what happened before starting to gather up my stuff.

'Don't rush off,' he says to me. 'I've got a few things to do today, more's the pity, but let's have some breakfast first. And if you've got time, I've got a few jobs I need a hand with if you want to earn a bit of cash?'

'Okay,' I say. 'I haven't got any work at McDonald's today. Depends what you need doing though.'

'Just stuff I never seem to have time to sort out, nothing too technical. Could you mow the lawn for me? Look at it,' he says, glancing out of the window. 'The garden's looking hideous. The mower's in the shed. And there's a stack of logs that need chopping and piling up by the back door and by the fire. Here's the log basket.'

'That's grim!' I say, taking in the nasty plastic tub the vicar uses to store his logs. He looks a bit taken aback.

'I used to have a nice one, but it fell apart and I haven't got round to replacing it. Just been using this plastic one – but I suppose it is a bit ugly.'

'I'll make you one,' I tell him. 'It's what I used to do with my dad. He taught me how to make baskets out of wood. Out of ash. We used to make all sorts of stuff together when he wasn't suffering too much with his back – he was great at woodwork. At one point I thought about becoming a carpenter, but my parents wanted me to pursue academic stuff.'

'Well, I'd love one of your baskets but I don't know that I've got the right tools. Or any of the right wood.'

I think about it. Mum will be at work, for sure. I can nip to the house and break into the garage – pick up some wood and tools. It's not like she ever goes in there. She'll never know.

'I'll sort it. It'll be good to do something useful.'

The vicar looks pleased – like he's happy to provide me with a bit of occupational therapy and get me off the streets for the day. Then he looks like he's trying not to look too pleased: like he thinks he has to play it cool. Which, in fairness, I guess he does.

We have breakfast and then Ben offers me the bathroom; I don't think there's anything better than being submerged in a bath listening to water thundering out of the taps. After that Ben drives me to St Aubin and I break into the garage (he stays in the car, claiming not to want to know what he's complicit in), collecting everything I need, then we head back into town, to the vicarage, and I set about the tasks.

It's a perfect autumn day and I start by raking all the orange-tinged leaves and heaping them into a pile on the patio. It's a lovely garden so I take a moment to explore it a bit more while I smoke a fag, finding an old greenhouse in a hidden corner. I take a look inside and I'm reminded of my dad, who used to love gardening despite having a long-standing back condition.

There's an old trampoline in another corner of the garden, covered in leaves, and a broken-down shed. It's a run-down place, really, and yet there's a very natural charm to it.

I get the mower out of the dilapidated shed and, after filling it with petrol, I set about the lawn. The garden is massive and I plough up and down it, taking an unexpected amount of enjoyment from trying to get the lines nice and straight. By the time I finish Ben is beckoning me in for lunch.

'How are you feeling?' I ask him as we sit ourselves down at his kitchen table.

'Grim! Never going to drink again...'

I raise my eyebrows and he smiles.

‘Here,’ he says, handing me a steaming bowl. ‘Chunky veggie soup.’

‘Smells good,’ I say. ‘Did you make it?’

‘I’d like to pass it off as my own but, no, I have an arrangement with Lucia from the café. She makes me batches of home-cooked food and I just stick it in the freezer.’

‘You’re no good at cooking, then?’

‘Useless. My wife, too...’

‘Caitlin?’ I ask.

The vicar clears his throat then closes his eyes. He opens them again. ‘Yes. Caitlin.’

‘You want to talk about her?’ I ask, but Ben just shakes his head.

‘How about you? Can you cook?’ he asks.

‘I’m not bad. My mother hated cooking, so my dad was always in charge – he was pretty nifty in the kitchen. I learnt a lot from him.’

‘Are they still alive?’ Ben asks carefully. ‘You mentioned them in the past tense.’

‘Did I?’ I say, feeling a mounting anxiety.

‘You don’t want to talk about them any more than I want to get on to the subject of Caitlin, do you? Tell you what – let’s just stick to neutral subjects shall we? Like... politics? Religion?’

I laugh, and we end up discovering a mutual passion for drumming, which takes us into safer territory.

‘I was in a band once,’ Ben explains. ‘We released a couple of albums. Very nearly made it.’

‘Called?’

‘Wired Ink.’

‘No way! I love Wired Ink! That explains the tattoos on your arms. I didn’t think they were very vicarly. And you did

make it, in a way. Just not mainstream. What happened, then? Why didn't you go global?'

Ben sighs. 'Ah, Caitlin again. After I met her, the music fell by the wayside. How come you're so musical?'

'My mum grew up with nothing except a deep Catholic faith. No money; no home for a lot of her life. But she's a very strong character. Without much education at all, she managed to find a way to become successful. So I was on the receiving end of everything – a private education, music lessons, anything I wanted I could have.'

'Lucky you!'

'No,' I tell him. 'Not lucky me.'

By the evening my new log basket is made, and I feel an intense satisfaction handing it over to Ben. I remember now how good it feels to make things with your hands and some basic tools. After admiring it and filling it carefully with logs, he tells me he's going to nip out to get some wine and, although I say I should be going, he begs me to stay and have a drink with him. I agree, all the while conscious that I shouldn't allow myself to get too comfortable at the vicarage (the prospect of Sand Street car park is becoming more and more unpleasant), and I promise to get the fire going while he's at the shop.

When he arrives back with Hattie's mum in tow, I tell him again that I'll head off but they both protest, so I make myself useful getting wine glasses and the three of us sit around the fire with our drinks.

'Go on then,' says Hattie's mum (who I've just found out is called Christine). 'Start from the very beginning. Tell us about this Caitlin of yours.'

I'm a bit surprised at this after the vicar's reluctance at lunchtime but he looks peaceful enough about the prospect of talking about her.

'I was telling Jed earlier that I used to be in a band. Before I became a vicar. And there was this girl. She was a groupie, I

guess – every performance, she was there. She stood out like a beacon – this incredibly long peachy coloured hair, striking blue eyes, tall and willowy. To start with I just used to wave at her, and she'd blow me a kiss back. Then, one time, we were at Wembley of all places, warming up for Muse. We'd just finished the set when the band manager told me some girl wanted to meet me. Said he could tell her to "F off" if I wanted but that she was pretty hot. I knew it would be her. The girl with the peachy hair.'

'And was it?' asks Christine.

Ben smiles. 'Yeah. And she *was* hot. More than that though – she was the most interesting person I'd ever met. I know that none of us can be pigeonholed really; we all have conflicting personality traits to some degree. But Caitlin... She was like a completely split personality: she smoked like a chimney, and drank too much, and was unendingly promiscuous – even when we were together, I might add – but there was this other, totally contrasting side to her. She was an incredible nurse – she ended up a Ward Manager at the hospice – and she never missed Mass on a Sunday. If she ever heard anyone blaspheme, she'd swear to them she'd make them wash their mouth out with soap and water!'

'Was she Irish?' I ask.

'Yes, from Galway. I'd often sing her that Ed Sheeran song – *Galway Girl* – though she hated it. She hated anything too mainstream – music, art, fashion. She was like this will o' the wisp. It's what I used to call her. You couldn't pin her down.'

'She sounds fascinating,' says Christine, as she refills our wine glasses. 'But if she wasn't faithful, why did you stay with her?'

'That was the worst thing. But she told me right from the outset – "I'm not one of those bourgeois, monogamous types," she said to me in her deep Irish accent the first night we met. "So you take me as I am or you run a mile. Personally, if I were you, I'd run a mile." Sometimes I wished that I had.'

'So what happened in the end?' I ask.

‘She left me twice. The first time for another man, unsurprisingly. Not just any man either – a minor member of the royal family would you believe it? It didn’t last though. She came back to me.’

‘And then she left you high and dry again,’ Christine says.

‘Yeah, she did.’ Ben’s eyes fill with tears, and suddenly I realise what must have happened. He lights a cigarette with a shaking hand.

‘She died,’ I say. ‘When she left you again... it was that, wasn’t it? She didn’t choose to leave the second time. She was taken.’

Ben looks at me, the tears running down his face now, though he doesn’t bother to brush them away. As we look at each other, the fire blazing away beside us, I feel a connection to this man – a deep connection I’ve only ever felt for one other person in my life: my father. I realise I really care about this vicar and his grief. Christine looks at us both, a hand to her mouth.

‘Oh no! She didn’t, did she?’ she asks, her face creased with sympathy.

‘Yeah, she died. Last Christmas. And, of course, you can probably guess just how.’

‘Lung cancer?’ I ask.

‘A predictable death for someone so utterly unpredictable. She always said, in the early days when I tried to get her to stop, “I’m stronger than these nicotine sticks!” She was the one who got me hooked. And it’s crazy because here I am, smoking, when these bloody things killed the love of my life. I don’t know, maybe I’m just on self-destruct because, actually, life isn’t really worth living without her.’

Ben looks devastated – as if it’s the first time he’s made that admission, even to himself. I know exactly what he means. If anyone knows what it’s like to self-sabotage it’s me. I put a hand out and rest it on Ben’s arm. I’m about to say “You’ll be okay” or something, but actually I don’t know if he will be. It’s left to Christine to try to lighten the atmosphere.

‘Rome wasn’t built in a day,’ she says, standing up. ‘You’ll get there.’ Then she takes the cigarette from Ben’s hand and throws it on the fire.

‘Now I’m going to make us all some tea and we’re going to forget about our worries for a couple of hours, even if we have to resort to knock-knock jokes.’

‘Please no!’ Ben says, laughing through his tears. ‘Anything but knock-knock jokes!’

As we all head through to the kitchen, I decide to ask Christine the question I’ve wanted to ask since she turned up.

‘How’s Hattie?’ I say.

‘Having a whale of a time now,’ she tells me with a smile. ‘I knew she would in the end.’

I have the strangest feeling on hearing these words: I’m pleased for her – genuinely pleased – but also, I feel really, really sad. Because I know this is the beginning for Hattie. And the end of whatever, in different circumstances, might have been for us.

PART TWO
OCTOBER 2022

Chapter Thirteen

Hattie

When Mum picks me up from the airport the first thing she notices are my ears.

‘You’ve had them pierced!’ she says, accusingly, but I’m not that worried. Not like I would have been. I’m nearly an adult now and the trip away made me realise that. I’ll be eighteen in January and this time next year, I’ll be living away from Mum, away from Jersey, surviving on my own in some college or university (still not Oxford, that much I’m sure of).

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, smiling as I turn my head from left to right so Mum can admire them.

‘No you’re not!’ she laughs. ‘Actually, I’ve got to admit, they do suit you. I can’t believe it, though – I always said you had to wait until you were eighteen.’

‘I know but that girl I was saying goodbye to – Selma – she was getting hers done and I just thought, “Why not?” I mean, what is it about pierced ears that’s such a big deal anyway?’

Mum takes my bag for me and loops her other arm with mine as we head out to the Arrivals car park and make our way to the bus stop. It’s a beautiful day: the kind that makes you glad to be home, where the air always smells like the sea, and seagulls steal your ice creams, and bus drivers smile and say ‘hello’.

‘I don’t know,’ Mum admits as we rest against a railing, waiting for the bus. ‘I’ve always thought it signals the start of being a grown-up. I got mine done at eighteen. Next thing I knew I was pregnant!’

‘So not having earrings was meant to be some kind of contraceptive?’

‘Well, when you put it like that it doesn’t make much sense, does it? Oh, it’s so good to have you home. I missed you!’

‘Same,’ I reply. Then, once we’re settled on the bus to town, I start to recap on my trip – about being homesick at the start but then making friends with Selma and all the laughs we had after that. It’s only once we’ve hopped off the bus and are walking towards the flat that I think to ask her how she spent her time without me. She didn’t tell me much when we were messaging and Face timing.

‘Oh, you know, working and that. The usual. Although you’re going to laugh at this – I’ve become quite friendly with that homeless friend of yours!’

I’m shocked. ‘Jed?’ I ask.

‘Yes. Him and his vicar friend – I think you’ve met him?’ I nod. ‘Well, it’s a long story,’ Mum continues, ‘but let’s just say we’ve got to know each other quite well. In fact, the vicar’s invited us round to the vicarage for some tea tonight. We don’t have to go, though. If you’re tired.’

‘No, I’d love to,’ I say, lowering my voice as we pass Rhonda’s flat (I notice her door is slightly ajar. She’s the nosiest neighbour you’ve ever met). Once I’ve unpacked, taking in all the details of my room, which feels all neat and warm and has a nice smell to it that I didn’t even know it had before going away, I get ready. I wash and dry my hair, tying it back in a ponytail so my earrings are visible, and then put on my best jeans, my biker boots and a new top I bought from Primark in Oxford.

‘You ready?’ Mum yells in the end.

‘Just coming!’ I tell her and I hurry through to the kitchen where she’s putting on the ratty old coat she’s had for years. She frowns when she sees me.

‘Made a bit of an effort, haven’t you?’ she remarks, and I feel sad that her light-heartedness seems to have been short-lived.

‘Just wanted to wear my new top. It was only a tenner!’

‘It’s nice,’ she says. ‘It’s just...’

‘What?’ I ask, feeling annoyed, but Mum just sighs.

‘Never mind. Let’s get going or we’ll be late.’

I’m about to ask her to wait a sec while I put some lip gloss on but think better of it. I can’t work out why, but it’s clear that Mum doesn’t want me looking *too* nice.

Well, if Mum’s concern was that Jed would fancy me, then she needn’t have worried. As soon as we arrive at the vicarage Ben is really friendly but Jed, while polite, is giving off major aloof signs. He asks all about my trip and everything, but there’s this aura about him. It’s hard to describe. It’s like he’s decided he doesn’t want to be friendly anymore but is too kind to ghost me. It’s a bit depressing, and the evening only gets worse.

First of all, I spot Mum looking at the cutlery laid on the kitchen table while Ben brings a steaming hot lasagne over. She’s looking all panicky, like she can’t remember whether you’re meant to eat lasagne with just a fork (like we would at home) or with a knife too. In the end both of us wait until Jed starts eating – using both the knife and fork – and it occurs to me that it’s a pretty strange situation to be in when you’re relying on a homeless guy to show you ‘how things are done,’ as Mum says.

‘This is delicious,’ Jed says, after he’s swallowed his first mouthful. ‘Was this Lucia again?’ he asks Ben.

‘Lucia?’ I ask. I remember her – the lady at the café.

‘Yes,’ says Ben, looking sheepish. ‘She makes all my food for me,’ he explains. ‘Lovely home-cooked stuff like this – and I have this massive freezer I put it all in. I’m a useless cook.’

‘What kind of stuff does she make then?’ I ask, thinking how the kind of food Mum and I eat wouldn’t really freeze – sausages and chips, beans on toast, tomato soup, spaghetti hoops, pizza...

‘Oh, you know, the usual kind of stuff – nothing fancy. Moussaka, lasagne, shepherd’s pie... let me think,’ Ben says as he offers salt and pepper to Jed, who takes both and starts

adding them to his food. ‘Casserole, fish pie... and puddings too. All very comforting.’

‘Don’t forget the chunky veggie soup,’ Jed says. ‘That was amazing.’

I look at Mum and see she has bright-red cheeks. It’s like she’s just realised she didn’t get the memo and she’s been feeding us the wrong kind of stuff for the past seventeen years.

‘Moussaka?’ she says, in a small voice.

Ben looks at her, surprised. ‘Have you never had it? It’s Greek. It’s really good. I’ll put that on the menu next time you come over.’

Mum gives him a tiny smile and goes back to the food, though she has that look about her like she’s lost her appetite and is just nibbling at it. I think it’s tasty. I’ve only ever had microwaved lasagne before and this one is miles nicer.

‘So are you staying at the vicarage now?’ I ask Jed, trying to find a different topic of conversation for Mum’s sake. I immediately realise this is a mistake.

‘I’m still homeless, if that’s what you mean. I only stayed over one night this week, when Ben wasn’t well. Wanted to make sure he was okay,’ Jed says in a prickly way. ‘I’ve had dinner a couple of times, but that’s all.’

‘I just...’ I start. I can’t understand it. Why’s he being all funny with me? And what would be wrong with him staying with the vicar anyway? Is being on the streets some kind of badge of honour for him? Does he think I’m suggesting he might have copped out by staying at the vicarage?

Ben intervenes. ‘Jed won’t stay, even though he’s very welcome. He has his reasons. Now does anyone want seconds? No? Then let me get the apple pie out the oven. I’ve got ice cream to go with it. Or crème fraiche if you’d rather?’ he asks, looking at Mum.

Again, she has that look about her – a rabbit in the headlights. ‘Ice cream will do,’ she says gracelessly, and my heart sinks even further as Ben dishes out the dessert.

The final nail in the coffin is when Mum starts on about Oxford, as if I'm definitely going to go there. I know it's not the right place to do it, but I realise I need to manage her expectations sooner rather than later.

'Mum, the trip was good, but I'm not going to Oxford. Firstly, because I'm unlikely to get in. But secondly because I don't want to go!'

Mum looks at me like I've slapped her. Ben glances at me and offers a sympathetic smile, but Jed is studying his apple pie intently.

'I thought the trip was a success!' Mum says.

'It was! But I still don't want to go. Anyway, I've decided History isn't for me – not for a degree. I want to study Art and Textiles. And I definitely can't do those subjects at Oxford.'

Mum looks like she's about to give me a lecture but then seems to remember where she is.

'We'll see,' she says, with a steely look in her eye, and I know this won't be the last conversation on the topic. I'm pretty sure, in fact, that it's only the beginning.

Chapter Fourteen

Christine

It's humiliating, that's what it is. To have tea with some homeless guy and realise he has better manners than you! I have to take my cues from him – which cutlery to use, what to do with my 'napkin'. And moussaka? Whoever heard of such a stupid-sounding dish? As ever, I feel like I've spent my life living under a stone while everyone around me understands how to do things instinctively. When we get home, I go straight to bed with my etiquette book and stay up long into the night, trying to lock all the information into my memory.

Before I fall asleep, I reach a chapter on 'Thank you letters' and realise I should send a written note to the vicar to thank him for the meal. In the morning I rummage around in my desk and find some notelets. Not the 'correspondence cards' the book suggests but surely better than nothing? I write the note, painstakingly trying to make my childish handwriting look neat, check it twice for spellings then seal the envelope. I decide to deliver it, rather than waste money on a stamp, and make a detour to the vicarage after my shift at Tesco.

It's getting dark by the time I reach the house and I'm just stuffing the note through the letterbox when I hear footsteps. Before I have time to leave, the front door opens.

'Chrissie!' the vicar says, and I flinch. The only person who's ever called me that was Hattie's dad. But Ben doesn't seem to notice. 'I'm glad to see you on your own,' he says. 'I was just on my way out but I'm not in a hurry. Have you got ten minutes? Time for a quick coffee?'

I check my watch. 'Alright,' I say, and I hand over the note.

'What's this?' he says, quickly opening the envelope as I follow him towards the kitchen. 'Oh, a thank you note. Well, that's very polite of you,' he says, smiling warmly. 'But a message would have been fine! In fact, you didn't need to thank me at all. It's me who needs to thank you.'

‘What for?’ I ask as I take a seat at the kitchen table. The vicar puts on his coffee machine and efficiently makes us both a coffee, bringing them to the table and sitting opposite me.

‘For letting me spew out all my Caitlin angst the other evening. I never talk about her normally, but you’ve got this thing about you. You make me want to tell you stuff.’

‘Do I?’ I say, surprised. I can’t say I’m much of a confidante to anyone else, other than Willow’s mum (the friend I came to join in Jersey when I was pregnant with Hattie). I know why: I’m much too guarded.

‘I think it’s because you don’t push for information. You’re not prying. So many of the people I come across in life have a prying sort of interest in my life and everything that happened. As a vicar, there’s a sense that you’re public property.’

‘Well, it’s none of my business,’ I say. ‘But I could tell you needed to get it off your chest. It’s no good keeping these things in. I should know.’

Ben looks at me. ‘Tell me what’s happening with Hattie,’ he says.

‘There’s nothing to tell,’ I say instinctively.

‘It’s just, I could sense tension last night. About Oxford. You really want her to go?’

‘Of course I do! Flipping heck. That girl has the opportunity to go to one of the best universities in the entire world to study a proper academic subject and she wants to go to some daft technical college instead to do arty crap!’

‘Sometimes it’s hard when we haven’t had opportunities ourselves. We want those close to us to do the things we missed out on.’

I stare at him. ‘You think I’m being selfish?’

‘Not at all. You want the best for her. The very best. But here’s a lesson I learnt when I was with Caitlin. If I ever tried to get her to do something I thought was best for her... Well. All it ever did was push her away. Ultimately, Chrissie, everyone has to make their own choices. Even kids. And if she

went to Oxford to please you and then she wasn't happy there, how would you feel?'

I don't say anything, so the vicar continues. I'm impressed at the nerve he's got continuing in spite of my face, which I'm guessing looks like thunder. 'You'd feel bad, wouldn't you? And then you'd wonder if it had been the right choice for her after all. Give her all the options, Chrissie, and support her to make a decision that's right for her. A choice that'll make her happy.'

'Even if it's the wrong one?' I ask. My voice is slightly husky. I can feel tears building. Tears I know I won't shed.

Ben puts one of his hands on mine. It feels warm. Strong and comforting. 'Even if it's the wrong one,' he confirms. He passes me a tissue with his free hand, from a box on the dresser. It seems the tears are falling after all. I remember the first time I met Ben, on the street, when I'd felt that urge to pour all my troubles out to him. Then I notice a noise.

'What's that?' I ask.

'What?'

'It's like a scratching noise. Coming from the hallway.'

Ben goes very still, like a hunting dog, then gets up quietly from his chair and heads into the hall. I follow him, dabbing my eyes.

'It's outside,' he says. He goes to the front door and opens it. And there, much to our surprise, sits Lola. She barks at Ben, just once, then makes to head away down the path.

'Lola?' Ben says into the brisk night air. She barks again.

'Ben, she wants you to follow her,' I tell him.

'Shit,' Ben replies, looking at me anxiously. 'Jed,' he says. 'It must be Jed.'

Chapter Fifteen

Ben

I quickly lock up and tell Chrissie I'll message her then I follow Lola while giving my sister a quick call to cancel our evening plans. The dog keeps checking I'm with her and soon I realise exactly where we're going. Somewhere I'm all too familiar with. When we reach the entrance to the hospital, I give Lola a good rub.

'Good girl,' I tell her. 'Now you wait here for me.'

It takes a bit of a time, but my dog collar helps, and eventually I find out what ward Jed's on. I take the lift to the seventh floor. When I reach the ward, I'm told Jed's been put into a side room and that's when I realise it must be serious.

The door is propped open, and a figure lies prone in the bed, sleeping or unconscious. I approach quietly and pull a chair over, sitting down next to the bed, and taking in the smashed-up face of the usually handsome Jed. He has two black eyes, his Roman nose has been knocked sideways, his lips are twice their normal size, and he has various medical plasters covering what I can only guess are nasty gashes on other parts of his face. He's wearing a hospital gown and I can see his neck is red and purple, as if he's been booted hard.

'Do I look pretty?' he says, startling me.

'I thought you were asleep.'

'Just hurts to open my eyes.'

'What happened?' I ask.

'Bunch of thugs – in broad daylight. They were pissed up; must have been out for lunch, or a liquid one anyway. I was asleep in the car park. I was tired; didn't sleep much last night. First thing I knew about it was being kicked in the head. Is Lola okay? I was worried they'd start on her.'

'She came and found me. Told me you were here.'

'She did?' Jed asks, looking at me and trying to smile.

‘She’s an amazing dog. And she’s fine. I’ll look after her for you while you’re here. You’re not looking your best, Jed. Any lasting damage?’

‘Broken nose. They’re going to fix that with an op tomorrow. And some broken ribs. Otherwise I’m just a bit battered and bruised. They’ve arrested the dickheads already. Idiots didn’t realise there was CCTV. And there were a few witnesses too apparently.’

‘Well that’s something, anyway. How are you feeling? I mean, not physically?’

‘Shocked, I guess. But I’m okay. Truth be told, it’s pretty nice in here. Warm. Seriously comfy bed. I might even get a shower.’

I smile. ‘Do you want her to come and visit?’

‘Who?’ Jed asks but we both know who I mean. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘But not yet. After the operation tomorrow. Tell her to bring me grapes.’

‘And anyone else? Your parents, maybe?’

‘No, Ben.’

I sigh heavily. ‘Jed, will you let me help you now? Help you get off the streets?’

Jed goes quiet on me. ‘Just for a bit,’ he agrees. He looks at me through his split, swollen eyes. ‘And Ben?’

‘Yes?’

‘Thank you.’

It’s late when I get back to the vicarage and, after messaging Chrissie with the news, I fall into a deep yet troubled sleep. In the morning I’m woken by the doorbell. It’s Chrissie and Hattie, standing there looking anxious.

‘Sorry to turn up so early,’ Hattie says. ‘We just wanted to find out how he’s doing before we head to school and work. Is he okay?’

‘Battered. But he’ll be okay. It’s unbelievable there are people out there who think it’s acceptable to treat a human being like a football just because they’re sleeping rough.’

‘There was a lot of that in Hastings back in the day,’ says Chrissie. ‘It’s a nasty business. Anyway, we won’t keep you. We weren’t sure if you had supplies for Lola, so we nipped to the supermarket on the way here – got her some dog food.’

As if sensing the charity is for her, Lola emerges, and Hattie gives her some fuss. I’m touched that the pair of them would think to provide Lola’s food.

‘So I can visit him today, right?’ Hattie checks with me.

‘After his op, which is this morning apparently. So maybe this afternoon after school? But listen, Hattie, do prepare yourself. He’s not looking quite as ... gorgeous ... as normal.’

Hattie blushes deeply and I could kick myself. But then she smiles and looks into my eyes. ‘At least he’s okay,’ she says, and I realise just how much we’ve all come to care about Jed in such a short space of time.

Chapter Sixteen

Jed

‘It’s incredibly comforting, you know. That sound.’

‘What sound?’ Hattie asks me.

‘The clattering of your knitting needles. How long have you been here?’

‘About half an hour. If you could stay in here for a while, I’ll get a load of my craft work done for the Christmas fair.’ She smiles at me, and I feel ashamed of how I must look.

‘You look fine,’ she says, as if reading my mind. ‘I mean, a tiny bit like you’ve done a few rounds in the boxing ring, but you still look like you. And the nurse I saw before was telling me it’s all superficial. And the nose is fixed. That’s the main thing. I love your nose.’

‘You love my nose?’ I say, smiling. ‘You’re nutty, you know.’

‘Maybe I am. What do you think of this so far?’ she says, brandishing the festive stocking she’s knitting. I’m glad she’s not talking about what happened. The sooner I can forget about that the better.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I tell her, honestly. ‘I mean, I’m not into Christmas as you know. But that’s one hell of a stocking. I love the little robin on the side. How many have you made?’

‘I’ve finished nineteen. This is my twentieth, then I need to move on to other things. I’ve ordered the Christmas wrapping paper and ribbons and paper bags. I hope I sell everything – or at least enough to cover my costs.’

‘It’s always pretty busy that fair, isn’t it? How many days will you have a stall for?’

‘Three days – it’s the Friday to Sunday. The last weekend in November. Will you still help? You said you would. With the wrapping and stuff.’

I remember offering, before I decided I needed to distance myself from Hattie before we both get hurt. But right now, I'm not in the frame of mind for distance. And there's no harm in us just being friends, even though I know there are much deeper feelings developing. On my part, at least. I sigh.

'You don't have to,' she says, quickly.

'No, I will,' I say. 'I'd love to.'

'I'll pay you, of course.'

'You will not pay me. I'll help you. As a friend.'

Hattie gets up from her chair and comes close to me. She searches my face then lands a very sweet and gentle kiss on my forehead – the one spot that's unaffected by my battering. She smells of Hattie. Nothing artificial – no perfume or body spray or anything else. Just her own distinct, and utterly beguiling, smell.

'What are those patches?' she asks, spotting my arms.

'Nicotine patches. As I can't get out of here for a smoke right now. These help with the addiction.'

Hattie smiles. 'You see, you were an addict after all. When I first met you, you said you weren't an addict!'

I laugh. 'Yeah, okay, you got me. Well, maybe I'll find myself kicking the habit while I'm here. I should really; Ben's trying so I ought to support him. Especially as I might be staying with him.'

Hattie's face brightens. 'You're going to stop living on the streets?'

'For a bit,' I agree. 'I'm too tired for self-punishment now. Too weary for pride.'

'I'm glad,' Hattie says. 'You'll heal quickly at the vicarage. It's got that feeling about it, don't you think?'

'Healing vibes you mean?'

'I just think it's got a comforting feel to it. And Lola's made herself completely at home. You'll have trouble ever moving her out.'

‘I miss her. That’s going to be the best thing about getting out of here. Seeing my Lola. And...’ I clear my throat. ‘Well, spending a bit of time with you, too. Not just snatched conversations on the street.’

‘Any idea when you’ll be out?’

‘In the next couple of days, I’m told.’

‘I’ll have barely finished this,’ Hattie replies, brandishing the stocking. ‘But I’m guessing you’ll have to take it easy at the vicarage for a while, so I’ll visit you there. I’m moving on to festive wreaths next.’

‘I used to make one every year with my dad.’

‘Good! Once you feel up to it you can help me then. Occupational therapy.’

It would be cheesy to say it, but Hattie is all the therapy I need.

Chapter Seventeen

Hattie

Once Jed has been safely installed at the vicarage, I visit him every day after school. I take all my craft bits and bobs with me and he either watches me while I work on the projects or helps me. He's good at the wreaths. He has hands that work very naturally with materials, which sounds odd, but you'd be amazed at how incompetent most people are when it comes to crafting. We can't make fresh wreaths this far in advance, but we use woven willow bases and then tie in dried bunches of lavender, birch twigs and other foliage like cress and honesty that I've been drying in my bedroom over the last few weeks.

It's when we're working on these projects by the fire in the lounge that he starts to open up a bit. He's always been so closed about his past and what led him to be homeless but there's something about us both being occupied in our work that makes it easier to chat somehow. Maybe it's being in close proximity but without the eye contact. It started when I asked him to tell me a bit more about his dad.

'I hope you don't think I'm prying,' I said to him on the first afternoon I visited him at the vicarage, 'but you talk about your dad very fondly. Did something happen? I mean, between the two of you?'

Jed had frowned, clearly about to shut me down, but then he'd sighed and looked into the fire. 'Yeah, we were very close. It was always the two of us against her.'

'Her?'

'My mother. I don't often talk about her, partly because most people seem to think that motherly devotion should be a part of your natural fabric. Like you're a nasty bastard if you don't love your mum. But then most people don't have mothers like mine.'

'That bad?'

‘In fairness, I understand why she’s like she is. She had a really tough start in life. She was born in Ireland to a young girl who’d been sent to one of those homes for unmarried mothers. She was adopted when she was only a baby by a deeply religious couple who, by all accounts, were very nice. But they were then killed in a car crash when my mum was seven and all eight of the children they’d adopted had to be found foster carers or put into homes.

‘This time Mum wasn’t so lucky and by the age of fourteen she was on the streets. She’d barely had any education. She was living rough. But there’s an inner steel to her, my mother, and you have to admire it in a sense, even when you’re suffering as a result of it. She pulled through. She found ways. She’s a director of a trust company nowadays. Earns an absolute fortune.’

‘Was she abusive?’

‘In subtle ways, yes. She was never physical; she never laid a finger on me. But she once ignored me for an entire month after I broke her favourite vase. I was ten years old.’

‘That’s awful,’ I’d said to him, quietly horrified. ‘But why didn’t your dad stick up for you?’

‘Dad’s a lovely guy, a really lovely guy, but he was never a match for her. Far too gentle. He protected me as best he could, but he lived in fear of her as much as I did.’

‘Did he consider leaving?’

Jed had shaken his head. ‘He couldn’t. Firstly, he couldn’t risk her getting custody of me. But also, she controlled all the finances and Dad couldn’t work because he had a terrible back condition. He couldn’t even afford to see a divorce lawyer.’

‘She sounds pretty scary.’

‘She is. And you can’t allow yourself to get lulled into a false sense of security with her. That happened to me a few times. She’d be nice for a little while and I’d start to think I’d got her all wrong. And then she’d do something vicious. There was this time when I was thirteen when I went to the cinema with some friends and the film was longer than expected so I

got home ten minutes after my curfew. The next day she told me she was sending me to boarding school in the UK. And that was that. Apart from holidays, I didn't return home until I was eighteen. To some extent, it was a relief, but I was under so much pressure to achieve. My mother would only accept top grades and she expected me to excel in everything.'

'So was throwing you out on to the streets one of her punishments?' I'd asked him, but at this point Jed had closed down. He's told me more stories since, about his mum, but I haven't dared ask again why he's homeless. I know that'll come though; what Jed needs is a patient listener, that much I've come to realise. And today, as we're making little walnut dioramas by the fire, I end up spilling a secret of my own. It's triggered by my phone beeping, which startles us both.

'You hardly use your phone,' Jed remarks, continuing to focus on cracking the walnuts without breaking the shells, the job I've designated to him while I make the tiny snowmen out of clay. 'I mean, girls your age are literally glued to them usually.'

I turn it on to silent and then look into Jed's eyes. I try not to gaze at them too often because they have a worryingly powerful effect on me, making me feel as if I've just spiralled down a helter-skelter. But they're the most trustworthy-looking eyes I've ever seen so I take a deep breath.

'A couple of years ago something really awful happened. I was on my phone a lot back then. I was obsessed with this game. Viper? One where you compete against other people. After a bit, I was befriended by another player who made out he was a young guy the same age as me, a local lad called Brett. We got really friendly over time and eventually he asked me to send him a picture of myself. We exchanged photos, nothing sleazy. He looked really nice: fresh-faced, blond and smiley. Then after a few more weeks he suggested getting together.

'I agreed to meet him at a coffee shop and when this man came over and sat down opposite me, introducing himself as Brett, I nearly threw up on the spot. He was about sixty years old. And really creepy looking. Honestly, I couldn't get the

image of him out of my head for months. There was something about his smile. It was kind of *knowing*. He had this bloated face with a really bulbous nose and gelled-back black hair, I think he must have dyed it, and he was wearing a horrible white t-shirt that strained to fit over his potbelly.’ I shudder as I remember him.

‘Anyway, obviously this guy had just been pretending to be the blond-haired kid. ‘Brett’ was actually the nasty old perv sitting opposite me. So I just got up right away, without saying anything, and ran all the way home; told my mum the whole story. She was fuming and got the police involved as I was only fifteen at the time. Not that they ever found the guy. But it really freaked me out, so I’ve been super disciplined about my phone use ever since.’

Jed is quiet and I see a slight twitch in his jaw. ‘That kind of stuff makes me so angry,’ he says. ‘All that grooming stuff. Those paedos. Preying on kids. It’s disgusting.’

I can feel my cheeks burning – the whole subject is still so shameful to me – but it also feels like a relief to talk about it with someone other than my mum and the police. It was all kept hush-hush at the time, and I didn’t even tell my friends, not even Willow.

‘Stupid thing is, we’re warned about this kind of thing at school. We get taught all the time about online safety. But he was so convincing, and it was all done so subtly, over time. I guess I should never have been so trusting.’

‘Don’t blame yourself,’ Jed says to me, discarding the walnuts. ‘That’s something else I hate. Victim blaming. Why do the injured parties always end up taking responsibility?’ There’s passion in his voice, and I realise he’s thinking about the situation with his mum. I feel suddenly a bit sheepish: after all, my issue was an unpleasant one-off, whereas Jed has suffered a whole childhood of issues at the hands of his mother.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘It’s nothing compared to what you’ve had to put up with.’

Jed edges towards me on the sofa, where we've been working with the coffee table in front of us. He puts a hand on my chin, and I think for one hopeful moment that he might kiss me. But then we hear the front door slam, and Ben's cheerful whistling, and we spring apart, the moment lost.

Chapter Eighteen

Christine

It's all go at the vicarage at the moment. Jed's been staying there since he got out of hospital, and he looks so much better. Not just because his cuts and bruises are healing up but because he's put on some weight and got some colour back in his cheeks. I'm glad he's taking a break from living on the streets; I'm not blind, I can see there's chemistry between him and Hattie, which worries me, but he's a good lad. He's been helping her with her arts and crafts for the Christmas fair as it's only a month or so away now.

Ben's being very patient about the state of his lounge, which now has Hattie's sewing machine taking up space, along with a load of materials. I can't say I'm too upset that it's his house she's working from rather than the flat.

I miss her though and Ben knows that, so we've got into the habit of eating tea together of an evening. Hattie goes straight to the vicarage after school, when she and Jed do their crafting, and then I join the three of them after my shift finishes on the nights I haven't got my evening cleaning job. Tonight, as I arrive and hang my coat up in the hallway, I can hear Hattie and Jed in the lounge discussing the tree decorations she's made.

'What are you going to hang the dioramas on, when you're displaying them at the market?' Jed asks.

'I hadn't thought,' Hattie replies.

'Why don't I make you a little tree out of twigs and you could hang the decorations on that?'

I smile to myself. Yes, he's a good lad. I leave the kids to it and go through to the kitchen. Ben's rummaging around in the deep freeze in the utility room.

'Ah, here it is!' he says, pulling a container out. 'Moussaka!'

I remember how embarrassed I felt that evening not very long ago when I hadn't heard of the dish, and it feels like a lifetime ago. Something has shifted between the vicar and me ever since that chat we had about Hattie. I no longer feel so ... inferior. I took his advice on board, too. I've taken the pressure off Hattie and I'm gradually coming to terms with the idea that she's going to pursue her arty dreams rather than go to Oxford or Cambridge.

I watch as Ben potters about domestically in the kitchen, the lamp from the dresser lighting up his russet hair. Truth be told, I find the vicar very attractive. Which is why I've started wearing make-up even when I'm just working at Tesco, because I know I'll be coming straight to the vicarage after. If Hattie's noticed, then she hasn't said anything. Which I'm glad about, because I have no illusions that he'd be interested in me and, in any event, it's clear he's not even close to getting over that beautiful wife of his. It's just nice to have someone to make a bit of an effort for, even if it is a one-way street.

'Want me to lay the table?' I ask.

'Please. I'll open the wine once I've got this in the oven.'

I know where everything is now, so it feels nice and companionable as I gather together all the cutlery and the serviettes (no, napkins, I remind myself) and the wine glasses. Even Hattie has a little drink with us when we have these meals together. It feels nice. Civilised. Once the moussaka's gone in, Ben opens the wine, which makes a satisfying clunk noise, then he pours us both a glass while I study the sexy tattoos on his forearms. We sit at the pine kitchen table, and it feels good to take the weight off my legs after a day in the shop. It's my least favourite time of the year at Tesco from October onwards as my manager insists on playing bloody Christmas music for three solid months. If I never heard a festive song again in my life it would be too soon.

'Cheers!' he says, looking at me at last. 'Hey,' he adds. 'You're looking good, Chrissie. What's different? The hair?'

I'm not good with compliments; never have been. 'God, this horrible mop. Haven't been to a hairdressers in years.'

Ben scrutinises me. ‘You’re lucky you haven’t got any grey. Not like me; I’m slowly going a gingery silver. It’s a lovely colour your hair, it’s like a chocolate caramel bar. All browns and golds. And the gold bits match your eyes.’

I’m completely taken aback. I don’t know where to look. I gulp down some wine.

‘But you’re right, it’s not the hair. It’s your skin. You look glowing.’

‘Just a bit of make-up, that’s all,’ I say and then I feel a sense of relief as Hattie and Jed enter the kitchen, full of chatter and showing us the little dioramas they’ve been making. I busy myself studying the tree decorations, but I can still feel Ben’s eyes on me. I glance up at him and he smiles. It’s honestly the loveliest smile I’ve ever seen, and I try to take a mental snapshot of it. Because it’s like a rare and precious gift: a warm, loving smile that’s just for me. A smile that makes me wonder if the street isn’t necessarily one-way after all.

Chapter Nineteen

Ben

It's Saturday morning and Hattie arrives with another box of materials.

'Morning, Hats,' I say (Caitlin used to tell me I have an annoying habit of shortening people's names). 'What's it today?'

'Baubles,' she tells me. 'Only thing is, I need to set them on fire. Have you got a barbecue I could use? I wasn't going to make these as we haven't got a barbecue at the flat, but I thought you'd be bound to have one.'

'Erm, well yes, I have... But when you say set them on *fire*?'

Hattie smiles at me. 'It's really clever,' she explains as she makes her way through to the sitting room and plonks the box down next to her sewing machine on the side table. 'I've got this floristry wire and I need to wrap it round balls of newspaper and then set light to the newspaper, leaving me with baubles that are the perfect shape! Then I decorate them.'

I think about it for a moment. 'We could always use the sitting room fire,' I say. 'Or tell you what, I know it's almost Halloween, not Bonfire Night, but how about we light a bonfire in the garden tonight and you can set light to your baubles on that? I could get some marshmallows for us to toast and stuff. Make an evening of it?'

Hattie's face lights up with enthusiasm. 'That's a great idea,' she says. 'I'll message Mum, shall I?'

'I'll do that. You need to get on with your creating. Do you need some old newspaper?'

'Please!' she says, and she follows me through to the utility room where Lola is lolling lazily in the bed I recently bought for her. She's thoroughly enjoying a life of luxury and I don't rate Jed's chances of persuading her back on to the streets. Jed and I haven't got on to the subject of how long he's going to

stay for, but in the last day or two I've begun to sense a restlessness in him so I don't think he'll be here much longer. I've got used to having him around. And Chrissie and Hattie, too. The vicarage feels so much happier full of people and chatter.

'Thanks Ben,' Hattie says as she takes a load of old newspapers with her back into the sitting room. I message Chrissie to invite her round this evening and then Jed appears in the kitchen, looking sleepy but fully dressed.

'What time is it?' he asks.

'Ten o'clock! Hattie's already here and beavering away.'

'I was going to visit my dad this morning, but I'll go this afternoon instead.'

'Your dad?' I say, surprised. Jed rarely mentions his parents and I had no idea he still sees them.

'He's in a nursing home,' Jed explains. 'It's a long story. One for another day. You know, I can't believe how late I sleep here,' he adds, helping himself to a bowl of cereal. 'It's like my body's making up for the last year of virtually no sleep on the streets.'

'Don't forget you're still healing, too. You need sleep to recover.'

Jed sits down at the table and looks at me. 'You've been so kind,' he says.

'You're underestimating my selfishness. I don't like to be alone. The last year for me has been so lonely. Ever since Caitlin died. Even before, to be honest. It was lonely at times being in a relationship with her. Having you here, it's helped me immeasurably.'

Jed nods, looking solemn. 'One more week,' he says. 'Is that okay? That's when I start back at McDonald's too. Might as well get completely back to normal.'

'No longer?'

'A week. And I'm going to make the most of every minute.'

We look at each other and I feel that visceral connection I've felt with Jed since the moment I saw him busking on the streets. It sounds strange but he feels like the son I never had. Then Hattie appears in the doorway.

'There you are!' she says to Jed. 'Hurry up, I need your help!'

Jed rolls his eyes, and we all laugh.

By five o'clock it's nearly dark and the weather has suddenly, within the space of a couple of hours, turned cold. Cold enough for proper coats and scarves and gloves, which – being British – I'm rather happy about. I don't get on well in the heat of summer with my pale skin and English ways. I much prefer the long, cold days of winter.

Jed and I have spent the afternoon creating a bonfire, which turned out to be harder work than I was anticipating as Hattie suggested I clear out the vicarage loft and get rid of a load of junk on it. After sorting and hefting for hours on end, we've created the most enormous bonfire the garden has ever seen. I was also persuaded into making mulled wine and cooking some of Lucia's sausage rolls so by the time Chrissie is due to arrive the kitchen is feeling warm and festive, and the fire is ready to be lit. There's a slight party atmosphere, only added to when Chrissie staggers into the kitchen laden down with pumpkins.

'They were knocked down to half price at the shop!' she says. 'So I thought we could have a bit of a carving competition.'

Jed and Hattie look delighted at this idea and start searching for marker pens and sharp knives. I dish out the mulled wine, not feeling quite as keen. I've got as much creativity in me as a doormat, but I decide to have a go at it so long as I can enjoy a drink at the same time.

'This is going to take hours,' Jed remarks once he makes a start on carving. 'What about the bonfire?'

‘I’ll put a timer on,’ says Chrissie. ‘Let’s see who can make the best pumpkin in half an hour, then we can crack on with the fire.’

I absorb myself in the task at hand and find it quite therapeutic despite my initial lack of enthusiasm. Admittedly, my pumpkin looks like a dog’s dinner once it’s done, even though I’ve gone for the most basic design I could think of (triangular eyes and nose; rectangular mouth), but there’s something about us all working together at the table. It’s companionable.

By the time the beeper goes off I’ve already finished my pathetic attempt, but the others all beg for ‘just another minute’ and finally they turn the pumpkins around so we can all look at each other’s and pick a winner.

‘Bloody hell!’ I remark, as I take in all three of them. I’m not surprised that Hattie’s is excellent, given her crafty nature, but I’m taken aback to discover how talented Jed clearly is. And Chrissie’s is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It’s an owl, and it somehow manages to look both ornate and cute at the same time.

‘Sorry guys but Chrissie’s has to be the winner. This is amazing!’ I say to her but she’s not a woman for compliments, that much I’m learning.

‘Not my best, is it Hattie?’

‘Every year, they’re incredible,’ Hattie replies. ‘Let’s get them lit and put them on the doorstep. Have you got tea lights?’

‘In the utility room,’ I say. ‘Top drawer. The matches are in there too.’

I stand and marvel at the pumpkins while Chrissie busies herself clearing everything up. Her talent is wasted working at Tesco, that’s for sure, and I feel sad for her; for the lack of opportunities that have come her way over the years. It makes me understand even more why she has such ambition for Hattie; and it makes me respect her even more for taking my advice and no longer insisting that Hattie should go to Oxford.

I suddenly find myself wondering hopefully if she might be interested in me. She certainly hasn't mentioned anyone else, and she spends most of her free time at the vicarage these days...

I'm broken out of my reverie by Jed. 'Let's get the bonfire lit. It's completely dark now. Shall we start with Hattie's baubles?'

'Absolutely!' I say, putting to one side my speculation regarding Chrissie. We take our mulled wine with us and watch as Hattie sets fire to the baubles she's made and then carefully moves them away from the fire to cool down. After a bit I bring out the sausage rolls and then we toast marshmallows, our faces warming in the heat of the bonfire.

'This is one of those moments when I find myself wanting a fag,' I remark to Jed.

'I was thinking exactly the same,' he replies, smiling. 'I'm eating way too many marshmallows to compensate!'

'We'll put on weight, won't we? Oh well, better that than kill ourselves, I suppose.'

Chrissie nudges me. 'Bit more weight won't do either of you any harm,' she says. 'You suit having a bit more fullness in your face, Ben.'

'Mum!' Hattie admonishes but I burst out laughing.

'Looks like I've started putting it on already then!'

We're so absorbed in the moment that it takes Lola's barking to make us realise that the doorbell is ringing. I answer the door and discover, alarmed, that it's trick or treaters and I don't have a single sweet in the house. Plus, we've just eaten all the marshmallows. I'm horrified at the prospect of disappointing the cute little painted faces looking at me expectantly. Then I hear a rustling behind me. I turn to see Chrissie opening up packets of sweets and pouring them into bowls, which she offers to the kids.

When they've gone, I turn to her.

'Do you always think of everything?' I ask her.

‘Only as much as the next woman,’ she replies. She smiles. A proper smile, not a strained one, and I find myself wanting, quite badly, to kiss her.

Chapter Twenty

Jed

My final morning and I wake up in Ben's ridiculously comfy spare bed and sigh. I put my arms behind my head and listen. I can hear the wind whistling outside and the bin lorries arriving to collect the neighbourhood rubbish. I can hear Ben's whistling and the sound of him putting his coffee machine on. I listen harder. I can hear a siren faintly, in the distance, and the hum of the washing machine in the utility room beneath me.

There's a sense of luxury in lying in this bed, just listening to the kind of sounds anyone else might take for granted as they doze in the comfort of their bed each morning. I look around the room. It's a typical spare bedroom in its blandness: aside from the super comfortable bed there are two bedside cabinets with lamps, a matching wardrobe currently containing my paltry possessions. A little desk and stool underneath the window, which looks out on to the lovely leaf-strewn garden below. Nothing but a mediocre watercolour picture on the wall. Its very blandness is a comfort. It's like the room demands nothing of you. You're not expected to admire anything in it; it's there purely to satisfy your basic needs.

Eventually I make myself get out of bed and help myself to what will probably be my last bath in a long while. I listen to the water thundering out of the taps as I'm submerged and, again, I find myself appreciating this simple luxury. Hot water. Soap. Being able to ease my muscles and relax in the tub, then dry myself with a soft, warm towel. But soon this feeling of appreciation begins to turn into despair. I don't want to live and sleep on the streets anymore. This time at Ben's place has softened me too much. And I feel guilty about Lola. I quickly dress, strip the sheets from the spare bed, then grab my stuff. I head downstairs and find Ben sitting at the kitchen table with a coffee and his diary.

'Jed!' he says, smiling. 'Come and have some breakfast.'

But I shake my head. 'No. No, I need to go. I'm sorry. To be so abrupt. It's just ... hard.' I feel a lump in my throat. Ben looks at me kindly.

'I understand,' he says.

'There's just one thing,' I say, struggling to talk through that bloody lump. 'Lola. Could she stay with you? Just for a bit longer. I feel bad taking her back on to the streets. She's so happy here...'

'Of course!' Ben says. 'I was secretly hoping you'd ask me that. She can keep me company. It's going to be difficult not having you here anymore. And I've a feeling Hattie won't be round quite as much either.'

I'm about to tell him that she probably will, because she still has more to make for the fair and all her materials are here, but I give up on trying to talk and just give Ben a massive hug instead.

'Thank you,' I mumble. 'For everything.'

'A pleasure,' he says, and I think he might be feeling a bit emotional too. 'You know where I am. And you can come and see Lola anytime. Here,' he says, letting me go and leading the way into the hall, where he reaches for the key rack. He grabs the gold key I only gave back to him yesterday and presses it into my hand. 'You're always welcome.'

I feel tears swimming in my eyes, and I know it's time for me to go. Lola comes into the hallway and sits down, her head cocked as she studies me. She whines.

I reach down and stroke her face gently. 'Look after the vicar,' I tell her and then I turn and leave. I don't look back but I've a feeling Ben and Lola stand and watch until I've reached the end of the street and turned the corner, heading back to the centre of town. Heading back to nowhere.

A creature of habit, I return to the doorway opposite the library. I sit there for most of the day, marking time until my evening shift at McDonald's starts. I'd forgotten how boring it is. My day is brightened when Hattie appears after school.

‘I can’t make a habit of this,’ she says, as she gets herself comfortable next to me. ‘I need to spend every spare moment getting ready for the fair. And there’s homework! But I wanted to see you today. Now that you’re back here again. Because I want to know, Jed. I haven’t broached the subject with you again after I asked you last time, but I want to know why. Why you won’t accept Ben’s offer to carry on staying with him. Why you won’t get a bed in a hostel. Why you’re homeless.’

Hattie’s cheeks are red, and I realise how much courage it’s taken for her to ask me these questions. I yearn for a cigarette.

‘I’m sorry,’ I tell her. ‘You’ve been so patient. I’ll tell you the whole story. But not here, on this doorstep. Let’s go somewhere comfortable. To Lucia’s café. I’ll get you a hot chocolate.’

And so we walk to the café and while Hattie sips her drink and I stare at my coffee, I tell her everything.

‘I always knew my mum was controlling with money, and I’ve since learnt this can be an early warning sign for violence...’

‘She hurt you?’ Hattie asks.

‘No, not me. It wasn’t long after my A levels. I’d only been home from boarding school for about a week. I went out with some friends for a couple of drinks early evening. When I got home, I could hear shouting coming from upstairs. I was about to go up to investigate when suddenly I heard the most almighty crash and saw my father literally flying down the stairs. He hit his head badly. There was blood everywhere and he was unconscious; my mother was a wreck, her neck flushed with emotion and mascara all over her face. It was all so shocking that it’s become a bit of a blur, but I somehow managed to call an ambulance and Dad was taken to hospital.’

‘Was he okay?’ Hattie asks, her eyes wide.

‘No. He suffered a spinal injury. He’ll never walk again. Fortunately, his brain was okay. But he’s in a wheelchair now and needs wrap-around care in a residential home.’

‘Oh, that’s awful. I’m so sorry. What a horrible accident.’

‘Except it wasn’t an accident.’

Hattie goes very still. ‘What do you mean?’

‘My mother pushed him.’

‘Did you see that happen?’

I shake my head. ‘No, but my dad told me. He said they were arguing and the next thing he knew she pushed him. She could have killed him.’

‘That’s horrendous! Did he tell the police that? Was she investigated?’

‘Dad didn’t want her to get in trouble. I’ve told you before, he’s a gentle soul. He wouldn’t want his worst enemy to go to prison, let alone the mother of his son. But I was so angry. And so I went to the police and told them. They questioned Dad but he wouldn’t corroborate my story, so they didn’t pursue her. Then my mother found out that I’d gone to the police. I knew there would be a punishment; I just didn’t know how severe.’

‘She threw you out of home?’

‘It began when I tried to use my debit card. It was declined. I called the bank and they told me my account had been frozen. I wasn’t sure how that could happen, but they told me that because I still had my student account, the one I’d had since I was thirteen, my parents had the ability to freeze it. When I got home, the lock on the front door had been changed and I couldn’t get in. I went round to the back and there, on the doorstep, was a sleeping bag, my guitar, a coat, and a small backpack containing a change of clothes and some other basic possessions. No money whatsoever. And a note.’

Hattie looks pale and shocked. ‘From your mum?’

‘I’ve still got it,’ I tell her, rummaging around in my backpack and passing the bit of paper to her.

Hattie reads the note. I know it off by heart.

Dear Jed,

I have tried my best to be a good mother to you. To give you everything a child could ask for. But you have repaid me only with your distrust. How could you think that I would push your father down the stairs? How could you believe that it was anything other than an accident? And to go to the police. To report your own mother. There is nothing left now and you must make your own way in life. Go and stay with a friend if you want to take the easy route, but if you've a backbone in your body you'll try to make your own way – like I had to. You'll try to survive on the streets. You'll hit rock bottom and you'll find a way up from there. And then, eventually, finally, you might begin to understand.

I will always love you. And I will always know what's best for you.

Your loving mother.

When Hattie finishes reading, she looks at me with tears in her eyes. 'So it's a matter of pride in a way? Being homeless. You don't want her to think you've copped out?'

I nod. 'And self-punishment, too. I've never forgiven myself for not stopping Dad from getting injured.'

'Jed, if none of this had happened... Your mum hurting your dad, and you being thrown out of home. After your A levels, what were you going to do with your life?'

I look down into my coffee, then back into Hattie's face. I smile.

'I was about to go to Oxford.'

PART THREE
NOVEMBER 2022

Chapter Twenty-one

Hattie

It's late November now and the first day of the Christmas fair, a pre-agreed day off school for me as it starts on a Friday. I haven't mentioned it to Jed since he left the vicarage because I'm not sure if he'll be in the frame of mind for helping. I've still seen him most days since he's been back on the streets, but he's become quite closed off after telling me what happened with his parents and how he was meant to study English at Oxford. I'm not sure if it was the opening up about it that made him withdraw or whether it's just how he survives when he's on the streets, especially now that it's so cold and wet. It hasn't stopped raining for at least two weeks. Which isn't exactly festive for the fair, either.

Mum helps me set up the stall before she heads to work and we make several trips from the flat to the Royal Square with all my boxes of creations, as well as the wrapping paper, ribbon and paper bags. The organiser has put up a gazebo around my stall so at least everything should stay dry.

'Right,' says Mum, flustered that she's going to be late for work. 'Here's twenty quid for your float – three fives and five coins. If you need me, give me a call. Otherwise, I'll be here straight from work to see how you've got on and we can walk home together, okay?'

'Thanks, Mum.'

'Good luck!' she says and she's off, rushing along past the Royal Court buildings then turning right to head to Tesco. The black clouds and pouring rain make it feel as if it hasn't got light yet, but in a way that makes it quite atmospheric because all the stallholders, including me, have put up fairy lights and these are sparkling in the gloom of the morning.

I spend some time getting everything nicely organised. The wreaths are hanging from above, the dioramas are all dangling cutely from Jed's tiny twig tree, and the baubles from another larger twig tree he made. Some of the stockings are laid out

and others are hanging from the sides of the stall and my little lavender-scented gingerbread men and women ornaments (the last things I produced, after Jed had left the vicarage) are scattered here and there. All my hard work laid out for everyone to see and – hopefully – buy.

Once I've set mine up, I go and have a nosy at the other stalls. There's an elderly lady selling edible stuff: fudge, Christmas cakes and puddings, chocolate truffles and so on. There's a young guy with cartoonish festive artwork and Christmas cards for sale. A girl about my age and her mum are selling homemade festive jumpers. They look lovely and I decide I might buy one if I make any sales. There are loads of other stalls, including ones with fresh food and hot drinks and mulled wine, but I realise we're about to open so I head back to mine.

'There you are!' says a familiar voice as I arrive, and I smile.

'Jed! I wasn't sure if you were still going to help...'

'Of course I am. A promise is a promise. I'm looking forward to it. Something interesting to do rather than watching people splash past me on their way to work. What do you want me to do?'

'If you don't mind being my wrapper, for anyone who wants their stuff gift-wrapped, then that would be good. Here's the paper and ribbon, there's some Sellotape here somewhere, and scissors...'

As soon as I've located everything for Jed I get my first customer, who buys some tree decorations. I sort payment while Jed wraps. He's handy at wrapping, as he is with everything. After a burst of customers, it quietens down a bit but at lunchtime masses of workers come and stroll around the stalls and I sell so much that I begin to panic I won't have enough stuff to last me the three full days. Then, after school, Willow and the other girls turn up full of chatter and admiration for my creations, even Mimi, and each of them buys something different.

By the end of the first day we're tired and Jed comes home for tea at ours before we reluctantly watch him head off to the car park for the night.

The following day he's there to help again and we receive a visit from Ben and Lola.

It breaks my heart to see Jed's face light up when he sees his dog. He gets down on the ground with her and fusses her while she whines with excitement and pleasure.

'So how's it going?' Ben asks. 'It all looks amazing. Your stall is definitely the best.'

I smile at his loyalty. 'It's great. I'm a bit worried I'll run out of merchandise!'

'At least then you'll know to make more next year. I'll tell you what I've had my eye on since you were making them. One of these lovely wreaths. They smell so good. Can I get this one here?' he asks, pointing up, and I get it down for him.

'Keep the change,' he says, handing over some cash. 'Right, I'd better get on. I've got an Advent service to prepare for. Come on, Lola. Good girl...'

I look at Jed. He looks exhausted today. 'You miss her.'

He nods. 'But she's better off with Ben.'

I take his hand and squeeze it instinctively and then let it go quickly. I catch a waft of Jed's smell and marvel as always at how a homeless guy can smell so good all the time.

'How do you shower?' I ask. 'There aren't showers in any of the public toilets are there?'

Jed shakes his head. 'That's been the worst thing for me about being on the streets, I think,' he says. 'I used to just wash myself in the sinks. A gypsy wash, my mother used to call it. But I've started to cheat over the last couple of weeks. When I visit my dad at the care home every few days, I use his shower. He has an en suite!'

'I didn't realise you visit your dad,' I say. He must see him during the day when I'm at school.

‘I go every two or three days and we have a little chat. Sometimes a game of something. He loves Scrabble. And draughts.’

We’re distracted from our chat by another customer. I don’t recognise the voice but when I look up and see the person standing there, touching one of my gingerbread woman decorations, I freeze. I feel the blood draining from my face. My legs start to tremble.

‘These are lovely. Smell good, do they?’ He brings the woman to his bulbous nose. ‘I expect my girlfriend would like one of these for the tree. I’ll take it please. Wrapped, if possible.’ He looks at me and I wonder for a moment if he even recognises me. But when he hands over the money, I’m in no doubt. As he passes the note into my hand, Brett grabs my fingers tightly. He lowers his voice to an angry whisper.

‘Little prick-tease!’ he snarls at me.

Jed, who’s been busying himself wrapping the gingerbread woman, appears to sense something in the atmosphere. He looks up, then seems to realise instantly who this man is.

‘Call the police, Hattie!’ he shouts at me, then he leaps right over the stall counter and grabs hold of the man. Jed holds Brett’s arms behind his back while the old man struggles and curses, his belly wobbling beneath his t-shirt. I call the police with a shaking hand and watch as a tough looking guy heads over to see what’s going on and then offers to help Jed. After only about ten minutes a couple of police officers arrive and Jed and the other guy relinquish their charge, coming to stand beside me. I find myself having to explain the situation to the officers while Brett looks daggers at me. You can see how seething he is.

‘She’s making it all up!’ he shouts, spittle flying from his mouth.

‘We’ll be able to look it all up on our system,’ the male police officer explains calmly. ‘We can have everything verified within a few minutes.’

‘But it was a couple of years ago,’ I say, apologetically.

‘Makes no difference,’ I’m assured and then he speaks into his walkie-talkie, using a lot of technical-sounding language. Once the conversation is over the police officers don’t mess about. They arrest Brett immediately and he’s led away by the male one, presumably for further questioning. The lady police officer takes me off to a bench a little way away from the stall.

‘Can you get her a cuppa, love?’ she asks Jed, and he goes off to one of the stalls selling hot drinks.

‘You okay?’ she asks. ‘You look a bit shocked.’

‘Brings it all back, that’s all,’ I say, and I find myself going over the whole thing with her again. Jed returns with the tea, which I notice he’s added sugar to, presumably for the shock.

‘You can come in and make a victim impact statement if he gets charged,’ the police officer explains. ‘They’ll be able to look at all his tech now. See what he’s been up to. If you give me your details, we’ll be in touch, okay?’

I give her Mum’s number as well as my own and once all the formalities are done, I head back to the stall, which Jed has been minding since he got me the cup of tea.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I say, and he puts an arm around me. I feel him inhaling the scent of my hair and I’m glad I washed it this morning.

‘You mustn’t apologise. I’m the one feeling sheepish. I mean, I’m happy that creep’s been arrested and everything, but I realise I acted too quickly. I didn’t check with you, first. I should have made sure that was what you wanted me to do.’

‘I’m pleased you didn’t. I’d have told you to leave it. But I’m glad now.’

‘I just felt so protective of you. As soon as I realised it was him, I knew we couldn’t let him get away.’

I look up at Jed and smile. ‘Nobody’s ever done anything like that for me before.’

I think about my limited experience in relationships. When I was fourteen, I had my first boyfriend, a boy called Jacques. All very innocent and only slightly distressing when he stood

me up at the cinema after we'd been going out with each other for a couple of months.

Then there was my crush on an older boy that was completely unreciprocated. Then Toby from school. He'd given me a red rose in February and, although I never told Mum (mainly because she likes the sound of him so much), we went out with each other for a bit. I even lost my virginity to him. But it just felt like I was going through the motions. There weren't any real feelings on my part. And he never did anything that made me feel that he had particularly deep feelings for me, either, aside from giving me that red rose.

It occurs to me that Jed might have just carried out that heroic act as a matter of principle or justice or even just plain kindness towards me. But I sense, and it's like an instinct, that his actions were because he feels something for me. Something real.

'Thank you,' I add, finally. And that's when he leans down and kisses me on the lips. And that's when I know I'm right. And as we kiss behind that Christmas stall, I know that everything has changed. In a moment.

Chapter Twenty-two

Christine

The Christmas fair is a huge success. Hattie has sold everything by lunchtime on the final day and I'm so pleased for her. She's worked incredibly hard. In fact, I've never seen her look so happy before, despite the incident with the pervert. She's positively glowing by the end of the weekend. We have a nice tea to celebrate on Sunday evening but by Monday morning, predictably, the bubble has burst.

My phone rings just as I'm about to head to Tesco for my shift. It's the police, telling me that Brett's under investigation but has been released on bail. I've only just disconnected the call when my mobile rings again. This time it's a long phone call and by the end of it, I feel completely strung out. Hattie comes into the kitchen to grab some breakfast before school.

'You alright, Mum?' she asks.

'No. No, I'm not. I've just had some difficult news. My mum's died. A heart attack, apparently. She always did like her fry-ups.'

Hattie pales and comes straight to me, hugging me as I sit there on the kitchen chair. 'I'm so sorry, Mum.'

I feel bad for Hattie because she never got to know my mum. We never got on, not even when I was a kid, and when I got pregnant so young with the vicar, she was ashamed of me. My father, too. We never got over that. So Hattie only met her nan and granddad a couple of times when she was little.

'It's not like I was close to her,' I say. 'It's just the shock. And regret, I suppose. I can't remember the last time we spoke, let alone met up.' I close my eyes. Bloody Rhonda has got Rod Stewart on full blast again.

'Will you go to the funeral?'

I open my eyes and sigh. 'I'll have to because the bad news doesn't end there. It was my mum's friend Jean on the phone.'

She lives next door in Hastings. She explained that my dad's gone potty. She thinks he's going to need to go into a home.'

I suddenly break out of my shock, realising I need to become practical. 'I'll have to go over. Sort the funeral, sort out my dad. I'll need to look at flights. I'll try to get one for tomorrow morning.'

'I could come with you,' Hattie suggests.

'No, you've got school and there's your mocks coming up after Christmas. And I'll probably have to be away for a couple of weeks.'

'I'll stay here then, in the flat.'

I shake my head. 'Not on your own. No. And I know you're nearly eighteen and you're going to be living independently next year when you head off to college but if I leave you on your own in the flat, I'm going to be worrying. The police called just before to say that pervert's been released on bail. It's one of the conditions that he's not allowed to go near you but even so. I'll speak to Willow's mum.'

'But Mum, I don't think I should go there. Not with everything that's going on.'

She's right. In my panic, I'd forgotten that my friend's in the process of splitting up with her partner and it's all quite tense at Willow's place right now.

'I could stay with Mimi maybe,' Hattie says, looking a bit unsure. 'She'll probably be fine with it, and I know you don't approve of Mimi, but actually her mum's really nice.'

I'm not sure. I don't have a good feeling about that idea. But then I cave because, really, there's just so much to organise and if I have to listen to *Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?* one more time I think I might scream.

'Alright, you sort that,' I say. 'Now I need to call work and tell them I can't come in today. Get some time off. Sort my flight. Right, that's it!' I say, getting up from my chair and flinging open the front door before I hammer on Rhonda's. She opens it, looking startled.

‘NO MORE BLOODY ROD STEWART, RHONDA! D’YA HEAR ME?’ I shout. She might be nosy and have dodgy taste in music but Rhonda’s not a fighter.

‘No need to shout the place down!’ she replies. ‘I’ll turn it down on the CD player, how about that?’

‘Fine!’ I reply. ‘But properly down, okay?’

‘Promise,’ she replies. I head back into the flat and listen hard but she’s true to her word and I can’t hear that Stewart fella bleating on anymore.

‘I can’t believe you just did that!’ Hattie says to me, laughing. ‘And why’s she got a CD player? She must be the last person in Jersey to still own one. Right, I’d better get to school,’ she continues. ‘I’ll speak to Mimi. We can discuss it all tonight.’

‘Discuss what?’ I ask. I’m all over the place.

‘Where I’m going to be staying!’

I’ve got everything organised and just finished my packing when I hear my phone beep with a message. It’s from Ben.

Fancy coming round for dinner tonight? Hattie’s welcome, too. I’ve just persuaded Jed to join me for a casserole. Would be nice if we could make it the four of us.

I’m not really in the mood for socialising, even with Ben, so I’m about to turn him down when I realise I’ve got nothing in for our tea. Barely anything in the cupboards or the fridge. I message Ben back to say yes then decide to run myself a bath. It’s not often I have a bath. Far too leisurely for someone like me, but I suddenly feel desperately in need of something to relax me. It does the job, too. I soak for a while, reading my etiquette book, and I feel quite revived afterwards. Less depressed.

I go to my bedroom and sit at the dressing table, rummaging around in my make-up bag. I look at my bare face in the mirror and sigh. I look older than my years. They’ve not been kind to me. But the bone structure is decent enough, and my

eyes, though slightly hooded and lined, are large and a nice-ish gold colour. I decide to take care with the make-up for once and start by blending in my foundation, adding blusher and a bit of bronzer, then moving on to my eyes, then finally my lips. I've just finished when I hear the front door slam.

'Hattie!' I say, greeting her in the tiny hallway. She's not looking at me. She's gawping at her phone.

'Mimi says it's fine for me to stay with her,' she tells me. 'Her parents are cool with it.' Then she looks up. 'Mum, you look *lovely!*' she says.

I'm about to bat the compliment away like I usually would but it just so happens I read the section on compliments in my etiquette book while I was in the bath, so I know exactly what you're meant to do now.

I smile. 'Thank you,' I say, and I turn and walk quite regally into my bedroom, ready to change into something nice for dinner (not 'tea', as I've also just discovered from my bath time reading). 'Oh, and Hattie!' I call out, scuttling back into the hall (not so regally). 'We're having dinner round at the vicar's tonight.'

I could be imagining it, but I think Hattie raises her eyebrows slightly before smiling and heading into her room.

'This feels like the last supper,' Ben says as we all sit around the kitchen table at the vicarage and clink glasses before we tuck into the food, Jed virtually inhaling his, the poor, hungry lad.

'I'll only be a couple of weeks,' I say. 'By the time I'm back we'll be well into December. It'll be time to think about Christmas!' Everyone around the table grimaces. 'Oh, come on,' I continue. 'We can't all be dreading it, can we?'

'It's just like any other day for me,' Jed says, pausing briefly between mouthfuls. 'I'll get my lunch at the soup kitchen. There'll be a fake Christmas tree decked with hideous orange and purple tinsel. I'll maybe treat myself to a can of beer. And that'll be that for another year.'

‘God, Jed, that’s so depressing!’ I reply. ‘Come and have the day with me and Hattie for heaven’s sake. Can’t say we go all out for the festive season, but we’ve got a telly, at least, and I’ll buy a turkey crown. Maybe we’ll even get a real tree this year.’

Jed smiles. ‘Alright,’ he agrees, and he looks across at Hattie, who blushes. There’s something in the air tonight by the looks of things.

‘How about you, Ben?’ I ask. He’s gone unusually quiet on me. Then I remember. ‘Oh shit, I’m sorry. I’d forgotten. She died last Christmas, didn’t she?’

Ben nods. He clears his throat. ‘I never liked Christmas that much anyway but last year was the final nail in the coffin. Actually, we had a really magical time together on the day itself. But it was so full of poignancy and the anticipation of goodbyes. That’s all I remember now. The agony of what was about to come.’

I feel for him, I really do, but I also feel a pang of something odd at the thought of his magical day with Caitlin. It’s been so long since I experienced this feeling that it takes me a moment to pinpoint it as jealousy. The last time I felt like this was when I was going out with my other vicar. Now I really know I’m falling for this guy.

Ben takes a gulp of wine. ‘But,’ he continues. ‘I can’t carry on wallowing in self-pity forever. And the last thing I want is to spend Christmas alone. So why don’t you all come here? Just the four of us. And Lola, of course. I’ll get a big turkey and all the trimmings. Maybe together we can get each other through it?’

I smile. ‘It’s a plan,’ I agree.

‘Sounds good to me,’ chips in Jed.

Hattie laughs. ‘Well, it’s not quite my wood cabin fantasy or a John Lewis advert but yes, okay! Actually, it sounds lovely.’

‘That’s sorted then,’ says Ben as he clears the plates. He brings over an apple and blackberry crumble for pudding. ‘Ice cream or crème fraiche, Chrissie?’ he asks me, and he has this

look in his eye. A slightly adoring look, which instantly alleviates any pangs of jealousy I might have felt a moment before.

‘Crème fraiche would be delicious,’ I reply, and I feel proud of myself. I’m beginning to think Ben would like me even if I remained completely rough around the edges, but the etiquette I’m learning is giving me something I’ve never had before. Something I’m beginning to enjoy. It’s giving me confidence.

Chapter Twenty-three

Ben

I say goodbye to Chrissie with a hug but then, after my goodbyes with Jed and Hattie, I return to her for another one.

‘Two hugs!’ she says, smiling.

‘Just... I’m going to miss you,’ I say.

‘Same as that,’ she says. I wish fervently that Jed and Hattie weren’t hovering nearby so that I could take Chrissie in a proper embrace and kiss her. I sigh.

‘Take care, won’t you? And let me know when you’re back on the island?’

‘I will,’ she agrees. ‘And Ben, you’ll keep an eye on Hattie for me, won’t you? Please promise me you will?’

‘I promise,’ I tell her and then she walks off along the road with Hattie and Jed chattering away beside her. Lola stands by my side and whines gently.

‘I know,’ I tell her. ‘I feel the same.’

During the week I message Hattie a couple of times to check she’s okay. She tells me she’s fine. Staying with some friend called Mimi. The weekend arrives. On Saturday evening I have Evensong, the first one in Advent. Afterwards, I go for a couple of pints in my local and then, on the spur of the moment, decide to check in on Jed at the car park. He’s usually on the ground floor but there’s no sign of him there so in the end I climb the concrete steps from floor to floor, looking for him. I’m about to give up when, on the sixth floor, in the far corner, I spot him.

‘Jed!’ I say, as I approach. Then I realise there’s someone with him. ‘Hattie?’ She’s wearing a thick winter coat and is zipped into a sleeping bag but, even so, her teeth are chattering. ‘What on earth are you doing?’ I ask her.

Jed looks at me anxiously. ‘Please don’t tell Christine,’ he says. ‘Hattie wanted to spend the weekend with me. To try to understand what it’s like to be homeless.’

‘It’s hard,’ Hattie says with a faint smile. ‘And I’ve only done it since after school yesterday.’ She looks horribly pale. ‘But I’ve decided I’m going to stay with Jed for longer, not just the weekend. I like being with him. And it’s awful at Mimi’s. She’s not the friend I thought she was. Her mum’s nice but she’s never there and Mimi’s been a total cow this week.’

I’m completely shocked. ‘Does she know where you are? This Mimi character?’

‘She thinks I’ve gone home to the flat. Her parents do, too. Don’t tell Mum about this. Please, Ben.’

‘But what will you do about school if you’re sleeping rough?’

‘I’m going to say I’ve got flu.’

I sigh and sit myself down next to them, desperately wanting a fag. ‘There must be other options,’ I say. ‘Ones that don’t involve you having to miss school. Why *don’t* you just go home?’

‘Our neighbour’s super nosy. She’d ring Mum up immediately if I turned up with Jed. Anyway, Mum doesn’t want me there in case that Brett guy turns up.’

‘Well, I’m pretty sure your mum wouldn’t approve of you doing this either. Why don’t you both come and stay with me?’

But Jed shakes his head. ‘It’s so kind of you, but I can’t take anymore hospitality from you. Except at Christmas. You’ve done too much already. You should go to Ben’s though,’ he says, looking imploringly at Hattie. But she just reaches out a hand to his face.

‘No,’ she says. ‘I want to be with you.’

We’ve reached an impasse. Then I have an idea. ‘Okay. Look, I get it. You want to be together. You can’t be at your

flat, Hattie, and you don't want to come and stay with me. I understand. But will you at least come with me somewhere tomorrow? It's something I've got to do that's going to be hard. I need a bit of support. Will you agree to spend a couple of hours with me?'

Jed and Hattie look at each other, then back at me. 'Okay,' Hattie says.

'I'll pick you up from here at eleven thirty, after church,' I say and then, against my better judgement, I leave them in that cold, dank car park for the night.

'Where are we going?' Hattie asks, as we head out of town in my car. Both the kids look frozen to the bone and with large bags under their eyes. I turn up the radiator in the car.

'You'll see,' I say, as we head west along the Avenue. Twenty minutes later we arrive in Grève de Lecq and I pull in at the beachside car park. Lola jumps out enthusiastically, sensing a walk is on the agenda.

'It's a bit of a trek from here but this is as close as I can get us in the car. Follow me,' I say and we all head along the road before we cross the field behind the pub and trudge up into the woods.

'You're not planning on murdering us in here, are you?' jokes Jed, as he grabs Hattie's hand.

'No, but you might want to leave a trail of breadcrumbs.'

The pair of them and the dog follow me as we slide our way along a particularly muddy path, then up a bank and along another little pathway. It may be morning but it's December now and, although the relentless rain of November has been replaced by crisper, colder weather, it still feels dark in the woods.

'Is it much further?' Hattie asks, struggling to catch her breath.

'I'm sorry,' I say, pausing for a moment. 'It's not far now. Another five minutes and we'll be there.'

Hattie and Jed exchange looks, obviously curious but not wanting to push me on where we're heading. But they don't have to wait much longer to find out. At last, we come to an opening in the woods that leads out on to a tiny track. And there it is, and the sight of it makes my heart ache. I stand and stare, remembering last Christmas, until I feel Jed's hand on my shoulder.

'You okay, mate?' he asks, and I realise I've got tears pouring down my cheeks. I sniff and wipe them away with my sleeve.

'What is this place?' Hattie asks in awe, as she reaches for the tiny gate, which creaks on its hinges as she opens it.

'It's my cabin,' I tell them.

PART FOUR
DECEMBER 2022

Chapter Twenty-four

Jed

‘Your cabin?’ I repeat.

‘I bought it years ago. As somewhere for the future. The vicarage is only mine while I’ve got the job, so my plan was to retire here. Ideally with Caitlin, although in my heart I knew it was more likely I’d be retiring alone. Either way, I loved this place.’

‘It’s beautiful!’ Hattie says, so taken aback by the cabin that she hasn’t even noticed Ben’s tears. ‘When did you last come here?’ she asks, as she tries to peer through the dusty windows.

‘Last Christmas,’ Ben says, as I knew he would.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Hattie says, coming over and giving Ben a hug. ‘So this is why it’s difficult. Because you haven’t been back since.’

Ben takes a shuddering breath. ‘Exactly. We had this incredible Christmas Day here last year; Lucia made all the food for us, and we had such an exquisite time. But a few days later Caitlin was in the hospice and a week after that she was dead. I’m afraid to say I didn’t even have the heart to come back and take the decorations down or get rid of the tree.

‘But when we talked about Christmas the other evening with Chrissie, I began to wonder whether we could possibly spend it here. And then last night, it occurred to me that you guys could help me out. You could stay here for a bit and get it feeling homely. Prepare the place for Christmas. Clear the cobwebs out. Both literally and metaphorically, if you know what I mean?’

‘You want us to stay here?’ I ask, hesitant.

Ben sighs. ‘Look, you don’t have to. It would be doing me a huge favour if you did but if you’d rather not, I understand. But while we’re here, would you at least come in and take a look at it with me?’

‘Of course, Ben,’ I agree, and we head in while Lola stays outside, sniffing around. As soon as we set one foot in the place, I know that Hattie’s going to want to stay here.

‘Oh my goodness,’ she says, taking it all in. The first thing I notice is the smell. It’s got that wholesome, organic scent of timber to it as the whole place is panelled in pale wood from floor to ceiling. We’ve come straight into the kitchen and it’s as cute as a child’s playhouse, with red and white checked curtains drawn back across leaded windows.

The room has one of those old-fashioned butler sinks with a little striped curtain underneath it and there are wooden cupboards painted sage green, although on the walls, instead of the units you’d get in normal kitchens, there are wooden shelves stacked neatly with mugs and glasses.

The worktops look like some kind of treated oak and in the middle of the room is a beautiful oak table, around which are six chairs, all with padded cushions that co-ordinate with the curtains. A sage green dresser with leaded glass windows stands at one end of the kitchen and this is laden with china. All of it is, I notice, that brand my mother used to scoff at – Bridgewater or something. She only ever liked plain white china, but this is an eclectic mix of that Bridgewater stuff – all reds and creams, stars and hearts. A selection of obviously Christmas stuff, too – jugs with little robins on and a teapot decorated with hawthorn berries. This place must be blowing Hattie’s mind.

‘I gave Caitlin the job of interior decorator and she decided to go “ironically country kitsch” on the place. I’ll put the kettle on in a minute,’ says Ben. ‘I brought some milk with me. But first, let me show you round. Come through,’ he says, and he leads the way into the sitting room. It’s big, surprisingly big considering how tiny the cabin looks from the outside.

There’s a long table down one side, fully decked with a red and green tablecloth (it has that look of Bridgewater again), and with eight chairs around it. Then, on the other side of the room, is a red velvet sofa facing a huge woodburning stove, in front of which is an attractive oak blanket box, presumably used as a coffee table.

There are two matching armchairs either side of the fire, each covered in sage green velvet and with white sheepskin throws draped over them.

There's no sign of a TV but there are little occasional tables here and there with oversized lamps on them and in one corner of the room stands a very sad and limp-looking Christmas tree. It's lost all its pine needles onto the wooden floor below, and all of the decorations have fallen off it and lie scattered, forlornly, on the floor. Some of them have broken as they've hit the ground and I suddenly find this scene really sad. I look at Ben, who's obviously finding the whole process agonising. He goes to the windowsill and runs his finger along the thick dust that's collected on the little wooden nativity scene that must have been sitting there since last December.

'There's more to see,' he says, and he leads us up the stairs. Right ahead of us is a bathroom. It's even more cute up here, with lower ceilings and the same wood panelling everywhere. The bathroom window has the same curtains as downstairs, and what looks like an original Victorian roll-top bath with claw feet. Even this has been painted red underneath, while remaining white on the inside, in line with the cabin's colour scheme. On either side of the bathroom is a bedroom, both with wooden sleigh beds covered in white bedding and eclectic patchwork quilts.

I now understand Ben's reference to leaving breadcrumbs on the way here. It's truly like the gingerbread house in the fairy tale. Though much less sinister. In fact, the place has a lovely feel to it despite the dust and the remnants of last year's Christmas tree.

'Hattie, this place,' I say. 'It's just like your dream. Ben, we have to have Christmas here.'

'We will,' he agrees. 'And will you stay here till then? Get it all ready for me? I won't have a chance; it's always the busiest time of year for me.'

I look at Hattie and she nods eagerly. 'Abso-bloody-lutely!' I tell him, and Ben smiles at last.

‘Thank you,’ he says. ‘You two are going to breathe new life into the place. I’m sure of it.’

Chapter Twenty-five

Hattie

Ben says Caitlin decorated it this way to be ironic, but the irony is lost on me. It's perfect. Completely perfect. And it's really strange because it's so exactly like the cabin of my Christmas dreams, even down to the sleigh beds in the bedrooms. I'm worried, as we look around, that Jed is going to insist on remaining on the streets (which, I can now vouch for, is utterly miserable – but I'd still want to be with him), so when he agrees to stay here, I'm ecstatic. Ben immediately goes from slightly depressed to intensely practical as he explains to us how everything works.

'There's no tech downstairs but both the bedrooms have TVs and DVD players. The remotes should be around somewhere,' he says, locating some on a bedside table. 'I know that's old-fashioned these days but Caitlin was obsessed with eighties' films so there are masses of DVDs in the blanket box downstairs if you fancy a binge.' He turns to make his way out of the bedroom we're in and we follow him.

'So, the bathroom... I'll put the immersion heater on,' Ben says, flicking on a switch behind the door. 'There's always plenty of hot water once that's on so help yourselves to baths. No shower I'm afraid, though it's got a shower attachment there. Caitlin needed that for rinsing her hair. In this cupboard here there's masses of towels,' he continues, opening up some doors beside the sink where there are towers of Cath Kidston towels of varying sizes, patterns and colours. Candy stripes and blooming flowers and polka dots. Caitlin really went to town on this place.

Ben heads down the stairs and, again, we follow him. He looks at the tree. 'If you could get rid of that, it'll improve the mood in here no end. I'll bring a new tree one day this week and together we can heft it through the woods. I'm not sure what to do about decorations...'

'I sold everything I'd made at the fair, but I can easily whip up some more baubles,' I say, looking at the decorations on the

floor. ‘Some of these are fine – all the gingham hearts are okay, and the woollen robins. And I assume the lights work?’

‘Let’s try them,’ says Ben. ‘If not, I’ll buy some when I get the tree.’ He kneels down to press the switch and they work perfectly, the white twinkling lights battling with the sunlight streaming through the windows and highlighting even more the dustiness of the room. ‘There are plenty of logs in the shed,’ adds Ben as he regards the ashes in the wood burner. ‘Feel free to light the fire. You might need to in the evenings as there’s no heating. I know it feels warm now, with the sun pouring in, but it can get pretty nippy. There are radiators in the bedrooms you can plug in if you get cold at night, and hot water bottles in the cupboard in the bathroom.’

Finally, we follow Ben through to the kitchen. ‘So, this is how the oven works,’ he explains, and we listen carefully as he details the individual quirks of both the oven and the washing machine. ‘And the dishwasher is only small, but we’ll probably want to use it at Christmas. The larder’s over there though I don’t suppose there’s a huge amount in it. Pots and pans are in here. Crockery’s on the dresser. Glasses and mugs up here,’ he says, pointing to a shelf. ‘Cleaning stuff is under here,’ he says, pulling across the curtain under the sink. ‘If you don’t mind giving the place a bit of a dust and scrub that’d be good. This is the fridge,’ he adds, which he pops the milk he brought with him into. ‘You’ll need to do some shopping, but you’ll have to make lots of little trips if you’re on the bikes.’

‘Bikes?’ asks Jed.

‘There are bikes kept in the shed. Round the back. It’ll be the only way for you to get about properly and you don’t have to go through the woods – it’s longer but there’s a rough track that leads from here to St Mary. No good for cars but fine for bikes. And it’s okay for my motorbike, too.’

‘You’ve got a motorbike?’ Jed asks.

‘Don’t use it much, living in town, but it’s a relic from my days in the band. And it comes in handy for accessing this place. Anyway, there are panniers on the bikes, so you’ll be able to stuff a bit of shopping in those. And I think there

should be some backpacks in the shed, too, so you'll be able to stock up reasonably well.'

'Should we get food in for Christmas?' I ask.

'Nearer the time I'll bring everything on the motorbike, in a couple of trips. We'll make a list next weekend. Or maybe wait until Chrissie's back? I'm sure she'll have ideas on what we'll need.'

I smile. 'As long as she's got a bottle of Baileys. That's Mum's absolute favourite at Christmas.'

Ben smiles back. 'I'll remember that. Better get ice too.' He checks his watch. 'Blimey, look at the time. I was going to make us some tea, but I've got to go. I've got a carol service this afternoon. Will you guys be okay?'

'More than okay. This is amazing. Thank you so much, Ben,' I say but he's already out the door and heading down the path. 'It's me that needs to thank you two,' he shouts back. The gate creaks open, clangs shut, and then he's gone. Lola, content with having got to know the outdoor area, heads inside. It's just me, Jed, the dog, and this beautiful cabin. I turn to Jed and smile.

'Better than Sand Street car park?' I ask.

'Just the tiniest bit,' he says, smiling. He comes to me, shuts the cabin door, and takes me in his arms. We kiss until I'm pretty sure my face has gone pink, scratched by Jed's beard. Eventually, he takes my hand.

'Where are we going?' I ask as he leads me upstairs. I feel suddenly nervous, but Jed looks at me and laughs kindly.

'No, not that,' he says. 'Hattie, I'm going to run you a bath.'

Once we're both clean, we find the bikes and make the bumpy journey to the garage in St Mary, where we stock up on essentials using Jed's busking funds and the emergency money Mum left me. While we're there Jed contacts his boss at McDonald's and I message Mum as there's no signal at the cabin and we forgot to ask Ben for the Wi-Fi code. I feel a bit

bad about making out I'm still at Mimi's, but the truth is, I know that she'd disapprove of me being alone at the cabin with Jed even more than being on the streets with him. I'm not entirely sure what her reaction's going to be when she gets back to find us there, but I decide to put that out of my mind for the time being. I receive a reply from Mum just as we're about to leave the garage.

Glad all okay and that you're getting on well at Mimi's. Very difficult here what with the funeral arrangements and sorting out poor Dad. He really is away with the fairies bless him. Should have him settled into the nursing home by the end of this week which will be a relief. Just had an email from school – there's been a burst pipe so you can't go in until Wednesday. I guess you and Mimi will be gutted with that news!

Could this day get any better? By the time we're back it's mid-afternoon and we both set about homemaking tasks. Once the food has all been unpacked and we've eaten some sausage rolls to keep us going, Jed starts to bring in logs from the shed and stacks them neatly in the nook next to the wood burner while I give the cabin a good dust. We get rid of the tree, clearing up all the pine needles, and find ourselves getting quite into the spirit of cleaning, washing the windows and the floors, too. Lola finds this very disruptive and slopes off upstairs.

'Shall we light the fire now?' I suggest eventually. It's starting to get dark and the cabin's beginning to feel a bit nippy. We light it and then sit on the hearth rug and stare at it, mesmerised by the warmth, the glow, the pleasing crackle of it.

'What are you thinking about?' I ask Jed after a while. He seems lost in thought.

'About the stark alternatives to this. Living and sleeping rough. The toll that's taken on me.'

'I'm not surprised, Jed. I could barely hack two nights. Aside from the cold and discomfort, which were massive

things, it was that combination of feeling frightened and bored at the same time...’

‘You’re right. The boredom at times used to make me feel positively sick. Sometimes I used to ride the buses. For the warmth, but also just for something to do.’

‘Ride the buses?’

‘Yes, I’d get on a bus in town and just take it to the next parish, then get on another one. All day long. McDonald’s, at least, gave me a focus.’

‘What are you doing about the job?’ I ask, realising I forgot to ask him about the conversation with his boss.

‘I’ve said I’ll go back after Christmas. I did a few shifts after I left the vicarage and before we came here but it’s not exactly handy for town here and I’d rather have a roof over my head right now than be serving up burgers and fries. And enjoy some time with you. But yeah... being homeless. It sucks.’

‘You know the other thing that was weird about it? Watching friends walk past and seeing me but not recognising me. Remember when Alice and Mimi came along the street? I was frozen with fear that they were going to spot me, but it was like I was a ghost.’

‘It’s the same for me with my old friends. It’s strange. There was that one girl that recognised you though. Selma?’

‘Yeah, she’s lovely. Hopefully I convinced her it was just something I was doing for charity! Experiencing a couple of nights on the streets. She looked worried, bless her.’

‘I’m glad you did it, even though I didn’t want you to. That you got a taste of what it’s like.’

‘Me too,’ I say. Jed takes my hand and looks right into my eyes. Again, I feel that dizzy sensation I get when those blue eyes gaze at me. Then I rest my head on his shoulder while we turn our attention back to the fire. It seems to represent everything to us in that moment: warmth; security; comfort; love.

Later, I make us beans on toast, which we eat on our laps in front of the fire. We rummage around in the blanket box after that and find a shedload of eighties' movies plus the more recent *Fleabag* series.

'Have you seen this?' I ask Jed. He shakes his head. 'I haven't seen the second series. Let's watch that, shall we?'

'In your bed or mine?' Jed asks, thereby answering the question that's been on my mind all evening. Will we be sharing a bed while we're here or not? Perhaps not, then.

'Mine,' I reply, and we head up, smiling at the fact that Lola has made herself very comfortable in the centre of the bed in the other bedroom. We plug in the radiators but it's still too cold to do anything other than snuggle up under the covers and so that's what we do. We start to watch *Fleabag*. We watch at least five minutes of it before Jed turns to me.

'I want to sleep with you,' he tells me, bluntly.

I look directly at him. 'It wouldn't be my first time,' I tell him.

'Nor mine,' he replies, smiling. 'I've had a couple of girlfriends. But, well, it always felt like I was going through the motions somehow. I've never felt like this. I've never felt such a connection before. A connection on every level if you know what I mean?'

'I know exactly what you mean.'

'I think it all started the first time I met you. You really *saw* me.'

'How do you mean?' I ask.

'Just that, as a homeless bod, people will do anything to avoid you. Even if they give you some money, they don't make eye contact. And like we said earlier, even your friends don't seem to recognise you. But you came up to me with that hot chocolate and looked right at me. Spoke to me. You saw me as a real person.'

‘Well, you saw me too. I used to think I must be completely unmemorable. I had this thing about it because I used to say hello to people at school and they’d look at me quizzically, like they’d never seen me before in their life.’

‘Hattie, you’re anything but unmemorable.’

‘Hmmm, I’m not sure how to take that!’

‘In a good way!’ Jed replies and we laugh. And then we stop laughing.

What happens after that is for me and Jed to know but it somehow manages to be both intense and light-hearted at the same time. It’s a revelation. We certainly don’t manage to finish the first episode of *Fleabag* until the following morning. And when we do, our skin is bare and we’re cuddled up together under the goose-down duvet, on a day when usually I’d be at school and Jed would be busking on the streets. If I wanted to wake up, I’d pinch myself.

Chapter Twenty-six

Christine

I arrive home on a crisp December day feeling a bit disorientated. It's hard to know what day of the week it is so when Hattie isn't at the flat to greet me (though I spot Rhonda's door is ajar), I think for a moment she must be at school. Then I remember it's Sunday, almost two weeks since I left. I'm about to message her to see when she'll be back from Mimi's when my phone beeps. It's a message from Ben.

Chrissie! Hattie tells me you're due home today. Let me know when you're back. We've got a surprise for you!

I frown. I don't like surprises as a rule. But I tell him I've just got back, and he replies that he'll be with me in half an hour. By then I've had a shower and got myself a bit spruce. Okay, I've made a huge effort in a very short amount of time to look good (yes, I've missed him). When the doorbell rings I answer it quickly but I'm not fast enough for Rhonda and I spot her in her dressing gown pretending to polish the brass knob of her front door. Fortunately, there's no sound of Rod Stewart coming from her flat; she's been as good as her word about that.

Ben's in black jeans and a plaid shirt, no dog collar. I'm pleased that he's obviously done his work for the day and we can spend some time together.

'Chrissie! You look gorgeous! How are you? How did it all go?'

'Nightmare-ish-ly,' I tell him. 'But it's all done and I'm relieved to be home. I was hoping Hattie would be here.'

'I know exactly where she is,' Ben tells me and he looks really excited, which lessens my nerves about this surprise of his. He drives me out of town and eventually parks in a car park near the sea.

'This is where I swim every weekend,' I tell him.

'What, even in winter?'

I smile. 'It's better in winter. Gets the circulation going.'

'I've heard of people going for dips all year round. Wild swimming, they call it, don't they?'

'Just plain old swimming if you ask me; don't know why everything ends up with a fancy name. So where are we going?' I ask.

'Follow me,' he says, and I regret my heeled boots as we head into a field and through some woods. Ben chats away as we walk but I'm out of puff. Eventually, thank God, he stops.

'Look at that,' I say, pointing at a cute little cabin ahead of us. It's dusk now and there are lights on inside, making the place glow. It's like a scene from a snow globe – without the snow.

'It's sweet, isn't it?' Ben says. 'And it's mine!'

'You're kidding me.'

'Nope,' he says, grinning. 'Come on, it's cold out here. Let's get inside.'

I'm feeling a combination of nerves and excitement, imagining for a moment that the vicar's brought me here for a bit of romance, but as we head inside I see Jed and Hattie are sitting at the kitchen table cradling mugs of something and the dog is lying on its back on the floor, clearly hanging out for a tummy rub.

'Hattie!' I say, smiling. 'What are you doing here? Is this the surprise?'

'Sort of,' she says, standing up and giving me a hug. 'Isn't this place just amazing? It's Ben's! Let me show you round, come on!' she says, excited.

'I'll put the kettle on,' says Ben. 'Jed, how's the fire?'

'Good. We've had it burning all afternoon. And Hattie's made mince pies.'

'You've been waiting here a little while, have you?' I ask him while Hattie tries to drag me off. Jed doesn't reply, which

strikes me as a bit odd, but I give in to Hattie's enthusiasm and let her show me around.

It's an adorable little place, I'll give it that. Proper fire in the lounge and a huge real Christmas tree in the corner with twinkling lights and lots of decorations, including Hattie's baubles. It's like something out of a fairy tale with a festive twist. Hattie takes me upstairs and shows me the bathroom and one of the bedrooms, then takes me through to another one where I notice the bed is unmade and there's a glass of water on each of the bedside tables. A top I recognise as Hattie's is on the bed, as well as some boxer shorts, and there's a faint smell of male body spray in the room.

I look at Hattie sharply and she glances down at her feet. I close my eyes for a moment, as the adrenaline begins to flood my body.

'You've been staying here,' I say: a statement, not a question. 'With the homeless kid. With Jed. You're sleeping together.'

'I wanted to explain it to you up here,' Hattie says, looking up at me with tears glistening in her eyes. 'I knew you wouldn't be happy about it, but Mum, we're in love.'

'That's what I thought, too, when I was your age! And look how I ended up. How could you, Hattie? How could you be so stupid?'

'We've been careful, Mum. I'm not going to get pregnant if that's what you're worried about.'

'That's the tip of the flipping iceberg!' I say, loudly, and Hattie glances at the stairs, clearly worried Ben and Jed will hear. I don't care. I'm furious. 'You're about to take your A levels! Head off to college. It's bad enough that you're not going to Oxford like I wanted you to, but this... I just know what you're going to do now, Hattie. You'll forget about your own life. Your own interests. Throw it all away on some man who'll probably end up leaving you high and dry! It's like history repeating itself, that's what it is!'

'Mum, Jed's different. He's not like my father!'

‘How would you know? You’ve never even met him. And he was exactly like Jed. Exactly like any other young guy who charms their way into a young woman’s life and then destroys it!’

Hattie looks like I’ve just slapped her. ‘So having me destroyed your life?’ she asks.

‘No,’ I reply more quietly. ‘No, Hattie, I don’t mean that. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. But can’t you see? I’ve spent all my adult life trying to make sure you’re able to lead a *proper* life like a young girl should. A life of opportunities. If you get serious with Jed now, I’m worried you’ll regret it.’

I sigh, calmer now. I sit down with a thud on the bed. It’s dead comfy, I notice vaguely. Hattie remains standing, nibbling on one of her nails and looking blotchy with unshed tears.

‘How did this happen?’ I ask her. ‘You told me you were staying at Mimi’s. Was that a lie?’

Hattie shakes her head. ‘I did stay with her for a few days, but she was horrible. Then I decided I wanted to try and see what being homeless was like, so I joined Jed for a couple of nights in the car park.’

‘You what?’ I’m horrified.

‘Then Ben found us, and he said we should go and stay with him, but Jed thought he’d spent too long at the vicarage already so then Ben brought us here. Asked us to stay in the cabin and get it ready for Christmas. He was planning on us all spending it here together.’

It’s then that the penny drops. How *could* he? Ben *promised* me he’d keep an eye on Hattie for me. And all he did was dump her here, alone in his cabin with a homeless guy. Allowed them to share a bed! My fury is back. With a vengeance. I get up from the bed and run downstairs.

‘How *dare* you?’ I say, finding Ben in the kitchen making tea. He looks at me, startled, but I don’t give him a chance to speak. ‘How *dare* you allow my daughter to stay here alone

with an older man and share a bed with him? You *promised* me!' I'm not shouting but my voice is icy with anger.

Ben visibly pales. 'I can explain,' he says. 'Chrissie, look, I'm sorry. It's just that there didn't seem to be any other option...'

'Oh, no? You didn't think to contact me? To get my opinion on where my own child should be living and with who? That's what gets me, Ben. It's like you've all conspired. You've conspired behind my back! I'm furious!' I take a breath, head to the doorway of the kitchen and yell like a fishwife up to Hattie. 'Get down here now, Missy!' I shout. Hattie quickly appears and I grab her hand.

'Do not follow us!' I say, looking from Ben to Jed, whose face looks flushed with emotion. He reaches out a hand to Hattie but before she can go to him, I pull her back. 'We're leaving,' I say and that's that. I pull Hattie along with me, through the woods, hoping we won't get lost. In the end I see lights and realise we're near the pub. There's a bus stop there. We stand and wait in silence. I think Hattie's silence is remorseful until she looks at me, just as the bus is arriving.

'I hate you for this,' she says, and it's like a knife through my heart.

The following morning, I wake with a feeling of dread in my stomach. I go to the kitchen and make Hattie an olive branch cup of tea then take it through to her.

'Here we go, love,' I say, groping around in the dark and carefully putting the cuppa down on her bedside table. I go to the window and pull the curtains then turn back to the bed. It's empty. 'Hattie?' I say, leaving the room and checking the bathroom but she's not in there. I return to Hattie's bedroom but it's clear the bed hasn't been slept in. I know, of course, exactly where she'll be.

I realise then that I've lost her. I've lost my girl. And, to my mind, there's only one person to blame. Ben.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Ben

The day before Chrissie is due to return, we have a truly lovely day; a day that seems to cure me of my cabin-related melancholy. On the Friday I pop in and tell Hattie and Jed to meet me on Saturday morning at the beach car park for Operation Christmas Tree. We meet at ten thirty and between the three of us we lug the tree out of the car and heft it through the woods to the cabin.

‘You didn’t think of getting a smaller one?’ asks Jed, panting, as we finally approach the cabin.

‘It was the nicest looking one!’ I tell him.

‘We’ll be happy once it’s up and decorated,’ Hattie says. ‘And it smells divine.’

We rest the tree in the sitting room while I empty my backpack of the first lot of Christmas ‘cheer’ I’ve brought with me (Baileys and Harvey’s Bristol Cream) and then we wedge it into the holder, with lots of instructions from Hattie to get it at the optimal angle. Then we set about decorating it.

‘Wait!’ says Hattie, once the lights are up. ‘We need festive music!’ She races through to the kitchen and returns with the vintage Roberts radio, which she tunes to the local radio station. Given that it’s now the middle of December, every tune is a festive one, so we sing along as we decorate, the three of us agreeing that *Christmas Wrapping* by The Waitresses is our favourite.

As soon as the radio tells us it’s midday, I pour us all a sweet sherry. It feels like one of those kinds of days. A day for immersing yourself in festivities. The tree fully decked, we all stand back and admire it. I’ve never seen a tree look so good: it must be Hattie’s creative flair.

‘What shall we do now?’ Jed asks.

I think about the Christmas season. What did I used to love doing at this time of year? Not endless church services and

vicariously or associating it with the sadness of last year. From the age of about six upwards what I've loved most about Christmas is the board games. 'How about a game?' I suggest tentatively. This suggestion, I know from experience, is not always met with enthusiasm. Caitlin hated board games with a passion. But Jed and Hattie look gratifyingly enthusiastic.

I rummage in the cupboard to find them and we start with Scrabble, then move on to Monopoly, which goes on forever so in the end we agree to pause while we have a late lunch. I knock up a simple roast, one of the few dishes I can prepare from scratch. Chicken, roast potatoes, peas and gravy washed down with white wine and rounded off with ice cream. After this, we're all too full to move but Lola is whining for a walk and so we force ourselves into the woods for a stroll and then head back to the cabin where we finish Monopoly at the dining table and, to my delight, I win. We listen to Bing Crosby, and I'm reminded of Hattie's cabin dream. It's a real moment for me, as I realise how much can change in such a relatively short space of time. I could never have imagined that only a year after Caitlin's death I'd be back here with two young friends, anticipating the return of a potential love interest.

And then, on Sunday, the bubble is burst. I bring Christine to the cabin full of excitement so it's quite a shock when she reacts as she does about me allowing Hattie and Jed to stay there alone.

I feel terrible after she's left with Hattie in tow. It occurs to me that I hardly gave their sleeping arrangements any thought at all. I assumed they'd either sleep in separate rooms or they'd start up a loving, respectful relationship. Either way, I didn't think it would bother Chrissie. How wrong could I have been? I feel so low that I head out of the cabin into the woods with my secret packet of fags. I have a sneaky smoke, but it only makes me feel worse, so I end up carefully extinguishing it and back in the cabin I clean my teeth immediately to get rid of the taste. I can't believe how many of those things I used to smoke a day. Then, seeing as there's a bedroom free, I decide to stay at the cabin overnight.

When Monday morning dawns, I know I have to try to sort this mess out. I expect to find Jed alone and miserable at the kitchen table (if he's awake at all) but when I head down to the kitchen he's sitting there with Hattie, and they look perfectly happy. The resilience of youth, especially young lovers.

'Hattie! I don't mean to sound rude but I'm not sure you should be here. Your mum would kill me! How did you even get here?'

'I snuck out and got the last bus to St Mary last night, then walked. And you don't need to worry. The damage is done now,' she says. 'And it's not your fault, Ben. None of it's your fault. I should have seen this coming. It's because of what happened with my dad. She's never got over it.'

I flick the kettle on and while I wait for it to boil, I lean against the worktop. 'Has there ever been anyone else? I mean, that was a long time ago...'

Hattie shakes her head. 'She was heartbroken by the whole thing. She really fell for him, and they were happy together for nearly a year before she discovered she was pregnant with me. Then he just dropped her. Didn't want to know. I guess some people would have got over that by now but Mum's quite ... stuck. She's never been in the least interested in another man. Until you.'

I feel my face flood with colour when Hattie says this, like some gauche teenager. 'Really?' I ask. I'm desperate for more information; for a glimpse of hope.

'She's been really different lately, since she met you. I know she still seems uptight, but she's been miles more relaxed. And it's little things, too. She's wearing make-up, taking baths instead of showers. And she's got a new confidence about her. She says it's because of this book she's been reading but I don't think it is. I think it's down to you.'

Part of me is thrilled at this news. To know that my feelings for Chrissie are reciprocated. But the other part is devastated because I know I've cocked things up well and truly, and Chrissie doesn't strike me as the forgiving sort.

‘I need to make things right,’ I say, bringing my mug of tea to the table, where Jed is eating cereal while Lola looks on enviously. ‘What can I do?’

Hattie sits back in her chair and sighs. ‘I need to, as well. I told her I hated her last night. She’ll be feeling devastated this morning. But here’s the thing about Mum. Once you’ve wronged her, there’s no making up for it. The only chance either of us has got is if she thinks she’s been in the wrong at all herself. If that’s the case, she’ll come to us. In the meantime, we’ll just have to be patient.’

Patience isn’t a virtue I possess, especially in matters of love. ‘But surely if I took her some flowers?’

‘*Never* take her flowers! They’ll end up straight in the bin and you’ll get the door slammed in your face.’

I smile, despite my despair. Yes, I can somehow imagine that with Chrissie. Still, I’m determined to make some effort to make things right with her and so later in the day, when I know she’ll have finished at the shop, I head to the flat with a gift for her. I ring the bell, but she doesn’t answer. I know she’s there because the lights are on.

‘Chrissie?’ I try. ‘Chrissie, I’m so sorry. For everything. I’ve brought you a present.’ Nothing. I try knocking instead and a woman in a dressing gown with bleaching cream on her upper lip and bright pink hair appears at the adjacent flat’s door and regards me suspiciously.

‘If she wanted to see you, she’d open the door,’ she remarks, clearly enjoying her statement of the obvious. I shrug apologetically and leave my gift by the door. The following evening, I turn up to try again but I see my bottle of Baileys is still exactly where I left it and I realise that Hattie was right. There’s no point in trying. I can only hope that, eventually, Chrissie will come to me.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Jed

It's all a bit awkward, the whole thing with Hattie's mum. I feel really bad for Ben, who's clearly messed up his own chances of romance with Christine by helping us out. It's been a week and Hattie and I are continuing to stay at the cabin (Hattie was getting the bus to school from outside the pub but now school's broken up for the holidays), with Ben joining us now and then, though he's pretty busy with his job. I'm conscious that I haven't seen my dad for a while and it's already the week before Christmas, so I plan to go this week.

But today Hattie and I decide to leave Lola snuggled at the cabin and get the bus into St Helier to go for a wander through town. I would say 'Christmas shopping' but neither of us has enough money for that so we've agreed not to buy each other anything.

It's nice in town though. Bit of a contrast to the peace of the cabin, but the lights are burning brightly on this dark December day. It's icy cold, proper Christmas weather, and everyone's wrapped up in coats and hats and scarves, though the shops themselves are probably boiling.

There's another Christmas market in the Royal Square, not selling arts and crafts this time, but all sorts of different kinds of food and drink. We stop and sample a load of cheeses, then I get us some hot drinks. We sit opposite each other on high stools, leaning on a tall table, and watch the world go by when we aren't mesmerised by each other (okay, we don't actually watch much of the world go by). Just as we're about to head off, however, something does catch my eye. It's a black helmet of hair and it's heading in my direction.

'Jed,' she says to me, and I notice that, aside from the usual stiff blow-dry, she looks different. Her face is all wrong, somehow. 'I've been looking for you for weeks.'

'Are you okay?' I ask, in spite of myself.

She shakes her head. ‘I had a stroke. A few months ago, now. Hence the face. It was worse than this, can you believe it?’ she says, with a lopsided smile. I’m shocked. Shocked, principally, at the thought that my mother isn’t infallible after all. ‘I know I have no right to ask this. No right at all. But would you spare me half an hour? We could go to a coffee shop. With your friend here, too. There’s something I need to tell you.’

‘Something else?’ I ask. I feel panic-stricken. I know I shouldn’t trust her, and yet she seems so diminished. I don’t feel I can refuse.

‘Twenty minutes,’ I say, bargaining. ‘The Greek place is open. Let’s go there.’

‘I’m going to leave you two to it,’ Hattie says. ‘I’ve got a couple of things I need to do. Jed, I’ll see you back in the square...’ And she heads off, clearly curious but sweetly discreet. It’s probably for the best. She might not see me in the best light in the next twenty minutes.

My mother buys us both a coffee and we sit at a table in the window.

‘I know what you think of me,’ she begins. ‘What you’ve always thought of me. Partly due to my own behaviour, I admit, but largely down to your father.’

I start to protest, wanting to protect him immediately, but she interrupts.

‘Please,’ she says. ‘Having this stroke, realising I could have died, it made me see that I can’t leave you behind without telling you the truth first. The truth about your father and me. And the day of the accident.’

I’m about to scoff at her use of the word ‘accident’ but I bite my tongue. I decide to listen to what she has to say.

‘We were never a very happy couple. I’m sorry to say that my upbringing left me slightly stunted on the emotional front. But your father and I had a marriage of convenience. For many years it worked quite well, but over time we began to resent each other. I resented the way he failed to bring any

financial contribution to the family, and he resented the way I was with you. And it's true, as I'm sure you'll agree, that I could be cold and vengeful at times. And controlling with money. I know all these things. But I didn't deserve what your father did to me over the years.'

'What he *did* to you?' I ask, bewildered.

'It started when you were ten. The violence. It was stealthy. Jed, he used to batter me. He never left a mark, but when you weren't around, he could be terrifying.'

I laugh out loud. 'This is ridiculous! You've lost your mind! Dad wouldn't hurt a fly!'

'That's what he wanted you to believe. And he was gentle as anything with you. Always. But he hurt me, Jed. He hurt me time and time again.'

'But he couldn't have. He had a bad back!'

'He wasn't immobilised by it. The back was a part of the problem, in fact. It gave him rages. He took it all out on me.'

'This is obscene!' I shout. 'You can't say this about him! You were the one who pushed him down the stairs!'

My mother closes her eyes briefly then opens them again. The blue of them is dazzling. 'He was strangling me. I pushed him off me. And that's how he fell. I had marks on my neck, Jed, don't you remember? The only time he marked me. I hid them with scarves when the police came sniffing around because I didn't want your father getting into trouble. It was bad enough for him that he would never walk again. Although I can't say I was sorry that he needed to move into the nursing home.'

My brain feels like it's going to explode. 'No,' I say, getting up from the table. 'You can't do this to me. You can't come and track me down out of the blue and feed me all these lies about Dad. He would never have done that to you. Never.'

My mother sighs. 'He'll tell you himself.'

'What?'

‘I went to see him at the home yesterday. He wants you to know the truth as well. Neither of us is getting any younger. And he, especially, has had time to reflect.’

I sit back down with a thud.

‘You know the worst thing?’ she says to me. ‘It wasn’t the violence. It was trying to keep you protected from the truth even though I knew that, in doing so, you would continue to favour your father and carry on hating me, especially when you went to the police about me. That was the final straw; the reason I kicked you out of home. I regret that sorely now, but it was a result of everything your father had done.’ She pauses a moment. ‘Do you remember when I told you I was sending you to boarding school?’

I nod.

‘Well, the night before, you’d been at the cinema with friends. Your father had hurt me very badly. I knew then that I needed to send you away before you realised what was happening. So the next morning I told you about the school. I could tell you were devastated but, Jed, I honestly felt as though I didn’t have a choice.’

The smell of coffee is starting to make me feel sick. I’m beginning to feel dizzy. ‘I thought it was because I was late home from the cinema. I was ten minutes late.’

‘You thought I was sending you to boarding school because of that?’ my mother asks, looking shocked.

‘You know how you would punish me. Remember the vase? You ignored me for a month!’

‘Your father thought I’d broken it. He’d given it to me when we got engaged. When he saw it was broken, he whacked me so hard I lost the hearing in my left ear for months. That was the start of it all. If I was a little silent over the weeks that followed, it was down to the shock.’

My whole world has been turned upside down. The person I had been taught to loathe was in fact my protector. The person I’d loved beyond all others had, all along, been a violent aggressor. I know I can’t fight the nausea any longer. I rush to

the loo and empty my stomach and it feels like I'm emptying my soul at the same time.

When I return to the table, my mother hugs me goodbye, a brittle hug. Tells me to get in touch once I've digested everything. Suggests that I go and see my dad, to get the verification she so wants me to have. I go through the motions. Then I find Hattie. I tell her, very briefly, what I've found out. That I need some space. I ask her to look after Lola for me for a couple of days. She looks worried but it's like I'm existing in a strange world where I can't properly compute what's going on around me. I walk to Sand Street car park in a daze and head up to the sixth floor. Once I'm there, I rest my head in my hands and sob until I feel completely empty.

The next day I just sit there in my winter coat and think and smoke (old habits die hard, though the fags taste horrible now). I think about everything Mum has told me and try to look back at the past with the new lenses she's provided. I'm grappling to comprehend it and I'm still not sure I believe her, so by the late afternoon I decide to visit Dad at the care home. I'm holding out hope that my mother has simply lost the plot and spouted a load of complete rubbish to me, but the moment I see Dad sitting in the rec room in his wheelchair, and he looks at me, I know it's all true.

'Your mother's told you,' he states, his lip trembling.

I sit down on the chair next to him. Usually, I'd take his gnarled old hand in mine but today I grip tightly on to the sides of the seat. 'It was us against her. That's what you used to say, Dad. She was the enemy. And yet, all along, she was the victim.'

Dad shakes his head. 'No, not for a long time. For ten years I was the only one to give you the proper love and care you needed, and I didn't raise a hand to her once in that time. But then, when you were ten, they put me on the steroids. For my back. That's when the rages started. You never knew because I controlled myself if ever you were around. You were so

precious to me, Jed. You were everything to me. You still are,' he adds, and I see a lone tear dribbling down his cheek.

'I was so proud of you. You were so hard-working at school and with a brain the size of a football pitch. The day you got into Oxford was the proudest day of my life. When she cut off your money and kicked you out of home, after what happened to me, I've never felt so depressed in all my life.'

'She said she didn't push you. That you were strangling her and when she pushed you off her, you fell back.'

Dad sighs. 'I saw red that night, Jed. She told me her plan, then, you see. You'd just done your A levels and she said you'd had it all too easy. That she was considering turning off the financial taps just as you were about to start at Oxford. That you'd have to find your own way, like she had. I was so angry. All that money. She just loved the control it gave her. Well, I lost control, Jed. I lost control.'

'But to strangle her?'

'It's not like it sounds. I just, I just went at her, and my hands were round her throat, but it was only a moment. Next thing I knew I was falling backwards. And that was that.'

'But it's true you used to hurt her? For all those years?'

'In my defence, she knew how to press my buttons, and the rage came so easily when I was on the steroids... I don't need them anymore; not since I was paralysed. So yes, Jed. To my eternal shame, yes, I did hurt her.'

'It's why she sent me away to boarding school, she says.'

'She's twisting things again. She'd been threatening to send you away to school for years. Wanted you out of her hair so she could focus on that career of hers and to come between you and me; the bond that we had. She was just looking for an excuse...'

I realise suddenly, despairingly, that I'm never going to get the full truth from either of my parents. And all at once, I realise it's just not worth the battle.

'You're not the person I thought you were, Dad.'

He sniffs. ‘I’ve let you down. We’ve both let you down in our own ways. She was never the victim though. Not really. It was you.’

‘We were both victims. And you, too, to some extent. But it’s not what a family should be.’

And that’s when I realise that I now know what a family *should* be. It’s what I have with Ben and Hattie and Lola and Christine. And I recognise that, more important than trying to resolve any of this mess with my parents, I need to return to the cabin and try to help sort things out with Hattie’s mum.

‘Dad, I have to go,’ I say, getting up.

‘Is that it?’ he asks, tremulously. ‘Will I ever see you again?’

‘Yes,’ I tell him. ‘I’ll visit you after Christmas, I promise. But for now, I’ve got somewhere I need to be. You’re still my dad. Despite everything, you’re still my dad.’

I hug him, a tight embrace, and then I leave the heat of the care home behind and head out into the cold evening, where I dash to catch a bus to Grève de Lecq. I feel an incredible sense of energy, and urgency, as I make my way towards them. My real family.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Hattie

When I see Jed walk in the cabin door on Tuesday evening, the sense of relief I feel is overwhelming. Ben and I are eating pasta at the kitchen table, though we're both toying with our food. Lola is the first to greet him but I'm a close second. I hug him hard then Ben gets a Heineken out the fridge and hands it to him, a big smile on his face. Ben tops up our wine glasses and we sit around the oak table together. Jed looks knackered. I mean, gorgeous still, obviously, but knackered. I pass him my pasta, which he begins to wolf down.

'Jed, I hope you don't mind but I filled Ben in about what happened. About bumping into your mum and the bombshell she dropped on you.'

Jed swallows his mouthful. 'That's okay, I don't mind. Better that it's all out in the open. I went to see my dad this afternoon. To see if it was true. That he'd been battering my mum behind my back.'

'And?' I ask.

'It was. There were reasons behind it. He was taking steroids for his back pain, which gave him rages. But even so. It's been a lot to take in. Especially as I've discovered now that she didn't push him down the stairs like I thought. He was strangling her and she pushed him off her. He fell backwards.'

'Strangling her?' Ben repeats, clearly shocked.

'He tried to say it wasn't as bad as that. There were quite a lot of discrepancies between what they both told me but the essence of it was pretty brutal: they hated each other, there was violence, they hid it all from me and both allowed me to believe that my mother was the enemy, when in fact she was only ever trying to protect me. Well, aside from when she threw me out of home. But I can understand it now to some extent.'

‘It’s a huge amount to process,’ says Ben. ‘Are you going to see either of them again?’

Jed takes a slug of his beer. ‘After Christmas, yes. I’ll see them both. I owe it to my mother, and, in truth, I feel a sense of duty towards my father. But all of this, it made me realise that I never had a clue – until I met you guys – about what family *should* be like. And I’ve never, in all my life, experienced a proper family Christmas. I’ve decided that’s what I want this year. I want to know what that’s like, more than anything.’

Jed’s words bring a tear to my eye. ‘I’d love for you to have the Christmas you deserve, Jed. But there’s one problem...’

‘Chrissie,’ Ben finishes for me, looking glum. Lola, sensing his blue mood, rests her cocoa head in his lap and makes a little whining noise.

‘I want to help resolve things with her,’ says Jed. ‘Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?’

I think about it. ‘There is one thing,’ I say. ‘I mean, it’s a long shot. But it could be worth a try.’

‘Anything!’ says Ben, jumping on even a slim possibility. ‘What is it?’

We’re cutting it fine with this plan as it’s already the afternoon of the 21st but we head to the only shop in town that still sells CDs and then go straight to the flat. We agree Ben and Jed will wait outside so I enter the flats alone and ring Rhonda’s bell.

She answers immediately (no doubt she was curtain twitching and spotted me heading into the building) and, as ever, she has her dressing gown on. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her dressed. She’s dyed her hair a new shade, a not-very-subtle electric blue.

‘Rhonda,’ I say. ‘I just wanted to bring you a Christmas gift.’

She regards me suspiciously, which is fair enough. ‘A gift for me?’ she asks. ‘Why?’

‘I just saw them and thought of you! Go on, open them!’

Of course, Rhonda’s nosiness wins out. She opens the wrapping and regards the CDs with apprehension. There are three of them, all Rod Stewart, including one full of his festive numbers.

‘Is this a joke?’ she asks. ‘Your mum tore a strip off me the last time I played Rod Stewart at any sort of decent volume. It’s not the same when he’s turned down.’

‘That’s why I wanted to give you these,’ I say, enthusiastically. ‘My mum’s had a complete change of heart about Rod Stewart! She absolutely loves him now. You can put these on and play them as much as you like, as loudly as you like!’

‘Really? Well, I’m not surprised she’s changed her mind. I could never understand why she didn’t like him in the first place.’ She smiles at last. ‘I’ll enjoy them; I don’t have these ones.’

‘Make sure you play the festive one loads,’ I tell her. ‘It’s really good that one.’

‘I will,’ says Rhonda. ‘And I’m sorry, but I haven’t got anything for you...’

‘Oh, you don’t need to get me anything! I’m just pleased you can enjoy your music again.’

‘Thanks love,’ says Rhonda, as I head off. ‘I will. And Happy Christmas!’ she adds.

I re-join the guys outside and Jed takes my hand as we leave the flats behind.

‘All done?’ asks Ben.

‘Yep. Now we just have to wait and see if it works.’

‘You’re sure this is our only chance?’ he checks.

‘Positive.’

‘Well, let’s just hope Rhonda and Rod together can make our Christmas,’ Ben replies.

Chapter Thirty

Christine

I wake on Christmas Eve feeling completely depressed despite the fact that I've got a week off work now. When I hear Rhonda beginning her day with *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, it's the final straw. For days now, she's been playing Rod Stewart again. To my mind there's only one thing worse than Rod Stewart and that's Rod Stewart's Christmas album. Even she must have got sick of it by now if she's back on *I Don't Want to Talk About It*.

I consider storming round to her flat to have it out with her but then I have second thoughts. Instead, I find my overnight bag and pack enough clothes for a couple of days, Hattie's Christmas gifts, and my etiquette book (still haven't finished it). Even though I'm not in the mood I even pack myself a Christmas jumper. I'm about to leave the flat when I remember one more thing that I need to return to Ben, but I can't fit it in my bag so I carry it instead.

I plod down to the bus stop and start my journey. It's not one I'm relishing the idea of. I've never been good at making amends. Always found it easier, really, just to hold a grudge. But this is Hattie we're talking about. My daughter. Ben is another story, but seeing as how she's at his cabin, I'm going to have to face him too. I haven't yet decided quite how I'm going to handle that side of things, especially as I'll need to spend Christmas with him if I want to be with Hattie.

I think about icily returning the Baileys to him and rehearse suggesting a polite and civil (icy) sort of friendship in my head all the way there and on my walk through the woods, which are muddy after a couple of days of rain. They say it's going to cool down again tonight. There's even talk of snow, though that's a load of hogwash if you ask me. Can't remember the last time it snowed in Jersey at Christmastime.

At last, I reach the cabin, which now has one of Hattie's lovely wreaths decorating the door, and I knock. I'm hoping it'll be Hattie that greets me but, just my luck, it's Ben. He

smiles at me; dammit, a great big smile that's enough to warm the cockles of your heart. And seeing him there, in a very silly festive jumper, I forget everything I've just been rehearsing in my head. I pass him the bottle of Baileys.

'Truce?' I say to him. He puts the bottle down on the kitchen table behind him and turns to me, pulling me into the cabin. Then he takes my bag from me and puts it on the floor. Finally, he takes my face in his warm, firm hands and he kisses me. He kisses me like I haven't been kissed in eighteen years and I feel all the tension and worry and downright misery I've carried with me in that time lift off me in a moment. I don't want this kissing to stop. Ever. Nor, it seems, does Ben. Eventually, though, he picks up my bag, takes my hand and leads me through the lounge and up the stairs.

'Where are Hattie and Jed?' I ask.

'They've cycled to St Mary to get some extra bits and bobs for tomorrow. They've only just left. Won't be back for at least an hour...' He turns to me. 'So, what do you say?'

I smile. 'I say "yes",' I tell him, and I let him take me to his bedroom, where I finally get to know him like I've wanted to, very possibly from that first moment I bumped into him in the street, just before I realised he was a vicar.

Afterwards, as we both laze sleepily in each other's arms, he says the nicest thing to me.

'Chrissie?' he says.

'Yes?' I reply.

'You feel like home,' he tells me.

A short time later we hear the door slam and the two of us spring out of bed like a pair of teenagers as we quickly rummage around for our hastily discarded clothes and pull them on.

'Ben, your jumper's on inside out,' I say, giggling. I honestly can't remember the last time I giggled like this.

‘Shit, so it is,’ he replies, quickly re-organising it. I decide to match his light-hearted clothing choice and find my own festive jumper, pulling it on over my top, and then we head downstairs looking like Mark Darcy and Bridget Jones.

We walk into the kitchen hand in hand, where we find Hattie and Jed unpacking their shopping. They’re chattering away and it takes them a moment to notice us. It’s Jed who spots us first. He smiles at us, and Hattie looks around and then drops the potatoes she was holding onto the floor.

‘Mum!’ she says, and she comes racing over for a hug. ‘I can’t believe you’re here!’

‘Neither can I to be honest. You know what I’m like. But I’ve had time to think, and I can see how it all happened. And I know now that what you’ve got with Jed is completely different to the situation I had with your father.’ I pause. In for a penny, in for a pound. ‘And I can see that Ben was only trying to help by offering for you both to stay here. So, I wanted to come here. To make amends.’ I pause again. ‘Plus which, Rhonda was driving me bloody mad with her Rod Stewart! I couldn’t stay in that flat another minute.’

Hattie looks at Ben and he winks at her. ‘Oh shit, Chrissie,’ he says to me. ‘Don’t tell me you’re not a Rod Stewart fan! He’s my favourite...’ Then the three of them dissolve into laughter before telling me about their cunning plan involving Rhonda. Maybe the old me would have got uptight about their confession but instead I find myself feeling amused at the lengths they’ve had to go to.

‘I can’t believe this is actually happening,’ Hattie says once we’re all ensconced by the fire with elevenes: mugs of tea and freshly made mince pies (so much nicer than shop bought ones, I discover). ‘We’re going to have Christmas together!’

I find myself feeling something. Something strange. Then I realise what the sentiment is. ‘My God,’ I say to them all. ‘Do you know what? For the first time in goodness knows how long, I’m excited about Christmas!’

Jed puts up his hand. ‘I’ll second that. First time ever.’

Hattie smiles. 'Well, this is my log cabin dream come true so I am for sure.'

I look across at Ben, who's sitting on an armchair in this cabin that must hold so many memories of his wife. 'How about you, Ben?' I ask hesitantly.

Ben hops up from the chair and heads right over to me, planting a kiss on my lips regardless of the fact that Jed and Hattie are sitting next to me (they cover their eyes and I hear Hattie muttering something about "getting a room"). He pulls back and looks at me until I feel like I'm drowning in the depths of his dark eyes, then he says, 'Chrissie, I can't bloody wait!'

Chapter Thirty-one

Ben

Christmas Eve. And it gets off to a good start when I read two pieces of good news in the local paper, which I relay to Jed and Hattie: the thugs who beat Jed up have been convicted of grave and criminal assault and will be sentenced in the new year. And although Brett was never charged for grooming Hattie due to lack of evidence, he's just been sent up to the Royal Court for sentencing in relation to numerous charges of downloading indecent images – all of which were located when the police searched his computer after he was arrested at the Christmas fair.

Satisfied with this information, we set about attempts to be festive, although in the back of all our minds is the fact that Chrissie doesn't seem to have fallen into our trap. We're just decorating the sitting room with holly from the woods when we hear the weather forecast on the Roberts radio.

'Listen,' I say. 'They're forecasting snow for tomorrow! Can you imagine it? A white Christmas, just like in your dream Hattie!'

Jed looks sceptical. 'What, proper snow? Snow that actually settles?'

'Hang on,' I say, as we listen. 'Oh,' I continue, a bit disappointed. 'Just snow showers.'

'I'd be happy with that,' Hattie says. 'We don't really want to get snowed in here. We'd starve to death.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' I admit. 'And I need to get to Midnight Mass tonight and the morning services tomorrow. We'll take the flurries then, thanks,' I shout upwards. After that I pack Jed and Hattie off to the shop to get extra supplies, just in case. Five minutes later there's a knock at the door. And just like that, Chrissie is suddenly back in my life.

I'm just serving up one of Lucia's fish pies for lunch (yes, I have a freezer in the cabin, too) when I receive two messages, one after the other.

'You're popular,' remarks Chrissie, as she passes round the plates.

'Better check, hope it's not some disaster at the church,' I reply, squinting at my phone (I think I might need glasses. I've got to that age).

Utter nightmare here! reads a message from my sister. *The oven has broken down and I can't get anyone to fix it until after Christmas. Have you got room for a couple more waifs and strays at the cabin tomorrow?*

'Oh bugger!' I groan.

'What is it?' asks Chrissie.

'My sister, Fiona. She and her husband Harold want to come for Christmas. Their oven's broken down.'

Chrissie smiles. 'Is she that bad?'

'No, she's sweet. Just a little...' I cast around for the right adjective and notice Jed and Hattie trying to suppress smiles while they no doubt think of a few.

'Tactless?' I try, in the end.

'She's my teacher,' Hattie explains to Chrissie. 'You know Mrs Carter? My English teacher. The one who took me to Oxford.'

The penny drops as Chrissie obviously brings her to mind. 'Oh, her!' she says. 'Blimey, I wouldn't have got you two down as siblings!'

'There's quite an age gap,' I explain. 'Anyway, I'm really sorry, guys, but I don't feel I can say "no".'

'Course you can't,' says Chrissie. 'It's what Christmas is all about, really, isn't it? Can't have them sitting at home with no turkey to eat.'

'I'll message her after lunch,' I say, pleased that Chrissie isn't too perturbed by the idea. 'She'll no doubt bring all her

yappy dogs, too, but hopefully Lola will take it in her stride. I'll just check this other message, quickly... Oh. Well, it looks like our turkey is going to need to stretch a little further. Remember Lucia?' I say to Jed and Hattie. 'The lady who owns the café? Well, she and her husband have had a disaster, too. They've got no electricity! So she's asked if they could join us. I'm so sorry. I hope you guys don't mind too much...'

'I don't mind at all,' says Hattie. 'It's going to be like my cabin dream, remember? Lots of people milling around listening to Bing Crosby.'

'Just as long as it's not bloody Rod Stewart,' Chrissie remarks, making me smile.

After lunch, I knuckle down to a bit of sermon preparation while the others take Lola out for a walk. When they get back, they set about laying the dining table, which still has its festive tablecloth on it from last year. I'm sitting at the kitchen table re-reading my sermon as they busy themselves with this task in the other room and there's something about the buzz of them taking such care over the table preparation that feels incredibly comforting.

'Ben, have you got any festive serviettes?' Hattie shouts through and Chrissie bellows 'napkins!' at her for some strange reason. I locate them in a kitchen drawer and give them to Hattie. Then I have a brainwave and locate a candelabra Caitlin insisted on buying and find fresh red candles for it. When I hand them over, I glance at the table, which is coming on beautifully, and realise what I've failed to buy.

'We haven't got any crackers!' I say, slightly devastated at this omission, but then I remember I'd bought some for last year and we'd forgotten to use them. 'Although, hang on...' I say, returning to the kitchen. I find them on the top shelf of the larder, the box dusty but eight brand new crackers stacked inside. 'Ta da!' I say as I return to the dining table. 'They're quite fancy, look! Gold brocade!'

‘You’re a superstar,’ says Hattie, as she takes them out of the box and begins to arrange them on every side plate.

It looks really festive by the time they’ve finished – glasses glinting in the lamplight, shining cutlery regimentally arranged, plates ready to be served with festive food, the candelabra in the middle of the table with its red candles just itching to be lit when darkness falls on Christmas Day.

By three thirty it feels like it’s already getting dark as the snow clouds begin to build and within the hour the snow showers begin. The four of us pull dining chairs up to the window in the sitting room and watch the flakes dancing in the darkening sky. We don’t speak; we’re all too mesmerised by the sight. I open a window slightly so that we can hear the soft falling of the flakes in the gentle wind.

‘It’s like a snow globe,’ says Hattie eventually. ‘Can you imagine looking down on us right now? This little cabin in the forest, the windows all lit up, and the snow falling all around.’

‘I know someone who probably is,’ I say. ‘I reckon He’s pretty pleased with Himself about this particular outcome. Now, who’s for a board game?’ I ask, glancing nervously at Chrissie in case she loathes them like Caitlin used to, but she smiles.

‘I love board games,’ she says. ‘And card games. We haven’t played them in years have we, Hattie? But we always used to when you were a little girl. What was that favourite card game of yours? We used to play it all the time.’

‘Uno,’ says Hattie.

‘I’ve got that!’ I say, hopping up and rummaging in the cupboard to locate the cards. I stoke the fire and then we all sit around the old blanket box to play seeing as the dining table can’t be disturbed. And so there we sit, in front of the roaring fire, as afternoon merges into evening, playing card games, and then board games. It’s one of those rare moments in time where it feels as if there’s nothing else pressing to do. Nothing to worry about or race around achieving. It’s simply about being together on a snowy winter’s night, enjoying the warmth and the company and the absorbing nature of our games.

Eventually, though, I start to feel hungry. I pop some sausage rolls in the oven and assemble some smoked salmon on fresh brown bread (with wedges of lemon) for us to pick on in the sitting room. Seeing as it's Christmas, I also crack open a bottle of champagne, though I remind myself to stick to one drink as there's Midnight Mass to get to later.

'Cheers me dears!' I say as we all clink our Bridgewater glasses together (each one with a differing festive scene). 'Here's to being together this Christmas. I didn't think it was going to happen at one point, but we did it. Merry Christmas guys!'

'Merry Christmas!' everyone echoes.

We all take that first crisp sip of our drinks and the little golden bubbles in the glasses seem to mirror the snowflakes still floating around in the night sky outside.

Finally, once I'm back from the service, we all head to bed. Chrissie and I snuggle up with our books (yes, we do indulge in a bit of passion first but I'm skipping past that). I'm reading a rather dull biography and I'm intrigued to see what Chrissie has as her bedtime reading.

'What's that?' I ask.

'*Debrett's on Etiquette*,' she tells me.

I smile. 'What? Why on earth are you reading that?'

'Trying to polish myself up a bit. I've been reading it for months. Been learning stuff I feel my parents should have taught me but never did. It started when I thought Hattie might go to Oxford. I wanted her to know the right way of doing things.'

'Chrissie, you mustn't worry about any of that crap. It's so insignificant.'

'You say that because you know it all automatically. It's easier to dismiss it then.'

'But you don't need to change! You're perfect as you are.' I'm tempted to grab hold of her book and hurl it into the

wastepaper basket.

‘What if I want to change, though? What if I want to give myself more confidence? To feel less rough around the edges?’

I consider what she’s saying, and I realise I can’t ride roughshod over her own feelings on this. If she wants to make what she considers to be self-improvements, then who am I to fight against that?

‘Then that’s your prerogative, Chrissie. But let me tell you one thing that’s going to remain the same regardless of whether you change yourself or not. I love you, Chrissie. I’m completely in love with you.’

Chrissie puts her book to one side and looks into my eyes.

‘And I’ve gone and done the one thing I always promised myself I wouldn’t do. I’ve fallen in love with another bloody vicar!’

Chapter Thirty-two

Jed

Christmas Day is a revelation. It's as simple as anything and I realise that the ingredients for a perfect Christmas are so much less complicated than I ever imagined: nice people; delicious food; a cosy place to be; a dog who loves you almost as much as the girl by your side (or should that be the other way round? Either way, I'm a lucky man).

The snow from Christmas Eve didn't settle and seems to have abated so there's no problem with Ben getting to his services on his motorbike. Once he's gone, I watch Chrissie and Hattie exchange gifts at the kitchen table while I make coffee for us all. Hattie and I agreed not to 'do' gifts but while Chrissie starts preparing the lunch, I ask Hattie to come into the sitting room with me, where I give her something I've made for her: a wooden cross to wear around her neck, seeing as the one I lent her before seemed to bring her the luck she needed.

'Jed, this is beautiful!' she says when I give it to her, admiring it from every angle and then popping the leather loop over her head. Then she tells me to wait right there, and she brings me an illicit present, too: the best festive jumper I've ever seen – a soft white polo-neck with a brown border collie on it, wearing a jaunty little Santa hat.

'I spotted it at that stall at the Christmas fair and I just knew I had to get it for you.'

'I love it!' I say, putting it on immediately, and I realise that no-one has ever, in my life, given me such a thoughtful gift.

Ben returns from church at twelve thirty and, after whipping off his dog collar and donning an apron, he immediately starts to help Chrissie in the kitchen. I'm tasked with stoking the fire, while Hattie makes sure everywhere's looking tidy, plumping cushions and double-checking the dining table. She puts on some music – Bing Crosby and the London Symphony

Orchestra – and I wink at her when I start to hear his crooning voice singing *White Christmas*.

Then all of a sudden, the guests arrive. Fiona and Harold, with their dogs, are the first to troop in the door with lots of bluster and chatter. Fiona was very unkeen on me last time she saw me thanks to the situation with Abigail but now that she's in need of charity herself she's far more friendly and she seems genuinely very fond of Hattie, though her conversation starter is instantly tactless.

'Such a terrible shame you decided not to try for Oxford,' she says as she warms her frozen hands by the fire, and I worry slightly that Christine will hop back on the bandwagon, but instead she jumps to Hattie's rescue herself.

'It would be more of a waste if she didn't put her crafting skills to good use. Have you seen how talented she is?' Chrissie says, taking Fiona over to the handsome tree to admire the decorations.

Ten minutes later, Lucia and her husband Bear complete the festive party.

'Nice to meet you,' I say to Bear and he claps me on the back. He's a huge guy, really rugged, with messy hair and a crazy beard, but you can tell instantly that he's a really decent person. It turns out he's a carpenter, so I tell him all about my childhood helping Dad with his woodwork, and by the time we sit down for Christmas lunch he's offered me an apprenticeship. As soon as Ben hears this, he suggests I should carry on staying at the cabin.

'I can't,' I say to Ben. 'I can't keep on taking your charity.'

'Well if you're going to have an apprenticeship with Bear, you're going to have a salary, and I'm guessing it'll be better than your McDonald's income. So how about you pay me a bit of rent? We can organise the finer details later. To be honest with you, I'd like to know this place is being looked after.'

And so that's that. The future sorted, in the space of five minutes, on Christmas Day. My future, at least. In the back of my mind, I'm always wondering about me and Hattie. I want

so much to be with her, and yet I also can't bear the thought of holding her back when she's just starting out in life. A part of me feels I've done her an injustice to get together with her; that I should have stuck to my guns and tried to keep her at a distance. But the other part of me is, quite honestly, totally in love.

With the long and leisurely Christmas lunch finished, we all take Lola and the terriers out for a stroll in the woods, and just as we're heading back to the cabin, snowflakes begin to fall again. It's impossible not to be charmed by this – and by Hattie's little dance, her head turned up to the sky as she enjoys the sensation of the flakes brushing her face.

When the day is done, and we head to bed, I hold her tightly in my arms.

'Did it live up to your cabin dream?' I ask her, as we're drifting off to sleep.

'It was better,' she mumbles sleepily. 'The reality was even better than the dream.'

Epilogue

September 2023

Hattie

I'm off to college today. To a place in the north of England that's got a great reputation for Art and Textiles. I don't let Mum come into the airport with me. I hate goodbyes, and she does too, so she heads off with Ben. But just as I'm about to head through to security, I hear someone shouting my name. I turn around and there he is, the familiarity of him jarring against the prospect of the unknown ahead of me. Jed: the man I've spent almost every day with for the last nine months. Jed: without any luggage.

'You're not coming with me, are you?' I say, after he's hugged me. We've spent the last three months debating the future. I wanted Jed to come with me to the UK and continue his apprenticeship there, but he's been as stubborn as an ox about it.

He shakes his head. 'I haven't changed my mind, Hattie. You don't want me hanging around like a bad smell at this point in your life. You're on the cusp of something. And I don't want to interfere with that.'

I sigh. 'I get it. It's not what I want but I see what you're doing. My lovely Jed. Ever the gentleman.'

We hug again, and I breathe in the smell of him, wishing I could somehow tattoo that scent into my skin; to be able to lift my wrist to my nose and take a sniff whenever I want to.

'Goodbye then, Jed,' I say, and I turn and start to walk away. Then I pause and look back at him. 'Will we be together again one day do you think?'

I see tears spring to Jed's eyes. He bites his lip and then he nods, very slightly.

'Probably,' he says. 'Maybe. I hope so, Hattie.'

I hope so too.

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This will sound strange, but, finally, I want to thank my characters, who've been on this journey with me. I'll miss them!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rebecca Boxall was born in East Sussex in 1977 and grew up in a bustling vicarage always filled with family, friends and parishioners. She now lives by the sea in Jersey with her family and Rodney the cat. She read English at the University of Warwick before she trained as a lawyer and more recently worked at a psychiatric unit.

She is the No. 1 bestselling author of *Christmas at the Vicarage* and *Christmas on the Coast*, as well as the bestselling writer of *Home for Winter*, *The Christmas Forest* and *Christmas by the Lighthouse*, and was nominated for the Romantic Novel Awards in 2020. She is also the author of *Christmas at the Farmhouse* and the popular short story, *A Winter's Day*.